The Responsible Self: Basis for a Christian Ethic

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I

Certainly one of the characteristics of the present time which is of more than a passing concern to all of us is the revolution in theology. Let us admit that most of us have at one time or another decried or at least viewed with alarm the so-called "death of God" theology, that we are rather suspicious of the "secular" trends in theological education, and are somewhat uneasy about the "new morality" and, perhaps this is because the "crisis of the old order" is finally catching up with us in many ways, not least of all in the fields of theology and churchmanship.

I suspect that revolutionary trends in theology have always been the reflection of what is happening in the world. It was between the two big wars that Walter Lippmann spoke of what he called "the dissolution of the ancestral order."[1] The theological crisis which followed the final collapse of medieval Europe was, of course, much more evident on the continent than here in the United States. While Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, for example, were beginning the reconstruction of protestant theology following the break-down of Christian optimism in Europe, American theologians were still engaging in the pyrotecnics of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The European mood began to influence American theology in the mid-30's through the efforts of Reinhold Niebuhr whose work represents the **tour de force** of American neo-orthodoxy. Tillich came to this country in 1933, following his professorship at the University of Frankfurt under Nazi pressures. Tillich always thought of his own work as a mediation between neo-orthodox and liberal elements in contemporary theology and reflected perhaps better than anyone in his generation the ambiguity of theological existence in a culture (American) which had not yet begun to recognize that its own historical crisis was imminent. At the risk of oversimplification Niebuhr's distinctive contribution was, perhaps, his reintroduction of the concept of Sin to the American theological vocabulary and his use of this concept in analyzing personal, social, and political relationships and structures. Tillich was able to preserve the best elements of the liberal tradition (natural theology, philosophical concern, the cultural depth of religious expression) in combination with the chastening influence of Christion orthodoxy.

Most of us are the heirs, willy nilly, of the theological formation which began in the thirties and stretched into the late fifties and early sixties. Now we are seeing a "new theology" emerging, not so much in reaction to the Barthian-Niebuhrian-Tillichian amalgam as in respectful departure from it. I refer to the growth of secular theology.

Perhaps more than any other book, John A. T. Robinson's **Honest to God** indicates this trend. In his book Robinson deals with the work of Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. With Tillich we witness "the end of theism"—of the God "out there" — who descends to earth and ascends to heaven. In Bultmann we find a new existential-personal dimension in the Word, stripped bare of its first century mythology. From Bon-

[1] Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan Co. 1929).

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hoeffer we hear of "man come of age," of the Christian man who takes responsibilty for the secular world. In each of these emphases we discern a new theological and ethical mood which moves away from dependence on the Church as "institution of salvation." Shubert Ogden has recently suggested that Robinson's book also raises the question of the meaningfulness of religious language, and natural theology so long overlooked by the neo-orthodox theologian, are once again being dealt with seriously.[2]

We are living through a major theological revolution, albeit, as Robinson chooses to call it, a reluctant revolution. One of its main aspects is its secular rather than religious orientation: its focus is on the world rather than the Church as the primary area of God's activity. In part, the consequence of this focus on the realm of the secular as over against a sacred realm is that man's concern (Tillich) leads to a personal crisis of faith (Bultmann) the result of which is a new sense of freedom and responsibility (Bonhoeffer) which is exercised not so much by "being religious" (going to Church, receiving the sacraments, saying prayers) as it is in discerning appropriate responses to concrete personal and social situations.

It is in this spirit that Bishop Robinson raises a question which all of us face, if we take the business of the Church seriously:

> I . . . raise the question whether, amid all the drives of modern secular society, whether collectivized or cybernated, the main function of the Church is to make or to keep men religious. I doubt whether it helps to answer the question of how to commend Christianity in a post-religious age. In fact, it probably hinders it... I would see much more hope for the Church if it was organized not to defend the interests of religion against the inroads of the state (legitimate and necessary as this may be) but to equip Christians, by the quality and power of its community life, to enter with their 'secret discipline' into all the exhilarating, and dangerous, secular strivings of our day, there to follow and to find the workings of God.[3]

Here we see the mood and expression of the "new theology" and the style and direction of the "new morality." But let me repeat once again that "newness" in this connection is an expression of the "newness of every historical period. Presumably, we do not want to simply reproduce the faith-assertions of the past in order to live and work and think and speak as Christians in the present time. This is what we probably spend much of our time doing, however, under the pressures of conformity to institutional requirements. Someone has observed that no Christian can escape history, least of all the restless Christians. Hopefully, at least, the minister is a restless Christian because he lives in and responds to a changing world. This changing world, in turn, produces, among other things, the changing currents we detect in theology and ethics. What is happening, of course, is not something unique in human history, but something which continues to happen. So it is that the world changes and with it the contexts of life and of the Church, the styles of living and thinking and responding. Is it not from within this situation that we find ourselves, as Tillich would say, grasped by the power of the New Being? All of us, whatever our particular responsibility in the vocation of the ministry are aware of the change that is upon us, and aware also perhapc that "newness belongs in a religious tradition that was

[2] See Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), Chapter I.

[3] John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 139.

born in the experience of a new age, a new situation of man before God."[4]

II

We are facing today in our society and culture a complex variety of problems: widespread violence, the breakdown of rule and authority, the tasks of coming to grips with the rapid development of industrial technology, widespread poverty and unemployment in segments of our own society, and so many others as to produce in us a dizziness and a fatigue not at all unlike Kierkegaard's sense of despair. Our reaction to all of this, or our **response** as Richard Niebuhr would insist, should be nothing less than a faith-informed response to the action and activity of God upon us. Niebuhr said many times and in somewhat different contexts that Christian responsibility is to discern God's action in all that is happening to us, and so to act as in response to his action.[5]

In other words, Niebuhr is saying that God acts in and through history, not simply in that "sacred history" recorded in the Bible (although we see an emergent pattern there), but indeed through all historical movements and events. We are acting as Christians, therefore, not **primarily** in our weekly rehersals of the Lord's Supper or in hearing and remembering the sacred literature of the Bible, but in our own faith-informed response to the pressure of contemporary events. This puts Niebuhr well within the circle of the co-called "secular" theology and the "new morality." At least his work moves in this direction in line with the trends we have already outlined above.

As we examine Niebuhr's concept of responsible selfhood, it is important for us to bear in mind something of the character of the so-called "new morality." There are, as I see it, two dominant characteristics of the new morality. First, there is an absence of Absolute Principles or Laws which remain binding in all time and under all conditions. The "old morality" was supposedly based on some such set of divinely ordained code like the Ten Commandments which were eternally and universally valid. The critical issue for situation ethics, says Joseph Fletcher, is sounded by the question "Are there any moral principles which oblige us in conscience at all times?" According to Fletcher there are none.[6] Referring to the Decalogue, Fletcher suggests that we may pose the issue between the new and the old morality by saying that situationists cannot and do not regard any of these ancient principles or laws as always morally valid in practice; they must be "relativized" by adding the word "ordinarily" in each case. Hence, "we ought to tell the truth ordinarily; we ought not to kill ordinarily; we ought to respect our parents ordinarily—but none of these rules is valid unless in each concrete situation it is 'good' to follow it. And the criterion for 'good' is whether our action is as loving as the situation allows."[7] The first characteristic of the new morality, then, is the denial that there are universally relevant moral principles or laws.

In spite of the fact that we are inclined to protest this assertion by holding ever more tightly to the notion of a set of divinely ordained principles, we have only to mention one or two issues in which we recognize immediately the truth of what Fletcher is saying. With regard to the Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill, it is quite safe to say that within the Christian comunity there are very few people who insist that this prohibition be taken literally with reference to all situations. Most Christians have no qualms whatsoever

[4] Martin E. Marty, Dean G. Peerman (eds.), *New Theology No.* 1, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), p. 10.

[5] James A. Gustafson, "Introduction" to *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 25.

[6] Joseph C. Fletcher in *Storm Over Ethics* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 151.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

about a rather broad interpretation of the commandment against killing. We have already heard a treatise of the biblical concept of Holy War. We learn from even a casual reading of the Old Testament that the prohibition against killing applies to murder or manslaughter of an Israelite. Never was it intended to be applied universally until, perhaps, after the exile. In other words, it is the principle of an "in group" ethic.

Another illustration of Fletcher's point might be drawn from the non-violence vs. violence debate of current fashion. During the peak of the riot season last summer, President Johnson made an eloquent appeal to the nation against the use of violence to solve the problems of the ghetto. He insisted that violence never achieved its objectives, that it prompted instead more violence and counter-violence. He suggested that continued use of violence would bring about the dissolution of our society, the end of the cherished and tender democratic experiment. The end of the path of violence as a means of achieving social justice leads only to rule by oppression. But we know that it is the same same President who called for the cessation of violence in the streets of his own land who orders the weapons of violence into action in Vietnam, apparently under the well-intenioned conviction that what violence cannot achieve here, it can achieve there. No man can do that who is not a "situation ethicist," who does not believe that the context in which one must make decisions determines in large measure the character of the decisions he makes.

This leads to the second major chararcteristic of the new morality or situation ethics, namely, that the context of decision, the **situation** in which people make choices, is the primary locus of value. Traditional ethics, as Daniel Williams reminds us, begins by asking for ultimate principles and then trying to apply them to situations. Situation ethics begins at the other end by deriving appropriate ethical principles from the situation in which one has to make a decision. "We discover our ethical principles by attending concretely to the situation where persons love, serve, reject, and contend with one another."[8] This situationalism draws heavily on the existentialist school of thought which stems from the work of Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish theologian. Kierkegaard's radical critique of Christian thought and life resulted in a major shift in modern Protestant theology. His influence may be seen both in Karl Barth's absolute denial that human reason is a means through which man finds God (hence Barth's strong doctrine of Revelation), and in modern existentialism which sees man as the prisoner of anxiety and despair reaching out for help (Tillich's debt to Kierkegaard). Existential man is alone; hence the focus on the individuality of faith and of ethical decision. In this sense we can say that Kierkegaard's influence is certainly evident in situationalism with its concentration not on absolute moral or religious principles but upon the existential context of decision. As we shall see clearly, however, Niebuhr is critical of Kierkegaard's individualism. He insists, for example, that decision for the Christian always takes place within the Christian community which is being continually created, governed, and redeemed by the active and present love of God.[9] But we do have in Niebuhr's work a situational estic, emphasizing the context in which personal decision must be made, and insisting that it is here rather than in some external or absolute realm of laws and principles that moral values and ethical principles emerge.

III

To understand something about situation ethics and the new morality is a

[8] Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians are Thinking,* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1959), p. 115.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 115.

good beginning but hardly an adequate introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr's own thought. Although we may fairly "categorize" Niebuhr as a situationalist, it would be a drastic mistake to jump to hasty conclusions about the scope or character of his work. One cannot read even the titles of his major publications without recognizing the depth of his commitment to the Church and the history of Christian thought.[10]

Niebuhr's interest is not so much in spelling out a comprehensive moral system or in expounding and interpreting something like a biblical ethic, nor is he concerned to address specific personal, social, or political problems from a "Christian" point of view in order to deliver a program for reform of one kind or another. His primary concern is to better understand man's moral life.[11] Particularly, in his book, **The Responsible Self,** Niebuhr is a "philosopher of the Christian moral life, rather than a moral theologian who primarily explicated Biblical foundations of Christian morality from theological dogmas."[12]

But to say this is not to disclaim his depth of theological commitment, nor to suggest that a 'philosopher of the Christian moral life" he is able to engage in detached speculation about a realm of pure moral or spiritual existence. To be sure, his stance is a reflective one: he is not protesting or proclaiming; he is not delivering pronouncements nor is he submitting preliminary sketches for a Christian social order. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a brief description of what can be expected from a moral theologian, and although Niebuhr himself takes issue with Bonhoeffer at some points, he could certainly agree with Bonhoeffer's description:

> An ethic cannot be a book in which there is set out how everything in the world actually ought to be but unfortunately is not, and an ethicist cannot be a man who always knows better than others what is to be done and how it is to be done. An ethic cannot be a work of reference for moral action which is guaranteed to be unexceptionable, and the ethicist cannot be a competent critic and judge of every human activity. An ethic cannot be a retort in which ethical or Christian human beings are produced, and the ethicist cannot be the embodiment or ideal type of a life which is, on principle, moral.[13]

This is an important point to remember in connection with Niebuhr's work, and one at which he has been rather severely and perhaps unfairly criticized.[14] We might wish that he were more of a Christian—that he would give us, as it were, a Christian anthropology, or that he would posit the "Christian" answer to concrete human problems, or at least that he would argue for the superiority of a Christian morality as over against other alternatives. This would be foreign not only to Niebuhr's own style of ethics, but to what he believes to be the special task of the Christian moral theologian. Niebuhr does not presume to write a manual to determine in advance for others what should be the proper Christian response to particular situations. This is in violation of the whole notion of Christian freedom. As Gustafson explains, one cannot expect from Niebuhr's ethics a set of close definitions of universally appropriate behavior, or even of occasional behavior.[15] The task of the moral theologian is not to argue for or to attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Christian ethics. We must agree that too often the moral stance of the Church and of her spokesmen has been in a mood of spiritual pride and

[10] See Gustafson, p. 25, for an excellent overview of Niebuhr's thought.

[11] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 43.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[13] Quoted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* by Gustafson, p. 13.

[14] Gustafson, p. 15-16.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

aggrandizement when it might more appropriately have been one of self-criticism and repentance.

So Niebuhr's purpose is not that of "staking the Christian claim." He is primarily concerned with what he refers to as the Christian "style of life." In this he is not dealing primarily with possible answers to such questions as "Should we stop the bombing of North Vietnam?" or "Should a Christian burn his draft card?" or "Can pre-marital intercourse ever be justified?" or "Can Christians practice birth control?" Undoubtedly Niebuhr himself would have been willing to give his own tentative answers to such questions. But in his theological reflection on the Christian style of life, he is more concerned with a pattern of personal response of the one who happens to be a Christian—a response conditioned, to be sure, by many factors which impinge on any decision, but conditioned most certainly by Christian commitments. At this point, then, for Niebuhr, the basic question is this:

> How does the general Christian character and form manifest itself in specific activities such as those in which Christians, like all other people, engage when they marry and raise children, eat and drink, obey civil laws and help enact them, when they make material goods, buy and sell, participate in war and peace-making; when they make all the countless daily evaluations, decisions and choices that human beings must undertake in their inescapable freedom?[16]

Here we begin to understand Niebuhr's particular brand of siuationalism in ethics. He would agree, I believe, that his method is certainly not characteristic of the "old morality" even though he might not consider himself an avant-garde proponent of the new morality. He would accept the observation that his ethic does not begin with "first principles of right and wrong" but with the situation, if situation means the context of decision in which the person—the self—exercises his freedom. And he would place a premium on the personal character of all decisions. This does not mean that Niebuhr proposes a new kind of individualistic ethic, either of the pietistic variety (be like Jesus), or of the existentialist variety (woe is me, for I am anxious). Niebuhr's personalism and his existentialism are qualified and interpreted by the Christian dimension of life, that is to say, a selfhood understood with primary reference to Jesus Christ. This aspect of his thought shines through all of his work. "Christian life" he says, "is, at least, one of the distinctive ways of human existence. Whether it is better or worse than any other styles is a question neither Christians nor others are in a position to answer, since men lack standards by which to judge their standards."[17] In other words, while Niebuhr refuses to buttress the Christian style with the claim that it has some quality which makes it inherently superior to any other brand or style of life, he does not hesitate to identify the distinctively Christian character of his own efforts. In this regard, we should certainly hear from Niebuhr himself:

> I call myself a Christian though there are those who challenge my right to that name, either because they require a Christian to maintain some one of various sets of beliefs that I do not hold or because they require him to live up to some one of various sets of moral standards. . . to which I do not conform. I call myself a Christian simply because I also am a follower of Jesus Christ. . . because I believe that my way of thinking about life, myself, my human companions and our destiny has been so modified by his presence in our history that I cannot get away from his influence; and also because I do not want to get

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

away from it; above all else, I call myself a Christian because my relations to God have been, so far as I can see, deeply conditioned by this presence of Jesus Christ in my history and in our history.[18]

IV

There is, of course, a sense in which all Christians are exercising a certain style of life and, as we have already suggested, most of us are pragmatically speaking situational ethicists, that is, we know what it means to compromise ideals and "be practical" in situations where it is not possible to live up to certain ideals. This attitude marks a basic point of difference between the so-called "old" and "new" moralities for, in effect, what we are doing is paying lip service to a set of moral ideals or legal principles on the one hand, and making expedient discisions according to certain immediate necessities. We do this so regularly and with so little hesitation that it never occurs to us that the "high moral principles" by which we tell ourselves we are living, or trying to live, are not really influencing our decisions at all. Whenever we detect this discrepancy between ideal and practice in others it's hypocrisy; in ourselves, however, the reasons we don't live up to our professed ideals is due to "the hard business of living," "the pressures of society."

We notice the same syndrome in comments people make occasionally to preachers after one of those "relevant" sermons about civil rights or Vietnam or something of the sort. The comment goes like this: "That was a fine sermon, Pastor, and much food for thought. I only wish that more people could have heard it; it would have done them lots of good — made them think about this problem. Isn't it too bad that people don't live up to those ideals. I've always said that if everyone practiced the Golden Rule, we would not have wars and riots in this world, but after all, this is a tough world and a fella has to do the best he can." What this illustrates is the fact that people, including ourselves, want to hear the "values and ideals and principles of our way of life" extolled and held in high esteem, but have long since made accommodation to the hard necessity of making decisions and acting in a world that does not abide by these ideals. Who was it who said that people are equally upset at hearing the Christian religion questioned and at seeing it practiced?

It is here that Niebuhr's concept of the responsible self emerges as a kind of "replacement system" in constructing a situational Christian ethic in lieu of the old idealistic or legalistic Christian ethic with which we are much more familiar, and under which most of us have grown up. Niebuhr's efforts appear as a viable alternative to these more traditional ethical systems.

The notion of responsibility, Niebuhr reminds us, is of fairly recent origin. "It is a relatively late-born child, therefore, in the family of words in which duty, law, virtue, goodness, and morality are its much older siblings."[19] And Niebuhr feels that the word itself may serve, perhaps, as a "new symbol" in terms of which we may understand something more of the ways in which we decide and act as moral beings.

He is suggesting that the concept of responsibility may throw some new light on man's moral life both in terms of self-understanding and as we seek guidance for our activity as we decide, choose, commit ourselves, and otherwise bear the burden of our necessary human freedom." Just as the concepts of law, duty, virtue, and goodness have served as "models" to describe the moral nature of man in the past, so the idea of responsibility offers itself as a more recent ethical model.

Niebuhr says that there have been two predominant symbols which have served as models for the moral life of man in the past. The most common

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

and perhaps that with the longest tradition comes from Aristotle and pictures man as one who works toward the realization of certain ends or goals. Aristotle begins his Nicomachean Ethics (to which Niebuhr refers as the most influential book in the West in the field of ethics) with the statement: "Every art and every inquiry and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good." For Aristotle, and for those thinkers in the long history of Western civilization who follow his lead, man is seen as "the being who makes himself—though he does not do so by himself—for the sake of a desired end. Two things in particular we say about ourselves: we act toward an end or are purposive; and, we act upon ourselves, we fashion ourselves, we give ourselves a form."[20]

Aristotle's most famous Christian disciple was Thomas Aquinas, who using the concepts of will and reason, argued that those acts are distinctively **human** which are the products of reason and will apprehending and moving toward some end or goal. When we consider our own actions, isn't it true that we often think and act with some purpose of goal in mind which is deemed **a good?** As we think about our vocation in the ministry, for example, our weekly activity **moves toward** culmination (goal or end) in the Sunday services. We came here **for the purpose** of getting away from the routines, or meeting friends, or recharging our intellectual and spiritual batteries. When we counsel a parishoner who comes for help with a problem, we may have some **goals** in mind which relate to the person's mental and emotional and spiritual health; the end of our concern in this regard is perhaps what Paul Tounier calls the "whole person in a broken world." The results of our counseling activity may be something less than we would like, but at least we recognize the **telos** of our activity.

When we think about good, or purpose, or realization of the ideal, we are thinking under the influence of what Niebuhr calls the teleological model in ethics which regards man as a realizer of ends, an achiever of goods, a pursuer of purposes. This is the image of man-the-maker and it represents one of the characteristic interpretations of man's moral nature.

A second ethical model, Niebuhr observes, is that of man-the-citizen, in which the predominant concept is law. According to this interpretation, man is subject to law and is bound to obey it. Hence, the questions arise: "To what law shall I consent, against what law rebel? By what law or system of laws shall I govern myself and others? How shall I administer the domain of which I am ruler of or in which I participate in rule?"[21] This symbol plunges us into the middle of that ancient dispute Paul had with the Judaizers in the early Church—a dispute which, as we know, has never been satisfactorily resolved in the long history of the Christian Church. We would certainly agree with Paul that it is not necessary to be circumcised in order to be a Christian, that true circumcision is a matter of the Heart (Romans 2:29). But at the same time we know that the Church today is often the battleground of conflicting legalisms which contend against each other in attempting to define what it means to be a real Christian. Hence, a true Christian is one who, according to the General Rules in the **Discipline,** does not wear "gold or costly apparel" (paragraph 95). Or a true minister is one who doesn't smoke and drink. We may not be encumbered by the brand of legalism Paul contended against, but the kind of slavish obedience to religious laws that Paul insisted could not bring life is still very much with us.

To be sure, not all legal systems are so petty as the ones we often contend with in the Church. (How much of our time as ministers is spent in keeping our people from "biting and devouring"

[20] *Ibid.,* p. 49.

[21] *Ibid.,* p. 53.

each other with their own rigid legalisms?) If man is a goal-sekeer, he is also a law-abider. In the history of Western Christendom, for example, the law motif is fundamental in a way that it has never been in the East where theology is flavored more by the concept of man's spiritual reconciliation with God than by his moral justification. For one thing, the legal motif underlies the theory of atonement, namely, that God's justice must be satisfied or appeased before man's sin (infraction of the law or disobedience) may be forgiven. With Paul, Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, the legal symbolism of Western theology was firmly established — a tradition which was given new life by the Reformers, and has once again been underscored in our own time particularly in the theology of Karl Barth. In both Barth and Bultmann, for example, we find the dominant ethical symbol is that of obedience to the gospel (Barth) or to the eschatological moment (Bultmann) in which one decides for or against the Christ, as it were. Here of course, law has been transformed into something like "the love of God in Christ" in order to avoid the problem of Law and to preserve salvation **sola gratia.** But the legal motif is still operative, and Niebuhr for one, feels that it leaves much to be desired as a model for interpreting the moral life of man.[22]

So we have before us, says Niebuhr, two dominant symbols of moral existence — the image of man-the-maker (teleology) in which the appropriate question is "What is good?" and the image of man-the-citizen (deontology) for which the appropriate question is "What is right?" There is no doubt that both of these symbols operate in our conscious and unconscious lives as we think and decide and act, for we find ourselves not only seeking goals and realizing purposes, but subjecting ourselves to the rule of laws whether they be civil or religious in nature.

But Niebuhr is proposing a third alternative, not as a substitute for either or both of these older ethical models, but as one which may be more characteristic of the present time and more apt in serving as a guide to a moral conduct, namely, the symbol of responsibility. The questions we try to answer as moral agents, says Niebuhr, are "What shall I do?" or "What shall we do?" In attempting to answer these questions, teleological and deontological systems may suggest solutions or answers in terms of what is a proper goal to be achieved (personal or social) and what rules or laws should be followed in order to achieve it. It is in this same setting, that is, in answering these questions, that the notion of responsibility offers another possibility. Niebuhr explains that implicit in the idea of responsibility is the image of man-the-answerer, man in dialogue, or man acting in response to action upon him.[23] We need to explore what Niebuhr has in mind here and then see how he relates his ethics of response to the broader field of Christian decision making.

Under the rubric of responsibility, we see man primarily as an actor or a doer. This figure, says Niebuhr, is more helpful today than the older models of man as a purposive agent or man as a law abider. To be sure, this does not mean that the former symbols have been cast aside but that in the idea of man as a responsible being we have a more fruitful basis upon which to consider his moral nature. Hence, all human action is response to action upon us in situations which are both personal and social in nature. This is not simply the reaction-response of the behavorist psychology; rather it recognizes the fact that we arrive at some degree of self-understanding through the interpretation of our response to everything that happens to us. In other works, "the self defines itself by the nature of its responses."[24] Response here refers to

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 130 ff.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

the whole personality, that is, one who has some degree of self-knowledge and insight, one in whom there is some coherency, some organizing center or integrity.

This is true not only of persons but also of larger social groups. As members of clubs, churches, societies, nations we are constantly interpreting not simply events themselves, but the meaning of events. For example, we respond to what the Vietcong do, not only as "enemy warriors" but as representatives of a larger social movement (Communism, Nationalism, Freedom), and we read about and interpret the war in Vietnam with reference to certain larger perspectives such as the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism on the one hand, or the role of a superpower vis-a-vis the small, emerging anti-colonial nations. In the same way, as members of a sectarian church, we view the movement toward Christian unity and interpret what is happening with reference to our history as Methodists or Roman Catholics or Episcopalians or Congregationalists. And all of this "interpretation" of the meaning of events conditions our response to these events, whether we willingly join the army or oppose the war, whether we work for the merger of denominations or view ecumenism with suspicion and hostility.

On the personal level, the fact that we understand ourselves largely in terms of our responses to situations may be illustrated with reference to the problem of suffering. All of us know that personal character is formed in some degree by response to suffering. It is not simply **that** we suffer but **how** we suffer, that is, how we respond to our suffering, which determines character.[25] In the case of the parent whose child is dying of lukemia, or the young man whose promising career is cut short by a freak accident, or the father who tries to understand why his son "drops out" of society to become a hippie, we have ample illustration of the fact that character is measured not only with reference to goals we try to achieve or laws we seek to obey but also in terms of the responses we make to what Paul Tillich calls "the conditions of our existence." Niebuhr is offering an interpretation of man's self-conduct that begins with the response-relation of the self to what is given with it and to it. The goal-oriented ethic raises the question "What is the proper end of man?" or "What is man's highest obligation?" The response-ethic Niebuhr is suggesting asks: "What is going on?" or "What does a man do in **this** situation?" Niebuhr explains:

> If we use value terms then the difference among these three approaches may be indicated by the terms, the **good,** the **right,** and the **fitting;** for teleology is concerned always with the highest good to which it subordinates the right; consistent deontology is concerned with the right, no matter what may happen to be our goods; but for the ethics of responsibility the **fitting** action, the one that fits into a total inter-action as response and as anticipation of further respnose, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.[26]

Here we must note once again the theological dimension of Niebuhr's "ethic" as seen in the fact that he regards all action upon us as God's action, whether the phenomen is natural, historical or personal in character. Gustafson points out that for Niebuhr, God is Creator, Governor, and Redeemer.[27] God presents himself to us as Creator not only in the ordered goodness of all creation, but also in the emergence of man as a **tender** of his world. Hence, the whole of human culture is the imposition of cultivating activity on a world unfashioned, or as Harvey Potthoff would say, a world in process of becoming.

[25] *Ibid.,* pp. 59-60.

[26] *Ibid.,* p. 61.

[27] Gustafson, pp. 30-41.

God presents himself to us as the Governor and Sustainer of the world in which we live through those natural and human limitations which make us finite creatures. We are limited by other beings, by our own finite capacities of strength and intelligence; we are limited by social and political conditions over which we have little or no control (Cold War, Inflation, Arms Race). Through this "web of limitation" we are aware of God's governing activity upon us, and it is in terms of this restricted field of operation that one may respond with self-restraint to live and serve among others, or with a sense of disdainful futility.

In the Redemptive character of God's self-disclosure we find something of particular relevance to the ethics of response, for it is by the redeeming love of God, shown to man in many ways, that we become free and responsible and loving persons. For Niebuhr we suspect that the freedom of the Christian man is understood to be the result of God's redemptive activity through which men are redeemed from sin, from law, from evil, from death. "We are loved, we are justified by God's redeeming action; therefore we can live and we can serve the neighbor in love. God redeems us from the need for self-justification, and frees us to serve the need and the will of the neighbor."[28] The Christian life, then, is one of personal response to "grace"—the free gift of God's love. It is a life of joy (if only now and then), a life of forgiveness (if only partially realized in particular relationships) and life of gratitude (if expressed incompletely) — a life that changes our relationships to others, bringing us out of ourselves and enabling us **to be** for others. The effect of God's redeeming action is the qualification of all our relationships. It leads us, says Gustafson, "to attack the evil in ourselves as we attack the external evils around us; it moves us in all our relations to others to seek their good, to seek and to save the lost; it impregnates our actions with freedom and love so that we are driven toward the creative responses to others that realize the good."[29] Theology, according to Niebuhr, is reflection on the nature and activity of God. In this sense, then, ethics is reflection on our response to the nature and activity of God.

If this sounds like nothing really new, Niebuhr would probably agree. He is not constructing a new ethic at all; he is identifying what seems to be a correlation between man's responsive nature and certain fundamental Christian understandings about the divine-human correspondence.

It is in this connection that Niebuhr gives helpful illustration to his response ethic with reference to the Scriptures in which he discerns a pattern of "responsible action" of the people of God. Here we see once again the difference between goal-oriented ethics, law-oriented ethics, and Niebuhr's own position:

> At the critical junctures in the history of Israel and of the early Christian community the decisive question men raised was not "What is the goal?" nor yet "What is the law?" but "What is happening?" and then "What is the fitting response to what is happening?" When Isaiah counsels his people, he does not remind them of the law they are required to obey nor yet of the goal toward which they are directed but calls to their attention the intentions of God present in hiddenness in the actions of Israel's enemies. The question he and his peers raise in every critical moment is about the interpretation of what is going on, whether what is happening be, imediately considered, a drought or the invasion of a foreign army, or the fall of a great empire. **Israel is the people that is to see and understand the action of God in everything that happens and to make a fitting reply.** So it is in the New Testament

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

also. The God to whom Jesus points is not the commander who gives laws but the doer of small and of mighty deeds, the creator of sparrows and clother of lillies, the ultimate giver of blindness and of sight, the ruler whose rule is hidden in the mainfold activities of plural agencies but is yet in a way visible to those who know how to interpret the signs of the times.[30]

V

Having before us in summary fashion Niebuhr's ethic of response, we must trace briefly the shape of his ethic with reference to certain understandings of selfhood derived from Christian thought. Here we may see that the trends in theology and ethics today toward what Harvey Cox calls "secularity' in history,[31] with its emphasis on freedom and responsibility, are given sharper definition and highlighted by Niebuhr's treatment of the Christian style of life.

When discussing Christian ethics, it is not enough to simply talk about the self or the person as individual without keeping the various relational aspects of existence firmly in mind such as family, church, society, nation. As selves or persons, of course, the moral character of our lives is grounded in the "I" but it is never there alone, or even exclusively. For Niebuhr, the character of the moral life, Christian or not, must be I-Thou, and beyond that I-you (plural). In this sense, then, my conscience is a function of my existence as a social being, always aware of the approvals and disapprovals of my actions by my fellow men.[32] This has particular bearing on my role as father, husband, teacher, counselor; it is also important in larger social relationships such as my citizenship in my country and my membership in the Church.

In both cases, my identity as a "responder" to actions upon me has reference to a larger community. When we educate our children to become responsible citizens, says Niebuhr, we do not picture this responsibility only in terms of their relations to other citizens, but beyond that to their country and its cause, "so that they can interpret the actions of their fellow citizens in the context of national intention; so that they will not be subject to tyranny of the immediate instant and the present moment."[33] And in the church, our personal response is to immediate fellowship of members in connection with its various groups and organizations, but beyond that, Niebuhr suggests we are responsible to a larger community (invisible church) represented by the prophets and apostles and of course, Jesus Christ himself. The Christian is responsible in the Church only as he responds to Jesus Christ, for we discover in him, says Niebuhr, the one who 'points beyond himself to the cause to which he is faithful (and the companions to whom he is faithful) — not the companions encountered in the church, but in the world to which the Creator is faithful, which the Creator has made his cause."[34]

The self assumes responsibility not only in the context of personal and social relationships, but also in the passage of time. The sense of time, of past, present, and future, and the realization that, as Tillich suggests, there was a time when we are no more, brings with it a sense of anxiety. Hence, we respond to the threat of nothingness and do so in various ways. In commenting about modern industrial man, Eric Fromm, the noted psychoanalyst, has said that "we are like a man who drives a car and dimly senses that he has lost the way. Instead of stopping and taking account of himself and his situation, he is

[30] Niebuhr, p. 67, italics added.

[31] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), Chapter I In his most recent book, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967) Cox develops a position not unlike Niebuhr's concept of responsibility.

[32] Niebuhr, p. 75.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

concerned only with driving faster. We seem to be driving 'nowhere' but with ever increasing speed."[35] In this we see a neurotic adjustment to the problem of time: it is a sense of the emptiness of time, the meaninglessness of history. Niebuhr says in this connection that under the threat of non-being we respond to all actions upon us anxiously, as men "whose ultimate future holds only death in one of its many forms."[36] This situation produces an ethic of self-defense or personal survival since we respond to each particular occasion with the understanding that the world is full of enemies. We can see this in all kinds of personal relationships as well as in dealings between social groups and nations. The ethical problem becomes, in this case, that of reinterpreting the meaning of time and this involves, at least for the Christian, the task of "revising the mythology of death into a history of life," and with it, of course, the process of making the fitting response "in a lifetime and a history surrounded by eternal life."[37]

This reinterpretation of the meaning of time and history brings us to the threshhold of the "Christian style of life." The word God is important in this connection, and particularly so today in light of the kinds of questions being raised about the usefulness of truthfulness of God-language. Niebuhr is a Christian theologian who believes in the fundamental meaningfulness of the Christian vocabulary. To say "God" is to affirm something about the character of reality—that it is ultimately reliable. But whenever we speak about the relationship between man and God in this sense it must be in terms of man's absolute dependence upon God. Niebuhr describes what we might call the radical contingency of existence and holds it there."[38] This knowledge is as much the occasion for terror as it is for trust, as in the case of Job, so that the "response" to absolute dependence may lead to Camus' "silent indifference of the stars" as well as to the Psalmist's "the heavens are the work of thy fingers."

For the Christian, faith is trustful response to the condition of our absolute dependence, but under what conditions does this "trustful response" emerge? If it is true that "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," then what makes it possible for us to affirm "blessed be the name of the Lord" rather than to cry out with Job, "the arrows of the Almighty are in me"? This brings us to the "nitty gritty" of Niebuhr's ethic and, indeed, to the very nub of the problem which preoccupies Christian thought — the problem of evil.

Niebuhr insists, as we have already noticed, that ever since Paul's letter to the Romans, Christian thought, (theology and ethics) particularly in the West, has dealt with the problem of sin and salvation in a legal framework. Even though Paul proclaims that Jesus Christ frees us from the law, we are still under the law, at least to the extent that "in Adam's fall we sinned all." The Law does not bring life, but it does convict us of sin. In other words, all mankind is guilty of a transgression against God. This put the question of salvation in its traditional terms of justification and acquittal in which Christ takes the punshment that we deserve, becoming the "sacrificial lamb" who is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours alone, but also for the sins of the whole world." The legal imagery which dominates Christian theology and ethics, as well as the liturgies of our worship, conforms quite well to Niebuhr's description of man as a goal-seeker and a law-obeyer. God establishes His purposes and sets forth His laws; man fails to achieve His purposes and live by His laws; therefore, God's justice demands punishment, but His graciousness and love move Him to sacrifice His own son as a "satisfaction."

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[35] *DesMoines Sunday Register,* December 10, 1967, p. 4-T.
[36] Niebuhr, p. 98.
[37] *Ibid.,* p. 107.
[38] *Ibid.,* see section pp. 115-126.

Hence, man is saved if, in faith, he accepts Christ as Lord, or if in faith, he submits to the rule and authority of the Church as an "institution of salvation."

Niebuhr insists that the legal and teleological framework of traditional theology is simply not an adequate interpretation either of the Gospel itself, or of the complexities of the human situation in terms of which we must make our daily decisions.[39] Niebuhr's brand of **situational ethics** is grounded in his view of the human condition which is much too complex to yield to a single-principle interpretation. He sees in man's "wretchedness" not so much the violation of a Law or the failure to achieve an Ideal but a condition of struggle against the One who creates and destroys, who lifts up and brings to nothing all that is. In our human situations, most of us are strangers to reconciliation, to grace, to the love of God. Like Wesley, we preach it, but have it not! Niebuhr says that defensiveness characterizes most of our relationships and activities most of the time (like men under the Law), so that we have to justify ourselves, seek our own glory and that of our closed societies (including the churches). We are held captive by our "restrictive loyalties" and by our narrow commitments. Our sense of righteousness is tied to a defense of the self against the other, one group against another, one race, one political point of view, one nation, and in all of this defensive and anxious self-righteousness, there is manifest our h i d d e n, rebellious distrustfulness against the One. "This is the body of death, this network of interactions ruled by fear of God the enemy. This is the wretchedness of the human condition as we see it in the light of reconciliation."[40]

Niebuhr does not leave us without his own answers to the questions raised about man's hope and the kinds of ethical response made possible by the condition of reconciliation. Salvation is deliverance from "that deep distrust of the One" who acts upon us in all actions; redemption appears as the liberty to interpret in trust "all that happens as contained within an intention and a total activity that includes death within the domain of life, that destroys only to re-establish and renew."[41] And this new attitude toward life, this condition of acceptance as Tillich would call it, leads in turn to a new understanding characterized by trustfulness and hope. Hence:

> . . . we begin to understand all that happens to us and to which we react as occuring in a final context of life — giving rather than a universal teleology of entombment. Our response now is to commandments given with the promise of life rather than with the threat of death; it becomes response to action that holds before us the sure anticipation of glory—not **our** glory but the glory of all being. As all our actions of short-term purposiveness, of obedience or disobedience to the laws, were once shaped to fit into an interaction ending in destruction, they are now shaped—insofar as we are reconciled —into an interaction moving always toward universal, eternal life. The ethics of death is replaced by the ethics of life, of the open future, of the open society.[42]

VI

How, then, do we characterize the ethic of responsible selfhood? What is the Christian style which results from reconciliation and from its attendant qualities of grace, peace, love, and hope? For Niebuhr as a Christian, of course, it is through the life, death, resurrection, and the reign in power of Jesus Christ that we are led to this reinterpretation of life in the faith of trustfulness. As in the case of our

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 142.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

reconciliation, so in the case of moral action Jesus Christ has always been a central figure. In accord with Niebuhr's analysis of the ethics of Law and the ethics of the Ideal, Jesus Christ has traditionally served a double function: he is the one who reveals the will of God and the ideal of life, and he is the one who makes it possible to do the will of God (obey) or to approximate the ideal of life (aspire). Now in the case of Niebuhr's ethic of the responsible self, Jesus Christ serves a similar kind of dual function, but the result, as we might suspect, is somewhat different, and here we see his departure from the Reformation tradition for an ethic of obedience, so evident in Barth's theology.

In the first place, Jesus Christ is "the responsible man" whose responses "fit in" to the divine action. In this sense, Jesus Christ "reveals" the will of God which means not so much the giving of a divine law as it does the indication of divine action. So when he prays "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" he does not mean "make us obedient" to the Law (which he set aside on a number of occasions); when he said, "Not my will but thine be done" he was not referring to commandments but to a divine intention and action carried out through the actions and decisions of men. Jesus "responds" to the "infinite intention" in all things. In this sense he is not "done in" by Judas and the treacherous conspiracy, nor by the expedient decisions of Pilate, but does the "fitting" thing, as he sees it, but not necessarily as others saw it ("if you are the Son of God, why don't you save yourself?").

Niebuhr says that for Jesus, "will of God" referred to a universal intention revealed in all things. "Will of God is present for Jesus in every event from the death of sparrows, the shining of the sun and descent of rain, through the exercise of authority by ecclesiastical and political disciples, to the impending beleaguerment of Jerusalem and the end of the aeon."[43]

Under the image of "the responsible man" the Christian ethos is one of universal responsibility in which the narrow and restrictive and partial commitments of the "old Adam" have been transformed. Everything that happens to us is an occasion for responsible action on our part. Niebuhr points out that this kind of response is characterized in certain portions of the Old Testament, as in the resolution of the Joseph story: "You (Joseph's brothers) sought to do evil but God thought to do good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."[44] There is no legalism here, says Niebuhr, no response to Law or to Goals in which case we might well have had retaliation and continued enmity between Joseph and his brothers.

Another example from the Old Testament is found in the tenth chapter of Isaiah which deals with the problem of an invasion by Assyria — an example which has certain unmistakable parallels to present-day situations on the international scene. As they face this critical emergency, Isaiah bids the Israelites to ask "What is **God** doing?" Isaiah suggests that Israel must discern God's intention for his people through the eventuality of an Assyrian invasion that they (Israel) be called back from their heedless ways into the convenant, the "relationship of reverence and affection" which had brought them into existence in the first place. The "fitting response" in a critical hour is first of all internal reformation; defense against the enemy is a secondary response.[45]

The Christian as a responsible man is one who has, in a sense, stepped out of what Ralph Barton Perry calls "the egocentric predicament" which implies the ethic of a closed self and a closed society. The responsible self discerns

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 165.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 169.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

the ways of God, says Niebuhr, "not in supernatural but in all natural and historic events, to respond to his intention present in and beyond and through all finite intentions." This is the way of responsibility to God that we find "revealed" in Jesus Christ.

But, Jesus Christ is not only the one who reveals the divine intention through his own responsible selfhood; he is also the "reconciler," that is, the one through whom it becomes possible for me as a Christian to be and to do for others, to live the responsible life, to discern and respond to the infinite intention behind and through and in all of the altercations of my own personal and social existence. He is the "redeemer to responsible being," the one who accomplishes the strange mystery through which our attitudes of suspicion and hostility are dissipated and transposed by those of trust and confidence.

How this happens,. we cannot easily say; that it happens, we cannot deny. How it happens that my defensive self (as father, husband, minister, teacher, citizen) is occasionally transformed by grace into a self that responds with love, with concern, with tenderness is something that I cannot easily explain; how my suspicions and hostilities of the unknown person or of my enemies are somehow brought under the imperative to love I cannot easily explain, but neither can I deny that these things happen. There are countless "altercations" and occasions which come to mind which elicit responsible selfhood, but we cannot adequately describe how it works. In this connection, Niebuhr would agree with Walter Rauschenbusch's comment about sectarian Christianity: "All things are mine, whether Francis of Assisi, or Luther, or Knox, or Wesley; all are mine because I am Christ's. The old Adam is a strict denominationalist; the new Adam is just a Christian."[46]

Paul Tillich talks about "being grasped by the picture of Jesus as the Christ" — the one in whom all the contradictions and anxieties and despairs and conflicts of life are taken up and overcome; to be grasped by this picture, by the personal dimension of being-itself which encompasses and surrounds us, is to be "redeemed from the pit" and set on the path that leads to life. Georges Rouault, the famous French painter, once said that his highest aim was so to paint the Christ that the man who looked upon it would be converted. One doubts that Niebuhr was motivated to convert people, but there is a similarity of concern here in Niebuhr's effort to present the picture of the responsible self whose own internal history is transformed by the spirit of the Christ. The strength of Niebuhr's position, it seems to me, is not that he provides a grand scheme for the creation of a great Society (although he would insist that this is the responsibility of the politician), nor that he blueprints particular ethical responses that can be made on given occasions (which is the task of every person and group), nor even that he provides a general theory of moral behavior (nonviolence, balance of power, instant retaliation, do unto others). The strength of his position lies in discernment of a style of life which affirms man's real freedom while giving that freedom direction in response to the living God. For Niebuhr, of course, this style of life was uniquely summarized in Jesus Christ, but there is no arrogance here. He was well aware of the fact that among those who do not take, or even who refuse to take, the name Christian there is often that kind of response informed by trustfulness and hope in the future.

[46] Quoted by Donovan E. Smucker in his article "Rauschenbusch's View of the Church as a Voluntary Association," in *Voluntary Association,* D. B. Robertson, ed. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 160.

For Niebuhr, the Christian style of life has become possible to us in our life with Jesus Christ and in the presence of the One whom he encountered in all his encounters and to whom he gave fitting answer in all his answers to his companions. We believe, he said, "that the reinterpretation of existence has come into the world and that it is not confined to those who say, 'Lord, Lord,' nor even necessarily best represented by them."[47] It is perhaps at least partially for that reason that, in spite of our failures and faithlessness, and in spite of the limiting frustrations we encounter in our daily rounds, you and I find our responsible work to do in the Church and in the world. Niebuhr observed that in our personal biographies as in human history itself, the process of reconciliation has begun in Jesus Christ. At no point is it complete, but the promise of its completion is our "help in ages past, our hope for years to come."

[47] Niebuhr, p. 144.