HOPE FOR THE HUMAN FUTURE: NIEBUHR, WHITEHEAD AND UTOPIAN EXPECTATION

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An idea which gains prominence requires consideration, and a powerful idea requires careful consideration. Thus it is that the re-emergence of utopianism in our time calls for the reassessment of utopian expectation. The metaphorical vision of Teilhard de Chardin, the sometimes strident hopings of the (late?) New Left, the matter-of-fact utopianism of Kai Nielsen or the almost tragic optimism of Marcuse, and the political theologies of human hope—all of these voice an expectancy which we must investigate. The obligation to investigate this claim to truth becomes more intensely felt if we find ourselves sharing—albeit from much too far—the aspirations of those who, oppressed, refuse the present in the name of a better future. For, as we have heard repeatedly, human hope is reasonable only if human history is open—not simply to a rearrangement of want and oppression, but to their dramatic reduction, perhaps even to their elimination.[1] Surely a dramatically more humane world is conceivable;[2] the question is whether it is possible.

Replying hopefully is difficult for several reasons, but no obstacle to utopian expectations, it seems to me, has been more perspicacious or powerful than the critique offered some years ago by Reinhold Niebuhr. Because of its influence and insight, we shall examine the relevant elements of Niebuhr's analysis. The result, however, will not be to refute what is essential to Niebuhr's position (nor, I hope, to lose what is profound in it) for Niebuhr's analysis was directed against the illusions of inevitabilism and perfectionism in a specific historical context. In that context, there was no reason to emphasize the openness of history to the possibility of dramatic and qualitative improvements in the character of life, even to the degree that this emphasis might have been systematically allowed. Today, however, the ques-

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[1]The claim that the reasonableness of hope depends, in part, upon the openness of history is made by Rubem Alves, following Paulo Freire, in *A Theology of Human Hope* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1974), pp. 10, 13 and *passim*, and (with pessimistic results) by Judith N. Shklar, in *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 216f., 271. This claim is but a conviction, of course; it is not a logically necessary truth. Its historical support is sufficiently strong, however, to make it a rather compelling thesis, especially now. Only recently we have witnessed once again the quieting of a student generation gradually convinced that its pursuit of social change can reap no progress.

[2]See, for example, the description by Kai Nielsen in V. Held, K. Nielsen and C. Parsons, eds., *Philosophy and Political Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 19f.

tions posed by the aspirations of the oppressed have changed theology's immediate task. If it can, theology must now give credible systematic expression to the Biblical confidence in a God "who, by the power at work within us, is able to do far more...than...we ask *or think*" (Ephesians 3:20; underlining added, in deference to the insights of Herbert Marcuse!).[3] Today theology must go beyond Niebuhr, without ceasing to be Niebuhrian. Hence, the aim of this paper is (1) to show the extent to which Niebuhr's astute assessment of the human situation is compatible with a genuine, though modest, utopianism, and (2) using the resources of Whitehead's thinking, to outline such an expectation.

I. Reinhold Niebuhr's Critique of Utopianism

Niebuhr's argument against utopianism has two foci. One is his reading of history; the other is his doctrine of original sin.

Has there been progress in history? Niebuhr's answer, in part, is yes. "All human capacities are subject to development, and the cultural achievements and social instiutions of mankind are capable of an indeterminate development..." (FH, 70).[4] The possibilities of increasing justice are indeterminate (NDM II, 192). It is "impossible

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[3]In current theology, this confidence has been most impressively expressed by the Latin American theologians, Rubem Alves and Gustavo Gutiérrez. If their work is anywhere deficient, it is in their neglect of the metaphysical dimension of theology. In *A Theology of Human Hope,* for example, Alves speaks as if nature is a closed continuum of cause and effect (127ff), but he also says, in a discussion of the physical world, that "transcendence...is the deepest dimension of the world of visible things..." (150). And since "transcendence," for Alves, refers to the free God who is the source of our freedom, one must ask how this divine freedom can be the deepest dimension of a nature that is deterministic. One way of explaining the God/world relationship in this regard is the Bultmannian "eye of faith" alternative, but Alves rejects this as leading to a form of docetism. Another way is to rethink the nature of the physical world, along the metaphysical lines of Whitehead. Or, to take a second example, Alves distinguishes his own view (messianic humanism) from humanistic messianism by its emphasis on the autonomy of God, who can surprisingly liberate us when we do not expect or even want to be liberated. Yet Alves also says that God needs, longs for, and awaits human cooperation (136, 143). Here again we are led to ask for metaphysical clarification: what is the relationship of divine agency and human agency in the temporal order?

To point out this neglect of the metaphysical task in Latin American theology is not to deny the primary importance of theology's emerging out of our lived experience, nor is it necessarily to suggest that *these* theologians should take time out of their humanizing labors to engage in metaphysical forays. But, as Gutiérrez says, theology is "critical reflection on Christian Praxis in the light of the Word" (*A Theology of Liberation* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973], p. 13), and we mean only to suggest that in the long run theology will be better served if in the first element, critical reflection, our socio-economic and cultural analysis is supplemented, by someone at some time, with a search for clarity at the metaphysical level. To help serve that limited aim is the purpose of this paper.

[4]In the following discussion, Neibuhr's works are cited in the text, abbreviated as follows (in the order of their citation):

FH—*Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.

NDM—*The Nature and Destiny of Man,* 2 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943.

SDH—*The Self and the Dramas of History,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

BT—*Beyond Tragedy,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937.

DCNR—*Does Civilization Need Religion?,* New York: Macmillan, 1927.

to set any limits upon the brotherhood which may be achieved in history" (NDM II, 85, cf. 183). It is even conceivable that "the power of self-interest. . . .(may) be harnessed, deflected, beguiled and transmuted in the interest of the commonweal. . ." (FH, 91).

These statements from Niebuhr affirming the possibility of progress are carefully qualified, however, in three respects. First, in spite of acknowledging specific areas of advance, Niebuhr is less sanguine about progress as a net result. Civilized achievement has a way of disintegrating into tyrannies and anarchies scarcely preferable to the social confusion of more primitive societies (FH, 7, 9, 98f). Secondly, even though the limits of progress are indeterminate, they are real nonetheless (FH, 70, 71 ff; NDM I, 183). The barriers to further progress cannot always be known, but they are there, and they are immovable. Thirdly, Neibuhr insists that progress fails to change "the human situation essentially" (FH, 70). Human freedom has periodically expanded throughout history, but "the perils and promises are inextricably interwoven" (FH, 232). Niebuhr says the same of the expansion of human power. (FH, 98f.). Hence, "the antinomies of good and evil increase rather than diminish in the long course of history" (FH, 233). The moral progress which appears to occur is in fact only the maintenance of "a tolerable harmony of life with life." No development "radically alters the human situation" (FH, 70).

What, precisely, lies at the root of this lack of moral progress? Niebuhr's answer is, the persistence of self-interest in both individuals and nations. To understand what he means by self-interest and to understand its persistence, we must come to Neibuhr's doctrine of original sin.

Human sin is tied to the uniqueness of the human self. The self belongs to the natural world, as do all other creatures, but the self is also a spirit. As a child of nature, we are bound by its necessities and limits and subject to its vicissitudes. As a spirit, however, we are able to stand outside of, to make an object of, nature, the world, life, and even ourselves. (NDM I, 3f.). The latter, our capacity for self-trascendence, is the source of our freedom and grandeur. It also accounts for our capacity to sin. For here, between nature and spirit, participant in both, we are inevitably anxious. We are both limited and limitless, forced and free, within ourselves and outside ourselves, and—most important of all—unsure of the boundaries between each. Seeking to escape this ambiguity, we, through our pretensions, plunge ourselves wholly into either the realm of spirit or the realm of nature. The former deception, the pretense that we are pure spirit, is the sin of pride; the latter, that we are nature, is the sin of sensuality. But in

either case it is a self-deception; we are deceived, yet not completely, for we have deceived ourselves. (See esp. NDM, I, chps. 6&7.)

One might expect Niebuhr's critique of progress to relate primarily to the sin of sensuality, since here we slothfully lose ourselves in regularities of necessity. And Niebuhr knows full well that sensuality conspires against progress. But he sees pride as the basic obstacle to a radical improvement of the human situation in history. Because pride is ineradicable, progress is impossible.

The problem is not that we seek no progress; it is that this pursuit is always betrayed by an inordinately high estimate of our own perspective. The self which partially transcends nature also supposes itself to transcend other selves, even if ever so slightly. Likewise with groups of people: forces for social justice, such as movements of liberation, are in the end "always involved in the same idolatries as the forces against which they contend" (FH, 227). The tendency to absolutize one's finite perspective characterizes both individuals and nations; inevitably they claim for themselves the vantage of divinity (FH, 16, 17, 84).

The "moral ambiguity" of our situation, to summarize, consists in our inability to transcend our limited, individual perspectives sufficiently to view adequately, and thus to balance properly, the claims of competing interests. And our *sin* is our unwillingness to accept this inability and our persistent denial that it is so. Incorrigible, we invariably confuse and finally corrupt our own best efforts radically to improve the human scene.

Critics of Niebuhr often concentrate on the problematic feathers of his "inevitabilism" – his view that human sin is "inevitable but not necessary." We are free, Niebuhr holds, and thus we sin freely; but, Niebuhr adds, we sin inevitably. How, one must ask, can human actions be inevitably sinful if they are free? Niebuhr concedes that his view poses a "'rationally irresolvable contradiction," but he adds that "loyalty to the facts may require a provisional defiance of logic. . ." (NDM I, 262f).

The advocate of utopianism might be expected to join those of Niebuhr's critics who deride his refusal of logic. My view, however, is that while Niebuhr's critics are right, his position can be reworded and allowed to remain. It is sufficient, I believe, to assert that both Christian doctrine and human experience powerfully confirm the judgment that all persons have, in varied ways, thought of themselves more highly than they ought; that this trait has with considerable regularity been most destructively present when it was most cleverly disguised and most studiously denied; and that therefore, we "ought"

(theologically) to assume the persistence of these traits—pride and the self-deception regarding it—within ourselves. What we would then have is not an empirical generalization, which in any case could not entail "inevitability" regarding the future. We would have instead a doctrinal stance, a statement of faith, the wisdom of which is attested to by human history. We are never able to transcend the finitude of our own perspectives sufficiently to be reliable judges of our own virtue; only one who fully transcends the limitations of finite perspectives can adequately gauge our modest moral advances, if such there be.

Reformulating Niebuhr's doctrine of original sin does not alone give grounds for utopianism. It does, though, make an important change. Specifically, it permits greater room for what Niebuhr himself called "grace as power." Rid of its inevitabilism, a Niebuhrian view can certainly allow that inordinate self-esteem *may* effectively be "harnessed, deflected, beguiled and transmuted" in the interests of the larger community, even if it may (Niebuhr says "can") never be completely suppressed" (FH, 91). Structures of personal discipline and legal restraint could evolve to effect not merely the *continued* balance, but also the *better* balance of expanding allotments of freedom and power. Such progress would not require "saints" free of pride, or even "lesser saints" who always see their pride. It would require the confession, born of faith and nourished by our experience (usually our experience of others!) that pride is there.

I admit to an inability to formulate structures necessary for the harnessing of pride. One should remember, however, that the problem of sin is not the inevitable finitude of our perspectives; it is our propensity to "forget" this finitude. And we have already devised some measures for beguiling our self-beguilement. Our "saintly passions," for example, are hot against those who manipulate the rights of "national security" for the perpetuation of themselves and their politics and the ruin of their opponents. But, reminded as we are that presumed incarnations of divine wrath may in fact be eruptions of partisan revenge, we have in advance yielded our passions to the restraints of "due process." It does not take the penetration of a Niebuhr to bare the many ways in which we "lynch" our fellow humans—economically, psychologically, socially. But even here there is the possibility of advancing restraint. A guaranteed equity of distributed wealth would go as far to prevent economic "lynching" as guaranteed legal equity (in some areas) has now gone to prevent vigilante "justice." A greater diversity of subcultures today limits the psychological injury suffered by those, like the homosexual, who formerly were more fully outcasts. Progress is achieved when the enjoyment of basic necessities

is uniformly extended and the free play of cultural diversity is cherished. Such progress does seem possible.

One speaking in this vein, after so many years of existential anguish and political realism, cannot avoid wondering at his own credulity. Nor is his trepidation tempered by the pitiful naivete of the popular cults of instant renewal through tripping, touching, dancing, bathing or just breathing deeply. Niebuhr's analysis will stand long after these are forgotten. Niebuhr is right to suspect the persistence of pride and the novelty of its manifestations in human action whatever the social order. And he is right to warn that no achievement, however humane, can guarantee against its own decay. But this is not to say that some social orders are not substantially more effective than others in restraining the power of pride and in cushioning its inhumaneness. And it is not to say that because their continuance is not assured, more desirable social orders cannot be achieved. Nor does it follow that, once achieved, they *must* crumble.

II. A Theological Basis for Utopianism

1. Nature, History and the Basis of Hope

Our analysis of Niebuhr, at most, yields only the concession that progress is possible. In fact, one can find in Niebuhr's own work passages where this concession seems to be admitted, if only by implication. But for appropriate systematic reasons, Niebuhr refused to move from the mere acknowledgment of possible progress to even the mildest utopian expectation. The obstacle was not so much his "inevitabilism," which we have judged indefensible and unnecessary to his doctrine of original sin. The obstacle was simply a lack of evidence. Niebuhr, in other words, could concede the possibility of progress without being led to expect that progress to occur, because a careful look at history gives scant encouragement to such an expectation.[5] The final justification of Niebuhr's "realism," then, is the dismal record of history.

Even if Niebuhr's pessimistic reading of history were accurate, however, why should we look only to history for evidence concerning the possibility of progress? Why not look also to the evolutionary progress in the natural world? Can we not look to nature for a clue to the human potential?

This suggestion, Niebuhr thought, was the great fallacy underlying all sorts of mistakes in philosophy and theology. He rejected it emphatically, writing:

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[5]Langdon Gilkey makes a similar point in his recent article, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History," in *The Journal of Religion*, 54, 4 (October, 1974), p. 372.

> . . .(Man's) freedom enable(s) him to create a new order of reality which. . .is not completely governed by natural necessity. . . .This distinctive realm is. . ."history." (FH, 18)
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> . . .Historical patterns are in a category of reality which cannot be identified with the structures of nature. (SDH, 45)
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> If historical development is distinguished as rigorously from mutations in nature as is required by the uniqueness of human freedom in the historical process, it becomes apparent that there is a level of meaning in history which is not comprehended by equating historical with natural events. (FH, 66)

Nature and history are treated as distinct spheres.[6] On the basis of

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[6]David Griffin, in "Whitehead and Niebuhr on God, Man, and the World" (*The Journal of Religion*, 53, 2 [April, 1973], 149-75), argues that Reinhold Niebuhr's views on theology, man, the world, and God are very similar to Whitehead's. Griffin's article is extremely valuable in countering pervasive misconceptions of Niebuhr, and well-documented on most points. I think he is wrong, however, when he denies there is a sharp nature/history contrast in Niebuhr. Griffin's contention rests on his allegation that for Niebuhr, as for Whitehead, there is a "degree of freedom in nature" (p. 160), thus making nature and history in an important sense continuous for both of them.

One piece of evidence for his claim, Griffin says, is Niebuhr's statement that concepts derived from an analysis of the internal reality of man's freedom and creativity should be used in interpreting the cosmos (NDM I, 134). To be sure, Whitehead takes this position (see *Process and Reality* [New York: Macmillan, 1929], p. 172), drawing from it the conclusion that self-determination or freedom in human experience has analogues at the sub-human level. But Niebuhr, in the passage under discussion, means something quite different. Beginning before and including in brackets te portion Griffin cites, Niebuhr's statement reads as follows:

> The fact is, that the relation of things to each other in the chain of natural causation is not an adequate explanation of their specific givenness. This irrational givenness must be regarded either as merely chance or caprice, or the order of the world must be related to a more ultimate realm of freedom, [There is,] in other words, [a gain for an adequate cosmology, if man uses concepts in his interpretations of the cosmos which he won first of all in measuring the dimension of his own internal reality. Even nature is better understood if it is measured in a dimension of depth which is initially suggested by the structure of human consciousness,] and by the experience of a reality more ultimate than his own, which impinges upon his freedom.

Niebuhr was not saying that, in order to understand nature, we must supplement an analysis in terms of natural causation with the supposition of some degree of freedom in nature. He was saying that, because natural causes constitute necessary but not sufficient explanation of nature, the order of the world is better understood if we also refer it to "a more ultimate realm of freedom," i.e., to God. The portion Griffin quotes has this meaning, too, as is clear from the fact that it begins: "There is, *in other words*. . ." (my emphasis). The last sentence of the quotation is more ambiguous, but it hardly supports Griffin's claim. Since the context of the passage concerns the superior adequacy of the Biblical doctrine of creation, this last sentence probably means that nature should be viewed as a process reflective of a divine purposiveness like that of man's.

Other passages Griffin cites (SDH, 61; BT, 8, 48, 220; cf. FH 48f.) also refer directly or indirectly to God as that reality to which appeal is required in order to supplement an analysis in terms of natural causation: These passages do not refer to sub-human freedom, as Griffin seems to suppose.

There are two passages noted by Griffin where Niebuhr does speak of freedom in nature. One of them is DCNR, p. 10 (actually, Griffin refers to p. 11). In the context of this statement Niebuhr is arguing that a mechanistic interpretation of the universe is inadequate: "no total view of reality can be permanently mechanistic," he writes, "for new types of reality do emerge and science is able to explain only the process and not the cause of their emergence" (DCNR, p. 11). Even so, Neibuhr says, liberal religion, the bulwark against mechanism,

> . . . may be forced to discard its metaphysical and theological monisms. . .and concede that

this premise, Niebuhr can consistenly maintain that the past record of nature offers no clues to what is possible for the human future.

But what if we reject this procedure? What if we refuse Niebuhr's supposition that, because of human freedom, nature and history are distinct?

I cannot here enumerate all the reasons for such a rejection. I can only point out that a credible alternative has emerged, and describe that position in order to see what follows from it for the question of utopianism. This alternative is that of Alfred North Whitehead, who views both human phenomena and natural events, both history and nature, as diverse points on the one continuum of reality.

According to Whitehead, the creative process at every level is constituted by myriads of atomic events related in diverse ways. He calls these momentary events "actual entities" or "actual occasions." They vary unimaginably in complexity, and their forms of relatedness to one another differ immensely, too. Some, of utter simplicity, constitute so-called empty space. Others, in degrees of greater complexity, cluster in societies to constitute the atoms of minerals and plants and animal bodies, including our own. Still others, characterized by an extraordinarily rich balance of harmony and contrast, successively constitute the life of the human mind. The differences of complexity and organization exhibited by these actual entities are simply staggering. Hence it is possible to draw a virtual infinity of distinctions in our analysis of them. But it is also the case that they have certain features in common: Each actual occasion, whether an ingredient of nature or of a human mind, is a synthesis of discrete impulses of "energy" or "feeling." Each is social, deriving that of which it is the synthesis from its past. The past determines the range of possibilities for each becoming occasion. In addition, the past "lures" each such entity to actualize certain pos-

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freedom and creativity in both man and the cosmic order are more seriously circumscribed than religion had assumed. But after that concession is made it is not likely that the idea of freedom, and the dignity of personality which is associated with it, will ever be completely discredited, whatever may be the deterministic obsessions of modern science.

The second passage is NDM I, 95:

> ...a profounder observation may reveal that no observable cause is a sufficient explanation of a subsequent effect and that each effect is but one of many possible consequences in the causal chain...., pointing to a realm of freedom even in nature.

These two references to freedom in nature are far too casual, it seems to me, to substantiate Griffin's account of Niebuhr's view. It is much more likely that Niebuhr used the term "freedom" in (at least) two ways, following the dual use that often appears in philosophical discussions. One has reference to the self-determination or self-creativity characteristic of persons. The other, evident in these two passages, refers to chance or the indeterminacy ingredient in the natural process. Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy was much discussed in theological circles during the period in which Niebuhr wrote NDM, both (rightly) as a disconfirmation of a purely deterministic view of nature and (wrongly) as evidence for human freedom. Niebuhr's references to freedom in nature, I submit, are more plausibly seen as reflecting his view that there are chance occurrences of novelty in nature which demonstrate the inadequacy of any thoroughgoing mechanism.

sible syntheses rather than others. As a part of its given, each occasion also inherits from God a lure toward the ideal form of its becoming. But, ultimately—and here is the crucial point for our consideration—each occasion is self-creative; how it constitutes itself cannot finally be explained without reference to its own self-directedness.

In Whitehead's view, then, those phenomena which contribute to the course of history have analogues, however remote, at every level of the natural process. And vice versa! The processes of nature have parallels in history. What occurs in the natural process *is* relevant to our estimate of human history. And this is no less true for the wavering, uncertain, slow—but upward—process of evolutionary development; it, too, informs our understanding of the human potential.

Our assessment of utopian aspirations is therefore greatly affected when we abandon the separation of nature and history, for the realm of relevant evidence is dramatically widened. We must look not only to history—whose record is surely not heartening—but also to nature, including the process of evolution.

Even so, we still have not arrived at a ground for utopian hope. For example, an interpretation of evolution which sees evolutionary advance to be solely the result of the chance conjunction of blind forces yields little if any social optimism; the more probable consequence, indeed, is pessimism. The inclusion of nature in the circle of evidence is productive of a legitimate utopianism only if one other factor is introduced. It is an assumption though, which Niebuhr would have accepted, namely a *theistic* interpretation of evolution.

2. The Grounds for a Process Utopianism

In the remainder of this paper we shall consider how a theistic view of evolution, Whiteheadian in orientation, is productive of utopian hope, without ignoring Niebuhr's (and classic Christianity's) insight into human nature. First we will see how such a utopianism is grounded in a Christian process view of God. Then we will examine the character of the utopianism supported by this form of theism.

On a Whiteheadian view, God is supremely powerful by virtue of his presence as a lure toward the ideal for each becoming actual entity at every level of reality. God is supremely loving by virtue of His pursuit and preservation of the maximal temporal good as it applies to each occasion. But God's loving aim for each actual entity is not coercive; the freedom of temporal entities is real. God's power is persuasive. His efficacy depends upon the intrinsic worth of the divine ideal to elicit the creatures' adherence to his bidding. In this way God labors, persuading the world to create itself.

The result of God's effort is the evolutionary advance. The circuitous path of evolution is significant. The path to every peak was threatened by numerous detours and drops; there were scores of failures for each success. With the traditional view of an all-powerful deity, no good reason can be given for this extreme waywardness of evolution. But it accords precisely with the doctrine of a persuasive God; the meanderings of the creative advance make sense if the world has real autonomy. This same autonomy, however, means that the achievement of no goal is guaranteed, nor, even if achieved, is its preservation assured. Whatever the cosmic situation, God faithfully seeks to inspire a better world, without a monopoly of power or a guarantee of success. Nevertheless, to this point, the result has been the mighty creation of this present world.

These dynamics of progress on the natural level also apply to the course of history. Nature and history differ enormously in degree, but not in kind. History is the scene of infinitely greater freedom, perhaps the only freedom that really merits use of the term. Human freedom multiplies the future's uncertainty. It *also* vastly increases the future's possibilities. Our hope for the future, therefore, must take its stand on the conjunction of human freedom and divine persistence. God's greatest resource for the increase of temporal good seems at present to be the concurrence of human action. Fundamentally though, the ground of hope for the future, whether in nature or history, is God's faithfulness. The whole creation is lured by God toward a better world.[7]

3. The Shape of a Process Utopianism

We can now discuss something of the nature of utopianism, as implied by process thought.[8]

We first should note that utopia must be conceived of dynamic-

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[7]For a more extensive introduction to the Whiteheadian viewpoint, see my essay, "The World and God: A Process Perspective," in Norbert O. Schedler, ed., *Philosophy of Religion: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp .423-40.

[8]The "abstract" nature of the following discussion may prompt one to ask whether such an analysis should not concentrate on the concrete obstacles to hope, e.g., the problems of pollution, hunger, and repression. But the fundamental difficulty, as I see it, is not an absence of analyses of specific problems or of proposals for their solutions (though these may too often be journalistic rather than scientific). The basic problem is that the alternative futures set before us are widely ignored. They are ignored in part, I believe, because the Judeo-Christian perspective (and its secular derivates) has been infiltrated by the notion that history is *closed* to alternatives. This works to a double disadvantage. It suggests that the *disasters* predicted need not be taken seriously, because things will stay pretty much the same, and it suggests that the modestly utopian *solutions* proposed need not be taken seriously, again, because things will stay the same. The Christian theologian's greatest contribution in this situation will be to recall us to the vision of an open future, showing that the disasters are possible and so, in principle, are enormously superior alternatives. If hope is in this way rendered credible, perhaps it will not only encourage greater attention to current analyses of our concrete problems, it may even encourage better assessments of the present and better proposals for the future.

ally, and thus, relatively. Utopian schemes, from Plato to forms of Marxism, have been static; they have been points beyond which further development is thought to be unnecessary and impossible. But, as George Kateb has urged, utopianism per se does not require this conclusion.[9] These static conceptions are derived from the classic Greek assumption that perfection means a fullness or completeness that precludes further development. This judgment is not shared by most moderns including many recent utopians. Nor is the preference for the changeless logically defensible, as Charles Hartshorne in particular has shown.[10]

Process philosophy, valuing both changelessness and change, offers a more adequate perspective for thinking of utopia. The temporal process is everlasting. Therefore, no temporal point could be reached which does not have a successor. Because succession from one finite standpoint to the next always entails some loss, "completion" in the sense of unthreatened fulfillment could never occur. Moreover, it should never occur. The realization of some values always excludes that of others. Hence, no single state of affairs can be reached in which all genuine goods are realized. Some further adjustment enabling the increase of value is always possible. Consequently, as Niebuhr maintained, there can be no ultimate historical achievement. "Utopia" cannot denote a single, complete reality; it refers to a state of affairs significantly better than the status quo. Beyond it, no doubt, lie other utopias still eluding our dreams. A "utopian" is one who believes that progress from the given to the significantly better is possible, and that the expectation of such progress is reasonable. If and when our utopias are realized, they presumably will have their own utopians.

Secondly, process philosophy requires that utopia be viewed in continuity with the present order. The temporal process is cumulative; the past is drawn up into the present. There are dramatic differences throughout, which we distinguish by referring to different periods or cultures or even to different "cosmic epochs." But the roots of the new are always in the old. The past is not abrogated. The emergence of the future involves the transformation—slow or relatively sudden, dramatic or slight—of the past by the power of new ideals derived from God. Process utopianism, consequently, is this-worldly. That is, it is affirmative of the present order at least in the sense that the present is viewed as the scene of renewal and as the partial resource for its own transformation. Traditional eschatological symbols are

[9]George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

[10]See esp. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metapsysics* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 33-44; *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1964), chapter I.

legitimate in so far as they portray the striking newness of the "age to come."[11] From the process standpoint, however, such symbols are illegitimate when they imply a discontinuity between the new age and this one. The present is essential to the constitution of all that lies ahead.

Third, a process utopianism implies the worth of human action. To be sure, progress depends finally upon God's faithfulness. But human effort makes a difference to what God accomplishes in history. The creative process is susceptible to what, by all methods of accounting, should be called failure. For example, we may destroy ourselves, and the subsequent temporal process may vacillate everlastingly at levels of richness below those presently achieved. Or, a higher temporal order may eventually emerge in spite of, and perhaps bypassing entirely, humanity as understood by us. There can be no guarantee that any effort will succeed, either God's or ours. But progress continuous with the present, and significantly dependent upon the quality of our human commitment, remains a genuine possibility. The character of present human commitment, remains a genuine possibility. The character of present human action contributes to the richness of any future "heaven."

The importance of what is now called "social action" is deeply ingrained in the Judeo-Christian mind. This is true, partly, because the world is viewed as something of value and as being the object of God's own concern. But the repeated betrayal of this conviction throughout Christian history suggests that its rationales are often insufficient. What is often missing is the straightforward conviction that present effort *makes a genuine difference to the future.* Where this conviction has been manifest, it usually was applied to the salvation of individual "souls", an unbiblical restriction which fails to support the importance of ministering to so-called physical needs—political, social, economic,

[11]The revitalization of these symbols in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and others is to be welcomed. The full adequacy of their work on this issue remains unclear, however, to the extent that they leave ambiguous the real dependency of the "coming age" upon the temporal present. This dependency of the "coming age" upon the temporal present. This dependency seems to me to be weakest in Moltmann. He views the resurrection of Jesus as the key to our understanding of the coming reality, and the resurrection, he says, is a *"novum ultimum" (The Theology of Hope* [New York: Harper and Row, 1967], p. 179; cf. *Religion, Revolution and the Future* [New York: Scribners, 1969], p. 17 and chapter two). Pannenberg holds that the coming Kingdom of God is to be realized "in history" and "is the destiny of present society" (*Theology and the Kingdom of God* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], pp. 76 and 84, respectively). Yet Pannenberg seems also to hold a static and absolutistic conception of the eschatological future which, in the end, forces him to contrast severely the "coming reality" with (apparently) every temporal achievement of justice and love (*ibid.*, p. 80f.). These judgments are difficult, however, because Pannenberg and Moltmann are both speaking so as to affirm the autonomy of God with respect to the future, rather than explicitly to deny the contribution of the present to that future. One can only say that in so far as these views undermine the essential contribution of the temporal process to the "age to come," they must, from process perspective, be judged inadequate.

ecological, etc. Except when made a precondition to salvation, which inevitably leads to the "works righteousness" syndrome, social action has frequently lacked a clear theological rationale. Inspirational exhortations have had to suffice as substitutes. Usually the appeal has been to the example of Jesus, an example which is easily as frustrating as inspirational. Pannenberg appeals to the glory of the coming future, a foretaste of which we have already in Jesus' resurrection.[12] This vision may indeed inspire feeling, but it is hard to see how it prompts action unless such action is *somehow* tied to the achievement of what we long for. Process theology makes this connection clear. Present efforts to bring healing and wholeness may or may not have their own reward. But they do serve the slow emergence of that better world for which, with good reason, we may hope.

We have been considering some of the elements of a process utopianism. We should also be clear about what it does not imply.

First, process theism does not guarantee progress, whether in nature or history. Unlike those utopianisms which Niebuhr so effectively criticizes, the view here defended does not suppose that time itself is redemptive. There is no assurance, either from historical experience or from theology, that hopeful expectations *will* be fulfilled. The unique degree of openness characteristic of human beings makes history especially susceptible to God's creative urgings. But the openness of the temporal future which allows for hope also denies its guarantee. Whether future progress will occur and, if it does, whether its achievements will be sustained—of these things we can never be certain. We can only offer good reasons for our active hoping.

Second, process theism does not manifest the prideful supposition that humanity is, or will become, the center of history or the master of its own destiny—these, too, being mistakes against which Niebuhr rightly warns us. (Of course, process philosophers and theologians are no more immune to pride than others are, but that is not a presumption endemic to their systematic orientation!) The process view does not suggest that humanity has at present reached its upper limits of development or that humanity as we understand it is necessarily the highest boundary of the creative advance. If it recognizes humanity now to be the supreme resource for progress, it may with equal force acknowledge our unparalleled capacity for destruction, peculiarly compounded by the manifold shrouds of our pious self-deception. Nor does process theism wrongly suppose that some humanly-contrived methodology, such as the scientific method, or encounter groups, or meditation, is an infallible instrument of progress. Indeed, its system-

[12]Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 79f.

atic recognition of the unfathomable complexity of the human organism should warn its advocates away from simplistic solutions and naive certitudes.

Finally, the utopianism of process theism does *not* imply our moral perfectibility. One necessary element of the human condition, Niebuhr reminded us, is the limitedness of each human perspective. Process thought generalizes this doctrine into a metaphysical principle —each becoming occasion always takes account of its past selectively. But another element of our humanity—"inevitable though not necessary" in Niebuhr's terms—is our propensity to ignore this limitedness and, moreover, to pretend that we have not done so. This claim, the kernel of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin, requires several comments. One is that process philosophy can give precise meaning to the otherwise paradoxical statement, "inevitable but not necessary." It allows us to say that the practice of absolutizing our individual perspectivies even while pretending otherwise is not metaphysically required, but it certainly is a pervasive human characteristic in the present cosmic order. Like Niebuhr, the Whiteheadian can understand the background of this propensity in terms of the powerful influences of the past. Yet, also like Niebuhr, we must view it finally as a function of the individual's own freedom.

There are, however, some differences between the Whiteheadian view and Niebuhr's on the issue of human perfectibility and its relation to utopianism. A widespread acknowledgement of our propensity toward pride and self-deception would itself be some measure of significant progress, the Whiteheadian is likely to hold. And it is not impermissible to suppose that God seeks to ingrain this acknowledgement more forcefully into our cultural structures and thus into our individual consciousness. To the extent that this effort succeeds, the result will be an increase of tentativeness and tolerance and, consequently, some decrease of inhumaneness. This would not constitute moral improvement in the narrower sense of the heightening of spontaneous altruism in individuals, but it would produce greater conformity to the more humane patterns of behavior dictated by virtue. Moral progress of this kind is clearly not the whole loaf, but it is a bite of bread worth having.

The process theist, however, cannot disallow the possibility of moral progress in the narrower sense. We cannot *be sure* that the mixture of motivations underlying human actions is in every case balanced toward perverse self-centeredness. We cannot *be sure* that every pursuit of heightened sensitivity, every effort to obtain a greater empathic sharing of the neighbor's need must, to the extent that it

succeeds, produce a new vice of corresponding intensity masked beneath a new facade. In short, we cannot be certain that "grace as power," which Neibuhr tended to admit only in principle, may not increase. If in feeling we share Niebuhr's dubiety, at the level of reflection process theologians must be skeptical of Niebuhr's skepticism.

Nevertheless, the essence of Niebuhr's understanding of sin, as it was interpreted above, need not be compromised in a process utopianism. His systematic repudiation of any design whereby men and women absolutize their doctrines, or morals, or motives remains intact. For process thought, only the divine perspective is sufficiently inclusive infallibly to judge merit and assign blame. If people do progress beyond the predominance of self-interest, they cannot, in the nature of the case, know that this is so. Indeed, even the emergence of a new moral breed, empathic to a degree now only dimly envisioned, could not alter the situation; so long as they remained individuals at all, the limitedness of their restricted perspectives would render impossible their certainty of virtue. From the process standpoint, even morally "perfect" individuals who were finite could not know of their perfection.

One remaining criticism of utopian hope should be discussed in connection with process utopianism. It is the fact of death. Niebuhr appeals to this fact as the "final proof" of those creaturely limits which define the parameters of historical development (FH, 77; cf. 75-79). This theme is a frequent one in critical treatments of utopianism. It is not clear why. The fact that people die does not logically entail the conclusion that progress is impossible or that they will not work for it. Men and women work for many things whose benefits they do not expect to enjoy. Instead, the point seems to be that death's finality tends to weaken utopian aspirations. If so, the claim is an empirical one, asserting a psychological connection between the inevitability of our departure from the temporal order and our hopes for its future. I do not think this claim is true, at least where, and to the extent that, the Christian ideal of altruism is realized. But if in fact the possibility of overcoming death *is* essential to an enduring utopianism, process theology, I believe, allows (though it does *not* require) a perspective that is uniquely effective in this regard.

Process thinkers generally acknowledge that the individual self could conceivably survive the death of its body, continuing to enjoy "subjective immediacy" as objectified in the life of God. This "divine environment" is its resource for the continuing enjoyment of a rich and dynamic existence. Important for our present considerations, how-

ever, is the further observation that the divine life, in turn, knows and is enriched by the enduring temporal process. Therefore, the post-mortem self could continue to know and enjoy the realization of that future to which it had contributed, as that temporal coming-to-be is meditated to it through God. Another relevant consideration emerges, too. The richness of God's experience is diminished to the extent that utopian aspirations are thwarted. It would follow, then, that the quality of our own post-mortem existence would also be diminished by an impoverished temporal future. In this view, our human actions not only make a real difference to the temporal future; they also contribute to the character of our post-mortem existence in the life of God. In any case, a process doctrine of immortality would deal with the problem of death in a way that underscores, rather than detracts from, a utopian commitment to the betterment of this world.

The foregoing argument, although clearly speculative, has not been "utopian" in the usual sense. It has not outlined an ideal society or recommended a particular path to progress. Indeed, it could not, for process theism suggests that there is a variety of reasonable utopian expectations. There are many higher forms of value awaiting realization. Numerous forms of life are possible in which self-interest is more securely constrained, racism more resolutely overcome, economic inequities more effectively eliminated, political decisions more justly accomplished, technology more creatively utilized, the environment more reverently nurtured, and the unique potentialities of individuals everywhere better realized. But to say this is useless unless we have some hope of getting there, some reasonable hope.

I have argued that we do. The argument in essence is this: that history is open to the possibility of dramatic progress, and—human sin notwithstanding—that the divine presence in history makes the pursuit of such progress a rational undertaking; for if, in the natural order, this creative presence has formed a world from chaos, we should not be sure that, in history, it will fail.