Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About Racism in America?

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John Bennett, a long-time friend and colleague of Reinhold Niebuhr, characterized him as "a pioneer in the movement for racial justice." Even one of Niebuhr’s harshest critics, black theologian Herbert O. Edwards, has acknowledged that Niebuhr “spoke out more often and more critically against racial pride than any other theologian of his time.”

From the very beginning of Reinhold Niebuhr’s public career in the 1920’s to the end of it nearly a half century later, he consistently condemned those in American civic and religious life whose racial prejudice denied the common humanity and human dignity of black people. Except for the years immediately preceding and during World War II, the issue of race never dropped out of the wide range of Niebuhr’s religious and political commentary. He understood “race pride” to be the most deeply rooted, insidious, pernicious, intractable and stubbornly evil of all the social sins. Niebuhr appreciated that on this issue, the stakes were high. In his first essay on the subject, written in 1927, Niebuhr wrote that “the whole validity of the Christian faith is in the balance as men try to solve the race problem.” It was not only the life and vitality of Christianity

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, “School, Church and the Ordeal of Integration,” Christianity & Crisis 16, no. 16 (October 1, 1956) 121-122,122.
that was at stake but that of Democracy itself. Niebuhr characterized civil rights as the great “American Dilemma” because it brought to light the stark contradiction between our basic Democratic values and ideals, premised on principles of equality and freedom for “all men,” and “the sorry deprivation of rights of our Negro minority.”

There can be no doubt that the problem of race and racism in America (and in the world) was an issue about which Niebuhr expressed great concern, sometimes with powerfully poetic rhetorical skill.

Yet, race, racism and civil rights had never become one of Niebuhr’s primary passions. Domestic labor issues, political philosophy and foreign affairs always occupied the greater part of Niebuhr’s energy and attention. It does not appear from biographical accounts that Niebuhr ever placed his own personal, proprietary or professional interests at risk for the sake of taking a hard-line anti-racist stand. Opportunities for him to have done so presented themselves in Detroit, both during his thirteen-year pastorate at the Bethel church and after. Not only did Niebuhr fail to integrate his own congregation, but he supported the firing of his young successor who had chided the congregation too harshly, in theirs and Niebuhr’s view, when the issue of whether or not to grant membership to black applicants actually came up.

In his public writing and private correspondence, Niebuhr was often reserved about the pace and level of civil rights activism in the South. He was concerned about laws that seemed to give blacks too much too soon at the risk of upsetting whites and prompting them to violence. Also, one cannot help but notice a certain racial ambivalence in Niebuhr, sometimes latent (such as when he speaks of the “primitives — and they are primitives” of Africa, and the socially and historically conditioned “cultural backwardness” of the black race), and sometimes blatant (such as when he said “we must not consider the Founding Fathers immoral just because they were slaveholders,” and that grown white women


7. Fox, 118-120.

8. Fox, 282.


10. For example, see Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America (New York, NY: Charles Scribner & Sins, 1958) 78-85.

hissing "like angry geese" at little black school-girls did not quite rise to
the level of racism.)

One is pressed by contradictory observations such as these to ask: Did
Reinhold Niebuhr really care about the problem of racism in America?
If so, how do we account for his relative lack of passion about it and his
seeming lack of consistency in thought and deed? In order to answer the
question fairly, the content of Niebuhr’s thought on the subject must be
considered carefully in terms of the theological, anthropological and cul­
tural presuppositions that were “constants” in Niebuhr’s thought (syn­
chronically) and in light of Niebuhr’s own social, political and personal
historical context over the course of his half-century of public life (dia­
chronically). First, the synchronic view.

Those who have studied Niebuhr have noted that the entirety of his
social, political and ethical thought is undergirded by his theology. At
the center of Niebuhr’s theology is his anthropology and at the center of
his anthropology is his doctrine of sin. Niebuhr’s understanding of sin
plays a critical role in his thinking about most of the historical problems
with which he grappled. However, unlike issues of foreign policy, political
philosophy or pacifism, where the connection between Niebuhr’s theol­
ogy and its application to particular historical circumstances often seems
attenuated or practically invisible, the line of logic that flows from his doc­
trine of sin to his position on racism is consistent, clear and direct. That
line of theo-logic goes as follows.

Niebuhr starts with the proposition that all human beings are created
“good” but we are innately paradoxical. On the one hand, since we are
made in the image of God, we possess the capacity of self-transcendence.
That is, we are free “spirits” having the supra-rational capacity to stand
outside of ourselves, to observe and reflect upon ourselves as subjects in
relation to objects and, accordingly, to exercise control over ourselves and
our environment. It is this capacity for self-transcendence that enables our
creativity, our civilization, our culture, our ability to form communities
and our ability to make history. In our capacity for self-transcendence,
we are God-like. On the other hand, we are finite, contingent creatures
of nature, subject to the vicissitudes of life and history. The tension that
exists between our free, self-transcendent godliness and our finite, nature­
bound creatureliness causes existential anxiety. It is when we try, in vain,
to escape this anxiety that we deny our true nature and God’s good cre­

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ation and thereby fall into sin. To the extent we deny our creatureliness and exalt our godliness, we commit the sin of pride and to the extent we deny our godliness and seek refuge in our creatureliness, we commit the sin of sensuality. Such a tendency to sin is so basic, and our acting upon that tendency is so inescapably inevitable, that Niebuhr likens it to "original sin."  

Niebuhr's doctrine of sin focuses almost exclusively on the sin of pride, which he considers to be the most basic sin from which all others are ultimately derived. This includes pride of power expressed in the will-to-power, whereby the ego that is either insecure or self-deluded regarding its own potency, grasps for control over nature and other people. Pride of power rises to "greater heights," says Niebuhr, "among those individuals and classes who have a more than ordinary degree of social power." The greater the power, the greater the sin.

Related to pride of power is intellectual pride. This occurs when humans perceive themselves to be the bearers of ultimate knowledge or truth, when they fail to see in themselves the limitations and defects they so easily see in others, and when they set up their ideology or culture as normative and thus seek to dominate that which fails to conform to it. Niebuhr points out that there is an element of self-deception and insecurity at work in this form of pride as well, such as "in the relations of majority and minority racial groups, for which the Negro-white relation is a convenient example." In this regard, Niebuhr astutely observed that the

...majority group justifies the disabilities which it imposes upon the minority group on the ground that the subject group is not capable of enjoying or profiting from the privileges of culture or civilization. Yet it can never completely hide, and it sometimes frankly expresses, the fear that the grant of such privileges would eliminate the equalities of endowment which supposedly justify the inequalities of privilege. The pretension of pride is thus a weapon against a feared competitor.

There is also the sin of moral pride, which takes place when an individual or group sees itself as the bearer of ultimate virtue or of the absolute good and claims that its actions bear divine approval. This is essentially the sin of self-righteousness, whereby the fiction of human ultimacy is mistaken for the reality of God's. Niebuhr sees this most insidious form

15. Ibid, 189.
of pride as that which "is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellow men. The whole history of racial, national, religious and other social struggles is a commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness."\(^{17}\)

All the sins of individuals are at work in and are capable of being committed by groups. Niebuhr’s most significant contribution to theological anthropology possibly lies in his keen insight that groups have their own unique characteristics that result in "collective egoism," "group pride" or what we have come to call "social sin." Niebuhr considers "group pride" to be more dangerous than individual pride because "the group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual."\(^{18}\) Self-interest is the very thing that gives groups their cohesiveness and makes them socially productive in positive ways. However, once group pride sets in and the group begins to worship itself, the result is the sin of idolatry, from which injustice and group conflict inevitably results.

Niebuhr pointed to “race pride” as a prime example of group pride in its most stubborn, conflict-ridden manifestation. He recognized that while class, language and religious differences will invariably account for group rivalries, these alone seldom result in the kind of “inhuman brutality” that takes place when the racial component is dominant. Niebuhr routinely offered three reasons why he believed the black minority in particular continued to suffer in the United States even after emancipation. First, skin color is an obvious mark of "otherness;" it is a visible, unalterable "divergence from type."\(^{19}\) Second, slavery has left a residual contempt for the former slave race. Finally, there continues to be “an historically contingent cultural backwardness” among blacks. This “backwardness” was by no means considered innate by Niebuhr — a point he frequently emphasized — but was itself the result of whites preventing blacks from acquiring various skills so that they might become fully assimilated into American culture.\(^{20}\)

Niebuhr maintained that all groups, even oppressed groups, are guilty of the sin of race pride. “There are never any saints, there are only

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17. Ibid, 200.
18. Ibid, 208.
20. Niebuhr, Man’s Nature and His Communities, 89; Pious and Secular America, 78-85.
people who are victimized and those who victimize them,"21 said Niebuhr. Race pride is simply one of the "universal characteristics of Homo sapiens."22 It is this aspect of human collective life that is "the sinful corruption of group consciousness" from which no group can be completely purged.23 So basic is this form of pride, that Niebuhr goes so far as to call it "one form of original sin."24 So deep is this form of pride, that even new amalgams of races will produce it — Niebuhr points to the Scots and the Welsh as examples.25 Even the church is not immune from this form of "original sin" since "there is no community of grace in which there are not remnants and echoes of the world's pride of race and class."26 Niebuhr believed that "man is an unregenerate tribalist"27 whose race pride is the "chief source of man's inhumanity to man."28 The only possible escape from race pride is repentance and conversion of heart — but no conversion is ever total. Remnants of sinful tribalism will always remain. Niebuhr cautioned that "if we do not understand [race pride] as a perennial corruption of man's collective life on every level of social and moral achievement, we are bound to follow wrong policies in dealing with specific aspects of the problem."29

How, then, did Niebuhr deal with specific aspects of the problem? His thought did not develop in a vacuum but in response to particular circumstances and events. Ronald Stone, a Niebuhr student and scholar, has insightfully observed that "no interpretation of [Niebuhr's] thought can neglect the chronology and remain accurate."30 When Niebuhr's thought is looked at diachronically — that is, chronologically — additional insights emerge.

Niebuhr's theology never really changed, but there are discernable shifts in the way he applied it to specific practical problems. A review

27. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man, the Unregenerate Tribalist," Christianity & Crisis 24, no. 12 (July 6, 1964) 133-134, 133.
of Niebuhr's writing on race and racism from 1925 to 1968 suggests that those shifts tend to follow the phases that Ronald Stone identified in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Prophet to Politicians*, an intellectual biography of Niebuhr's political philosophy. Stone identifies in his subject four key intellectual phases: Niebuhr the liberal (increasingly disillusioned), the socialist (Marxist), the "Christian realist," and the more integrated "pragmatic-liberal." Stone argues convincingly that these phases, though not strictly separable, are indicative of changes in Niebuhr's attitude toward liberalism, which he constantly tested for its adequacy in explaining and responding to abuses of power. While Stone's book focuses principally on the issue of foreign affairs, the same phases can be seen in Niebuhr's thought concerning abuses of power on the domestic scene and in a racial context. These "phases," full of high anti-liberal rhetoric, may account for some of the seeming inconsistencies in Niebuhr that led Herbert O. Edwards to ask, "Will the real Niebuhr please stand up?"

For example, Niebuhr first concerned himself with the problem of racism in the mid-1920's in Detroit. He apparently had not noticed the "Great Migration" of southern blacks to northern cities and the racial tension that it produced until violence erupted in 1925. A white man was killed in the course of storming a black doctor's house in a white neighborhood, and Niebuhr took notice. Niebuhr responded with condemnation of white racism and expressed great sympathy for the plight of poor blacks forced to live in overcrowded slums under substandard conditions on account of it. In Niebuhr's first published article on race, an unsigned editorial entitled "Race Prejudice in the North" (1927), he reported his discoveries that "race prejudice seems in fact to be a universal vice - universal at least among Nordic peoples - which is manifested in varying degrees of intensity according to the degree of provocation given by the social circumstances," that Protestant Nordicism "has frequently aggravated rather than allayed race feeling," and that "the natural virtue of man has been greatly over-estimated." Such sentiments correspond with Stone's assertion that during this period between the first and second World Wars, Niebuhr, once a social-gospel liberal, had already entered the "disillusioned" phase of his liberal years. Disappointed in the failed promises of his liberal President, Woodrow Wilson, disgusted with the opportunistic and exploitative practices of his liberal contemporary, industrialist Henry Ford, and awakened

31. Ibid
32. Fox, 91-92.
to the ugly realities of race prejudice, Niebuhr’s faith in human nature had taken a major blow. His disillusionment turned polemical. In 1928 Niebuhr wrote, in an essay entitled “The Confession of a Tired Radical,” that he was “fed up with liberals, with their creeds, their idiosyncracies, and their attitudes.”34 No group was immune from Niebuhr’s sweeping anti-liberal polemic which he directed at contrite white liberals and, even more pointedly, at established Northern blacks who were as prone to the sin of race pride, in Niebuhr’s estimation, as anyone else. “The minority groups may commit fewer social sins,” he said, “but they suffer from as many spiritual limitations.”35 All this blaming of the victim was to make the point that “we are not dealing with the particular vices of particular groups and races but with characteristics of man.”

Niebuhr may have been tired, but he became more radical than ever, as is evidenced in his 1932 book Moral Man and Immoral Society.36 This work marks Niebuhr’s clear break with liberalism in its progressive-capitalist-industrialist manifestation, and the shift into his socialist/Marxist phase. It was during this phase that Niebuhr’s activism on behalf of racial minorities became most strident, both in his writing and in practice. No longer was he chastising blacks about the danger of their own race pride or self-interest. Quite the contrary, Niebuhr took up the cause of the under-class and argued forcefully that “the oppressed, whether they be the Indians in the British Empire, or the Negroes in our own country, or the industrial workers in every nation, have a higher moral right to challenge their oppressors than these have to maintain their rule by force.”37 Violent resistance could not be ruled out since “equality is a higher social goal than peace.”38

Nevertheless, Niebuhr argued that non-violent resistance and coercion were the best means of bringing about justice, not because non-violence is morally superior, but because in the case of the black minority in America, it was the strategy most likely to work. First, he argued, violence should not be used unless it will bring about the desired results. In this case it would not, because whites were too powerful. Second, a wounded beast is more dangerous than a dead one, and justice is more likely to be achieved if the white oppressor is not unduly provoked. Finally, non-violent resistance deprives the oppressors of the right to claim they occupy the higher

34. Niebuhr, “Confession of a Tired Radical” in Love and Justice, 120.
35. Ibid, 121-122.
37. Ibid, 234
38. Ibid, 235.
moral ground. Although Niebuhr did not believe such a strategy would produce complete emancipation from oppression, he urged its use in the hope that some progress could be made. He specifically recommended that boycotts and non-payment of taxes might be employed as a means of bringing economic force to bear on racial injustice. Even in this most radical phase, Niebuhr’s pragmatic-realist inclinations can be seen in this call to activism: “the White race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.”

Niebuhr’s rhetoric during this period was matched by some action. In 1934, he traveled south and helped Sherwood Eddy form the inter-racial Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. He also became President of the Fellowship’s project, Delta Farm, an inter-racial farming cooperative for poor share-croppers. This was not a particularly successful venture, financially or otherwise, and Niebuhr’s interest faded as World War II approached and his brief love-affair with Marxism came to an end.

Niebuhr’s “Christian Realist” phase can be seen most vividly in his post-war writings of the 1940’s and 1950’s. The civil rights movement was gaining momentum, the Supreme Court was mandating de-segregation, and civil rights legislation was getting passed over strenuous white resistance. In 1944 he wrote of his expectation that tensions would increase since blacks who had been fighting for freedom and justice would be coming home looking to claim their own. The task of the church, he said, was to model justice and to “help white people” understand their hysteria and sin so that they might come to repentance. Niebuhr rightly expected that racial tensions would get worse before they got better.

During his realist phase, Niebuhr seems to have been his most equivocal and ambivalent. His reactions to post-war developments in the law reveal a recurring concern about blacks provoking whites to violence. For example, in 1950, writing in support of the pending Fair Employment Practices Act (which included proscriptions against unfair employment practices and anti-lynching and anti-poll tax measures), Niebuhr agreed that all of our national and religious resources should be used “to give our Negro fellow citizens every democratic privilege that we enjoy.”

40. Ibid, 253.
41. Fox, 176, 282; Bennett, “Niebuhr’s Ethic: the Later Years,” 95.
ever, he believed that passage of this bill was "futile... obviously cannot be passed and probably couldn't be enforced" because it went too far beyond the "standards" of the local southern communities."\textsuperscript{45} In 1954, Niebuhr enthusiastically applauded the Supreme Court school de-segregation decision in Brown v. Board of Education for the principles of equality it upheld but also because it "wisely postpones application of the principle [of integration] for most of the affected states until they have time to adjust themselves to the conditions created by the decision. Thus any undue shock is avoided, and the danger is lessened that the decision would provoke resistance by Southern authorities."\textsuperscript{46} The old rule of "separate but equal," he said, "was a good doctrine for its day." In fact, he thought progress in consequence of that doctrine was "so rapid that it would have seemed plausible to let well enough alone and continue upon the course." Still, he was pleased at the decision of the Court to "boldly" press ahead in its establishment of the "ideal" of integrated schools and a "norm of conduct" that might eventually be realized.\textsuperscript{47}

Two years later, in the wake of white resistance, Niebuhr was still expressing sympathy for anxious southern parents opposed to unsegregated schools because he believed that "the cultural differences between the races are still great enough to warrant a certain amount of disquiet."\textsuperscript{48} White parents had understandable concerns, he thought, "for the cultural adequacy of their schools" and were understandably fearful "that a backward race will corrupt that culture," even though the backwardness was caused by a lack of educational opportunities and the fears were actually unwarranted.\textsuperscript{49} Niebuhr was reluctant to criticize the "honest scruples"\textsuperscript{50} of southern white recalcitrants and their churches too harshly, because he felt this would be interpreted as "Yankee meddling."\textsuperscript{51} He therefore refused to support Federal intervention to force integration based on the belief that it "would do more harm than good."\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools," Christianity & Crisis (June 14, 1954) in Love and Justice, 149.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Niebuhr, "School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration," Christianity & Crisis 16, no. 16 (October 1, 1956) 121.
\textsuperscript{51} Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Effect of the Supreme Court Decision," Christianity & Crisis 17 (February 4, 1957) 3.
\textsuperscript{52} Reinhold Niebuhr, "Letter to Felix Frankfurter of February 8, 1957" in Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr, Ursula Niebuhr, ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); Reinhold
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these examples is that Niebuhr, the pragmatic "realist," no longer gave justice the moral priority over peace. "The Negroes will have to exercise patience," he said, "and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice."\(^{53}\)

Civil rights progress was made in the 1950's but it was too little too late and Niebuhr eventually came to realize it. Seven years had passed since the Supreme Court decision and only 6% of the schools had become integrated.\(^{54}\) In the 1960's, and especially toward the end of his life (1971), Niebuhr had entered his "pragmatic liberal" phase in which he arrived at some synthesis between his liberalism and his realism. His tone became less reserved, and he was more openly critical of southern recalcitrants. His most scathing critique, however, was leveled at the white church which he found to be "woefully lacking in relevance and vitality."\(^{55}\) With the verve of the "old Niebuhr," he wrote that while it may be excusable for the church to stay out of complicated economic issues, "there is no such excuse in the realm of racial justice. There the issue is crystal clear. The question is simply whether we are prepared to treat our fellow man with the same respect that his innate dignity as a human being requires and deserves."\(^{56}\)

His theological basis for racial equality was not in Christology in the Pauline sense (all are one in Christ), but in the doctrine of creation under which every human being is believed to be made in the image of God.\(^{57}\) Niebuhr became supportive, finally, of Federal military intervention to enforce Civil Rights, provided that excessive force was not actually used.\(^{58}\) He also supported the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in their advocacy for more comprehensive civil rights legislation and became less equivocal in his support of black activism.\(^{59}\) In a tone reminiscent of the Marxist Niebuhr, he proclaimed that "a century is too long to wait for justice" and "Revolutions do not stop half way."\(^{60}\) In the end, Niebuhr was

\(^{53}\) Reinhold Niebuhr, "Civil Rights and Democracy," Christianity & Crisis 17, no. 12 (July 8, 1957) 89.

\(^{54}\) Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Montgomery Savagery," Christianity & Crisis 21, no. 10 (June 12, 1961) 102.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid, 103.

\(^{57}\) Reinhold Niebuhr, "Let Love Be the Motive and Justice the Method," Katallagete 1 (Winter, 1967-68) i.


sympathetic to young black rioters frustrated by poverty and the inadequacy of the welfare system. Justice, it seems, had regained its priority over peace.

Did Reinhold Niebuhr really care about racism? The evidence, on balance, suggests that he did — and that he cared deeply enough to write about this problem, even when no-one else did. His condemnation of the white church for its apathy — and worse, its share of blame in perpetuating racism — was consistently hard-hitting. Niebuhr’s prophetic message is one that white churches still need to hear. But Niebuhr’s thought had serious limitations concerning racism which may account for his not having embraced the cause of its victims with the full measure of vigor and passion of which he was clearly capable. These limitations were theological, ideological, cultural and practical.

Ironically, the greatest theological limitation in Niebuhr, pertinent to race, lies in what many would say is his greatest contribution — his anthropology and doctrine of sin, particularly related to groups. Niebuhr’s emphasis on the sin of pride necessarily results in a theology which judges the will-to-power and self-love as inherently sinful, if not ontologically, then for all practical purposes. As feminist theologians and some third-world theologians have pointed out, Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin has no application to the powerless, while they are powerless. For the oppressed and victimized, a failure to claim one’s power and an absence of self-love may be the greater sin than pride, not only in the individual sense that it is sinful to deny the sacred self that is created in God’s image, but also in the collective sense that self-hating both enables and perpetuates the sin of systemic injustice. Black-pride, Woman-pride, and Queer-pride are not “original sins.” To the extent Niebuhr believed these could be so fundamentally sinful, his ability to support the cause of the victims of racism had to have been hampered.

This is not to say that there have not been black male theologians who have been positively influenced by Niebuhr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

was influenced by Niebuhr and his understanding of group pride as the source of racism.\textsuperscript{63} He parted company with Niebuhr, however, not only on the issue of pacifism but with Niebuhr's denial of the historical possibility of agape — King preached that the in-breaking of the Kingdom was possible in history. Preston Williams has also acknowledged Niebuhr's influence upon him, though he ultimately ceased to identify himself as a Niebuhrian during the time of the Montgomery boycotts.\textsuperscript{64} J. Deotis Roberts is a thoroughly Niebuhrian black liberation theologian, but he adds to Niebuhr his own strong emphasis on grace and the Holy Spirit — elements that are sorely lacking in Niebuhr's theology.\textsuperscript{65} I have not found a black male theologian who can fully embrace Niebuhr's theology "as is" or a feminist/womanist theologian who embraces him at all. Black theologians, when they refer to Niebuhr favorably, tend to refer to his most radical and most empowering book, Moral Man and Immoral Society — a book that did encourage the oppressed, and specifically the victims of racism, to activism. However, the thought reflected in this book was not the whole Niebuhr. When Niebuhr wrote Moral Man and Immoral Society, there were no boycotts, no Supreme Court decisions or civil rights legislation pending, and no race riots taking place. Niebuhr's radicalism lacked a sufficient theological basis for activism because it lacked a well developed pneumatology and ecclesiology. This missing piece in the basic theological structure of Niebuhr's thought seems to have "taken the wind" out of Niebuhr's prophetic voice — for Niebuhr's own time and ours.

The ideological limitation that clearly tempered Niebuhr's zeal rested in his "Christian realism" and corresponding disaffection with utopian idealism. Realism may be useful for interpreting the past and the present, but it does nothing to help people envision themselves into a better future. Perhaps this is why Niebuhr never fully engaged himself in Martin Luther King's dream. He never truly believed it was a "realistic" possibility. At best, Niebuhr's realism is descriptive, not prescriptive. To the charge


\textsuperscript{64} Preston N. Williams, "Christian Realism and the Ephesian Suggestion, Influences that Have Shaped My Work," \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics} 25, no.2 (Fall, 1997) 233-239.

that he lacked vision, this much Niebuhr admits: "A Christian engaged in political philosophy can do no more than seek to prevent premature solutions of essentially insoluble problems, hoping that time will make some solutions possible tomorrow which are not possible today."  

Niebuhr’s Christian realism has had its critics among theologians speaking for oppressed peoples. Black theologian Herbert O. Edwards launches a strong and persuasive critique against Niebuhr, charging that Niebuhr’s typical approach was to analyze an issue in such a way as to always put blacks on the defensive. Edwards observes that Niebuhr would first agree with the moral ideal of equality, offer a “realistic” assessment of the situation (what is “real” always being determined by a white perspective), advocate a course of action “that would not rock the boat too much,” and then caution the victims of racism to “be patient.”  

This is certainly a fair and accurate characterization of Niebuhr’s approach during his “Christian realist” phase, which extended over the greater part of his most productive and prolific years. Niebuhr’s realism is as limited today as it was in Niebuhr’s time, in its adequacy to constructively address the problem of racism, because “realism” too easily degrades into defeatism. His pragmatic ideology may aid our understanding of the causes of racism, but the “obvious facts of history” suggest that understanding causes is not enough.

There were also cultural limitations in Niebuhr that may have subdued his ardor. As a white, Protestant, European, heterosexual male in America, he never experienced powerlessness in society. The fullness of his humanity and richness of his culture were never called into question, nor was the absolute right to participate in all the privileges of society ever denied him. Sympathy is not as powerful as empathy born of one’s own experience. Niebuhr himself resignedly acknowledged that “try as we will we cannot feel the pain of others as vividly as they do.” Where such experience is lacking, however, work has to be done in some effort to compensate. Niebuhr does not seem to have gone out of his way to learn about the black experience and perspective, nor does he seem to have engaged the thought of black theologians. He quotes Benjamin E. Mays for Mays’ famous observation that “eleven o’clock on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour of the week.” However, he never mentions anything more about this highly educated and worldly religious educator’s

thought. Had Niebuhr truly engaged such a thinker, he might have been more aware of the profoundly devastating effects racism had of producing self-contempt among black youth — and he might not have seen either race-pride or self-love as sinful in such absolutist terms. Had Niebuhr attempted to understand the experience of the Black church, he might also have understood the power of the Holy Spirit as a community building, life-sustaining force that empowers people to claim their God-given human rights and dignity.

A further and most fundamental cultural limitation is that Niebuhr does not seem to have ever critically examined his own whiteness. This seems to have been a complete blind spot for him. Everything Niebuhr had to say about the “race problem” was from the white perspective — he saw racism as primarily a white sin but also as a white problem that whites were primarily responsible to solve. His attitude seems somewhat patronizing at times, a remnant of the liberal Protestantism, perhaps, that he never quite shook. Niebuhr suffered from a clear case of privileged white myopia. This limitation is made stunningly evident in a comment he once made that “poverty is a peril to the wealthy but not to the poor.”

So, too, does his consistent suggestion that blacks suffer from historically conditioned “cultural backwardness” demonstrate a complete lack of consciousness of his own culturally conditioned whiteness. Niebuhr believed blacks were fully human in a spiritual and biological sense but white culture was the superior norm to strive for. Operative throughout the whole of Niebuhr’s thought on the race issue is the unacknowledged presupposition that progress for blacks meant becoming more and more “white.” In this regard, Niebuhr may have been no more limited than any other racially unconscious white man of his day. However, for purposes of determining what is worthy and useful in Niebuhr for a theological and ethical understanding of racism in our own time, this is a limitation every white theologian must consider, and continually examine in themselves.

Finally, Niebuhr may have been limited by circumstances in his personal life. In his early public life, he was responsible for the support of his mother and sick brother, Walter. Niebuhr was a young, severely underpaid pastor hustling as a writer to make ends meet and to support a family. This may account, in part, for his hesitancy to integrate his own church. Niebuhr often pointed out that Catholic clergy had far more freedom in this regard, because they could not be fired by their congregations. In his later years, just as the civil rights movement was gaining national steam, Niebuhr’s steam was running out. He had long battled severe depression

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and had suffered several strokes. John Bennett, who knew Niebuhr well, attributes Niebuhr’s inability to engage more actively in the cause of civil rights to his failing health.\footnote{Bennett, “Niebuhr’s Ethic: the Later Years,” 95.}

Niebuhr did care about the problem of racism in America. If Niebuhr were to be charged with not caring enough, he would probably acknowledge that he could have done better. Among his last words on the subject are these: “After almost two centuries of broken promises and pledges our debt to our Negro minority is immense and obvious, and its burden lies heavily upon our consciences.”\footnote{Niebuhr, “The Negro Minority and Its Fate,” 64.} I suspect that it weighed heavily on Niebuhr’s, as well.
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