

Reinhold Niebuhr: Sin & Power

- Niebuhr's book Moral Man & Immoral Society is the only writing mentioned more frequently than Rauschenbusch's Christianity & the Social Crisis.
 - MLK is quite enamored with Niebuhr's social ethics
 - R.N. arguments raised such questions about certain aspects of liberalism that he could not ignore them.
- R.N. and Christian Realism
 - **Christian Realism**: some refer to this movement as Neoorthodoxy because the emphasis was similar...but Neoorthodoxy tended to have a pessimistic view of human nature.

Christian Realism argued:

- *The biblical understanding of human nature, symbolized by the myth of the Fall, is a far more accurate, more realistic, understanding of the human situation than either the pessimism of Christian orthodoxy or the optimism of Christian liberalism.*
- *The Doctrine of Original Sin – could be documented as a fact of human experience*
- Here was a revolt against the romanticism, the idealism, and the liberalism of the 19th century

Humanity: Image of God and Sinner

- This positions begins with an understanding of human nature
 - MLK: R.N. has extraordinary insight into human nature, especially the behavior of nations and social groups...His theology is a persistent reminder of the reality of sin on every level of man's existence
- For R.N. human nature is best understood in dialectical and paradoxical terms:
 - Constant tension between one's essential (created) nature and one's existential (self-determined) character – an ever-present conflict between good and evil impulses.
- The modern systems of thought failed to deal with these three subjects related to the nature of human nature:
 - The relationship between spirit (vitality) and nature (form)
 - The nature of individuality
 - The origin of evil
- Christian/Hebraic biblical view of human nature provides answers to these:
 - The doctrine of imago dei (image of God)
 - The concept of creaturehood
 - The doctrine of original sin

Humanity: Image of God and Sinner

- **Image of God**
 - Humans were created in the image of God – unlike any other creature
 - This is the source of our uniqueness & R.N. defined it in terms of our capacity for infinite transcendence. (The world and itself (humanity) can be the object of our knowledge)
 - **Memory** – the ability to detach self from the immediate socio-cultural context and profit from what we see from the past.
 - **Imagination** – humans can transcend their immediate desires in order to consider the wishes of others & plan for the future.
- **Creaturehood**
 - In spite of “transcendence” the spirit resides in a body which occupies a particular locus in space and time.
 - The human is a creature.
 - We are finite...free, but limited and bound.
 - We are people... not God.
 - The unity of spirit and nature is the basis for indeterminate possibilities for creative endeavors.

Humanity: Image of God and Sinner

- **Sin**
 - rooted in this complex & paradoxical character of human nature
 - A paradox of freedom and necessity – free yet bound – that makes us continuously subject to anxiety.
 - However...anxiety is not sin; it is the precondition of sin.
 - People put the self at the center of the universe & everything therein
 - Love of self instead of God
 - PRIDE (hubris)
 - We refuse to accept the limitations of our creaturehood
 - Ethically:
 - Love of self to the exclusion of God (**original sin**) leads to the love of self to the exclusion of other selves (**actual sin**).
 - Humankind's sinful nature manifests itself in over acts of injustice.
 - Actual sins become a structural aspect of social institutions & injustice is perpetuated by human institutions.
 - Therefore we can speak of institutionalized greed or racism or sexism.
- R.N. Classic axiom:
 - *Man's capacity (self transcendence) for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice (egoism) makes democracy necessary.*

Sin - continued

- For MLK – human nature employed a dialectical method of reasoning, rejecting the either/or in favor of the both/and approach
 - MLK considered liberalism too optimistic because of its over emphasis upon humanity's essential goodness, and neoorthodoxy too pessimistic because of its overemphasis upon humanity's essential evil.
 - MLK called for a synthesis of the two and called this: a realistic Christian view of man.
- For MLK the most important characteristic of human nature is that a human is a spiritual being made in the image of God.
 - He locates the essence of humanity's spiritual nature in the faculties of reason, memory, imagination, and freedom.
 - As an examples, MLK points to our abilities to write poetry and other literary works, to paint great masterpieces of art, and to create stirring compositions of music.
- Since we are also a part of nature (created by God – as good) the body is good – not evil and the source of sin.
 - For MLK the view that the human body is evil is based upon a false analogy derived from Greek philosophy (soul good – body evil).
 - MLK then went on to argue that the Christian church should be concerned with the *physical* as well as the *spiritual*. Pie-in-the-sky-by –and-by is considered a potentially dangerous version of Christianity.

Sin - continued

- Like R.N., MLK saw people as sinners in need of the grace of God
 - MLK regretfully observed: it is not unusual for one to follow that dimension of ones' nature inclined to evil.
 - Our acts are often corrupted by selfishness and the will to power
 - King writes: ***You must come to see that a man may be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. His generosity may feed his ego and his piety, his pride. Without love, benevolence becomes egotism and martyrdom become spiritual pride.***
- MLK was influenced by R.N. the historicity of reason (there is no unprejudiced mind and no person is devoid of pride).
 - “The will to power uses reason, as kings use courtiers and chaplains to add grace to their enterprise. Even the most rational men are never quite rational when their own interests are at stake.”
 - Could this be where we get our notion of “political spin?”
- MLK learned from R.N. that reason may serve vested interests, be conditioned by social status, and be distorted by human sin.

Sin - continued

- MLK focused upon the position of the white liberal –referring to them as innocent children of light.
 - In the Klan or some politicians from the south, were unabashed children of darkness.
 - White liberals presented another problem because they often seemed oblivious to latent prejudice.
 - The stance of white liberals often leads to tokenism instead of equality because their advocacy of the cause of minority groups often seems to be an expression of pride.
 - MLK: *the timidity of the children of light helped to explain why structures of evil are so tenacious and fall so slowly.*
- MLK seems to agree with R.N. interpretation of human nature.
 - One qualification: ***there is within human nature an amazing potential for goodness.***
- A weakness MLK saw in R.N. was his inability *to deal adequately with the relative perfection which is the fruit of the Christian life.*
 - R.N. did not deal satisfactorily with the possibilities of spiritual growth, Christian values in personality, and how agape is actually realized in human nature and history.

Power, Justice, and Love

- For R.N & MLK: *the analysis of the relationship between ethics, power, and politics was always intertwined with their views on the relationship between love and justice.*
 - The issue in most social conflicts is the possession or lack of power.
 - Social inequity is the result of – the possession of an inordinate amount of power.
 - Concentration of power in one social group leads to the entrenchment of power, and power automatically give that group a privileged position and an advantage over other groups.
- Privileged classes always resist change
 - They are the beneficiaries of social injustice.
 - Power always continues to exploit weakness until it is challenged by countervailing power.
 - The oppressed *“have a higher moral right to challenge their oppressors than these have to maintain their rule by force*
 - **Morality is always on the side of the exploited social groups;**
 - hence the use of power is justified in the struggle to achieve social justice

Power, Justice, and Love (cont.)

- For R.N. his view on power must be seen in the meaning and relationship between ***love & justice***.
 - Love and justice should be distinguished but they should never be separated.
 - Love is the fulfillment of justice in the sense that love serves to expand the potential of justice:
 - **Love is the negation of justice in that love always transcends justice and sits in judgment upon every historical actualization of justice.**
- Christian loves neighbor – in the way that God has love them
 - Disinterestedly, unqualifiedly, and without consideration of the worth of the object
 - R.N.: *The Christians are presented an ethic they cannot disavow because it judges their prudential decisions, but which they cannot perfectly achieve because of egoism and vested interests.*
 - He speaks of the Christian ethic as the *impossible possibility*
 - He was searching for an adequate strategy to implement it.
- R.N.: Justice is the highest approximation of love that finite humans can achieve in social institutions and social structures.
 - LOVE is the motive behind all attempts to achieve justice
 - LOVE is the norm by which all systems of justice should be evaluated.

Power, Justice, and Love (cont.)

- Begin with quote by R.N on balance of power (p.87)
- MLK understood and agreed with the necessity of power.
 - MLK suggested that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference give a priority to the study of *the levers of power*.
 - In the south (MLK) *businessmen act much more quickly from economic considerations than do churchmen from moral considerations.*
- MLK learned in the civil rights movement struggle that oppressed people *cannot depend upon American institutions to function without pressure.*
- MLK criticism of white liberal's sentimentality
 - ***It is not enough to say " We love Negroes, we have many Negro friends." They must demand justice for Negroes. Love that does not satisfy justice is no love at all it is merely a sentimental affection, little more than what one would have for a pet. Love at its best is justice concretized.***
- For MLK Justice has a dual meaning
 - God's justice and righteousness, the ultimate referent
 - The laws of society.
 - This law needs to reflect the will of God or the moral laws of the cosmos.

Power, Justice, and Love (cont.)

- The meaning of justice for MLK in regard to desegregation & integration
 - Quote on page 91
 - MLK sees society moving from segregation to desegregation to integration
 - ***The actualization of genuine intergroup and interpersonal relations; it is virtually synonymous with the “community of love” that will be produced by adherence to the will of God and the moral law of the cosmos.***
 - Desegregation is the goal of justice; integration is the goal of love. Love is the goal; justice is the means.
- **Law and Love:** MLK and R.N. were similar in their thought
 - MLK: *Morality may not be legislated...but behavior can be regulated.*
 - MLK: *It is immoral to compel a person to endure injustice while waiting for another’s heart to change.*
 - *An oppressed group, like blacks in the United States, cannot achieve its rights without confrontation and constant pressure upon the social groups wherein power is concentrated.*
 - MLK quote (p. 93)
 - MLK on power (p.94)

Nonviolence and Pacifism