Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism and Martin Luther King’s Philosophy of Coercion

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**Abstract:** Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism and Christian socialism typify a phenomenon of 20th century America. Niebuhr’s Protestant theology and political stand reflect the struggles of contemporary America and its multifocal societal paradigm, and prove formative for many subsequent thinkers and theologians, including Martin Luther King. The present study will explore the connection between Niebuhr’s theology, his political consciousness, and political realism; and show the practical implications regarding King’s nonviolent program.

**Keywords**: Christian Realism, Civil Rights, coercion, non-violence.

Unconfined to one historical trend of thought, Niebuhr’s theology makes use of the richness of human intellectual history. His concept of human nature, for example, reifies Augustine’s view of man; in a study of the means of achieving social justice one may detect traits of the Machiavellian prince and of Deweyan pragmatism. His meditation on the role of the government reveals, as it is also verbalized, familiarity with Calvin and Hobbes; while the view of society is constructed in the light of Marxist class-consciousness. This multivalence borrows elements from various schools of thought, while it rejects and criticizes the respective school itself. A cardinal change in Christian thought is, however, the rendering the church which used to have “a universality it no longer possesses” (*Moral Man* 91) one societal group within a larger societal context, and the Christian believer a member of a religious minority in a multireligious/non-Christian environment.

It is with this understanding that Niebuhr responded with pessimism to human nature. Under the formative influence of his working-class parishioners who suffered from recurring lay-off, and of the experience of the world wars (Hermens 255), Niebuhr professes the “existence of natural evil [and] of suffering” (Jaffa 261)—drawn to St. Thomas and Augustine. The original sin, however, does not enslave humans in the sense medieval religious thinkers held. For Niebuhr humans are free, but they use their freedom wrongly because they have the ability to do so. Considering it as an axiom based on Genesis, he claims that the nature of the world is good, and that reinforces his view of man as part of the creation as well: “sin is not a necessary and inherent characteristic of life. Evil is not a part of God, nor yet a part of essential man” (*Beyond Tragedy,* Ch.8, par. 17). In this way, he does not abolish Augustinian dualism, quite the opposite, for he claims that “there are genuinely tragic elements in the human enterprise, simply because nobility and strength, dignity and creative ambition are mixed with [. . .] sin” (*Beyond Tragedy,* Ch.8, par. 16). He places humans in a “city of man” of alienation and corruption (Diggins 115)--society in which Human corruption is due to the inevitability of freedom: “Sin is not so much a consequence of natural impulses, which in animal life do not lead to sin, as of the freedom by which man is able to throw the harmonies of nature out of joint [. . .]. It is not a defect of creation but a defect which becomes possible because man has been endowed with a freedom not known in the rest of creation” (*Beyond Tragedy*, Ch. 1, par. 11). With all the “glories and the limitations of freedom” (Finstuen 116), freedom shares a dualistic character. On the one hand, freedom liberates: “the individual, though mortal, is given, by self-transcendent freedom, the key to immortality” (“A View of Life” 267). On the other, human nature is corrupted because of the egoism people have built up in their freedom: “Man pretends not to be mortal [and] seeks to turn creatureliness into infinity” (*Beyond Tragedy,* Ch. 1, par. 16). “Humanity’s stubborn overestimation of its freedom” (Finstuen 116) allows Niebuhr to assert that “the highest expression of human spirituality, therefore, contains also the subtlest form of human sin” (*Beyond Tragedy,* Ch. 1, par. 18). Human life is therefore tragic, enshrined in sin and renders an almost apocalyptic conflict inherent in society.

Since Niebuhr considers Christians with the same rights as non-Christians, the question of conflict and coercion is rightly introduced. Initial non-hierarchical and anarchical conflict between *raison d’être* and equality are relativized in society “by the necessities of social cohesion and organic social life, which [. . .] give some men privileges and powers which other men lack; and finally by human sin” (*Christian Ethics* 148), also manifested in the difference between classes(*Moral Man* 152). In a society of conflict, anarchy can only be turned into order by force to secure the optimal maximization of colliding interests: “coercion is a necessity of social cohesion, and coercion demands the concentration of power in government and the manipulation of that power by some authority” (*Christian Ethics* 155). Yet, cohesion is established in injustice and is validated through ideology.

Society is a construct in which conflict dominates because of human self-transcendence. Individual instances of self-transcendence act as mutually exclusive as each strives for hegemony. Niebuhr, therefore, proposes to centralize power to establish control over a be eliminated, only at the most, appeased. Thus, he criticizes the liberal attitude stressing co-operation and individual goodwill (*Christian Ethics* 175). Social control is a compulsion because of human inability to deal with freedom.

Consequently, his realism grants place to necessary violence in place of liberal “non-violent resistance as an instrument of love perfectionism” since “the end justifies the means” (*Christian Ethics* 195) to achieve a balance of power. Understanding that “where there is tension there is potential conflict, and where there is conflict there is potential violence” (*Christian Ethics* 189), Niebuhr sees coercion ethically justified (*Moral Man* 179) in establishing “justice through equilibria of power” (*Christian Ethics* 189).

Christian liberty constitutes for him thus one factor in the national patchwork, contributing to the tension that both constructs and deconstructs the social balance. Social control is artificially maintained and its achieved equilibrium cannot be equated with Augustine’s *civitas dei*. Christians do not dwell in a city upon the hill, or in forced otherworldliness, but in an antagonistic world, the properties of which they have to use to legitimize their stance.

Niebuhr’s Christian realism and political views have greatly influenced modern political realism’s description of states. Especially, in the aftermath of World War II, in the bipolar cold war system it culminated in its relevance. László Kiss reminds us of the extent Niebuhr’s anthropological pessimism (89) had an impact on Hans J. Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations* (1948) and on Kenneth N. Waltz’s *Man, the State, and War* (1959), two prominent representatives of the modern realist school. Indeed, Niebuhr’s political thought bears the trademarks of realism:

The question of politics is how to coerce the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order, offering human beings the greatest possible opportunity for mutual support. In the field of collective behavior the force of egoistic passion is so strong that the only harmonies possible are those which manage to neutralize this force through balances of power, through mutual defenses against its inordinate expression, and through techniques for harnessing its energy to social ends. (*Christian Ethics* 140)

The neutralization of egotistic and, therefore, contesting human interests is, in Niebuhr’s view, the task of a centralized authority, the state, which is only able to channel conflict, if necessary through violence. Morgenthau holds the same pessimistic view of human nature that is driven by *animus dominandi* to achieve sufficient power to establish and to extend the sphere of the self (Kiss 86). On state level, Morgenthau claims the same, namely that the behavior of states can be characterized by “rational, power maximising egoism” (87).

Niebuhr presupposes inevitability of conflict, decentralisation of power internationally and, in this way, foretells wars as “in this conflict power must be challenged by power” (*Moral Man* xxvii) that is exerted by states pursuing *raison d’état*. States are the only legitimate entities since states only can concentrate power: “the government expresses the national will, and that will is moved by the emotions of the populace and the prudential self-interest of dominant economic classes [. . .]. Nations are territorial societies, the cohesive power of which is supplied by the sentiment of nationality and the authority of the state” (*Moral Man* 83). Internationally, Niebuhr denounces liberal co-operation, which at the time of the book’s publication was logical. The egotistic behavior of states triggers a self-perpetuating process. The use of coercion leads to the reassurance of state conduct and this alone obstructs lasting international co-operation. Waltz, who considers international conflict in terms of international anarchy, echoes Niebuhr’s argument. Waltz claims that the behavior of states derives from human nature (126), i.e., “wars result from selfishness, from misdirected aggressive, impulses, from stupidity” (124). Similarly to the antagonistic nature of human communication whereby individuals seek to maximize their power, states, too, live “in anarchy [where] there is no automatic harmony [. . .]. Because each state is the final judge of its own cause, any state may at any time use force to implement its policies” (129).

Niebuhr identifies with and perpetuates the views of realism. At the time of his writing, he refuses the possibility of international agencies to channel conflict, and remains skeptical of the capability of citizens to see domestic problems in other countries. States as independent and sovereign entities denounce any concert of states; and, internally ordered hegemonies, they do not support interstate communication.

**Martin Luther King’s Philosophy of Coercion**

Not only has Niebuhr had a lasting impact on both theology and international relations theory, but also domestically he made a significant contribution. It has, for example, been reported that in 1932 he urged African Americans to organize Gandhian nonviolent campaigns (“Death of a Christian Realist” par. 6.). Likewise, in 1956, Niebuhr stood up for civil rights, admonishing gradualism “in a delicate balancing act” (Jackson 104). Indirectly, he influenced Martin Luther King, who, in his student years, outspokenly criticizes Niebuhr but later, with the escalation of Civil Rights events and the Vietnam War, increasingly blends his concepts into his philosophy.

Among the four intellectual sources that prove formative for King, Mohan Lal Sharma identifies Niebuhr besides Gandhi, Rauschenberg, and Tillich (257-258). Yet, Niebuhr’s initial influence is exerted by way of opposition on King’s part. The first encounter with Niebuhr was in his final year at Crozer Theological Seminary, where, as Adam Fairclough explains, King held Niebuhr’s pessimistic view of man for inappropriate as “[Niebuhr] underestimated the human potential for human improvement” (13). As King argues, “He fails to see that the availability of the divine Agape [sic] is an essential affirmatim of the Christian religion” (150). Much as he rejects “Niebuhr’s extreme agnosticism” (“Theology” 279), the impact of Niebuhr’s theology can even lexically be proved. In a sermon in 1957, when he was still in his mid-twenties, King wrote: “[. . .] this is one of the tragedies of human nature. So we begin to love our enemies and love those persons that hate us whether in collective life or individual life by looking at ourselves” (“Loving” par. 11). Yet the obvious use of Niebuhrian terminology of the tragic and the collective accompanies a liberal approach to society and the self at this point: “Men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love” (par. 22). Thus, King expresses the view that humans, despite the co-existence of good and evil in them and the reification of conflict, are capable of overturning this present darkness with *agape* love, goodwill, and co-operation. In this way, he even reasserts Luther’s idea of establishing heaven on earth, while at the same time he abandons the core of Niebuhr’s argument. Even in 1964 in the Noble Peace Prize acceptance speech, after the shocking events in Birmingham in 1963, he remains explicit in his understanding of human nature:

I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal “oughtness” that forever confronts him [. . .]. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality[. . .]. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. (224)

His then optimistic rhetoric is yet not to be equated with naïveté, but instead it reveals an ethics, which does not denote “abstention from violence” (Fairclough 35), but increasingly entails Niebuhrian coercion (12). King’s optimistic liberal approach to human nature shows change in Birmingham, though, when in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he poses the question: “Isn’t segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness?” (294)—which is the capstone of Niebuhr’s theist existentialism. As Richard Lischer points out, his move away from a liberal stand toward a more Niebuhrian position is less of a conversion than “disgust at liberalism’s paternalism in the Civil Rights Movement” (61).

As he marches on in the 1960s, his approach undergoes major modification when he comes to realize the value of coercion (“Re-emerging” 4). His strategy becomes to “create a ‘climate of collapse’ that undermined faith in the state and its conduct.” (4) This influences the Poor People’s Campaign, King’s protest against Vietnam. In a protest against the Vietnam War, King calls for “a radical revolution of values” (“Vietnam” par. 12), which radicalizes the concept of nonviolent action. As he states, “Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo, we shall boldly challenge unjust mores” (“Vietnam” par. 14). The revitalized love-concept clearly displays ideas of Christian Realism and a particular *realpolitik*, and the idea of counteraction marks anticipated coercion.

Charles P. Henry proposes that the change from “non-violent persuasion to coercive non-violence” means for King to be “less intent on winning the love of the oppressor than pressuring liberal whites in the North to support and defend liberal black demands” (337). Indeed, King emphasizes in his last speech as well: “we are putting pressure where it really hurts.” (“Mountaintop” par. 25). The violent events he encounters at home and abroad has as a consequence that Niebuhr’s ethics *vis-à-vis* violence gains ground, and makes him move closer to the more radical wing of civil righters, and, in his theology, to the black theologian, James Cone (Henry 337).

Despite a certain degree of radicalization, which is clearly felt in the adoption of Niebuhr’s realist methodology, his ethics remains close to his initial stand regarding the view of humans. In his last sermons and speeches, King remains truthful to the critique of Niebuhrian pessimism and reiterates confidence in humans’ capability to improve:

Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such. Until men see this everywhere, until nations see this everywhere, we will be fighting wars. [. . .] Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all men. [. . .] If there is to be peace on earth and good will toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. (“Christmas Sermon” par. 9-14)

The concept of love both embodies a coercive tool and reflects faith invested in humans to overcome differences stemming from their *sacro egoismo*. Establishing the means and belief in humanity, King, thus, proves hopeful that the power-invested state constellations not only can be balanced, but also countered. The “all-embracing, unconditional love for all men,” (“Vietnam” par. 15) with which he turns to all humanity, goes indeed well beyond facilitating theologizingly “a worldwide fellowship” (par. 15) to politicizingly organize a potential counterhegemonic collectivity.

**Conclusion**

Niebuhr’s system of thought places individuals in the midst of a multifaceted collectivity—society. He assigns them to a group, be it ethnic or economic, within society, which both enables them to reassert themselves and overburdens them with determining conditions. He sees human life in a context of continuing antagonism and conflict, which derive from inability to deal with freedom correctly, and which cannot be eliminated, only balanced with the aid of institutions. It is this point, in the first place, that King refuses to accept. In his essentially liberal argumentation, people are not hopelessly lost as the result of original sin, but are capable of change. Although King’s view would ultimately also annul Niebuhr’s understanding of realist politics, the events of the 1960s lead him to employ a more coercive ethics reminiscent of Niebuhr’s.

Niebuhr cannot, however, condemn humans eventually, either. In “A View of Life from the Sidelines,” which he wrote after he had suffered a stroke, his attachment to humans surfaces: “The physical ills that consigned me to the ‘sidelines’ were productive in furnishing me with insights about human nature that had never occurred to me before. I learned to know the goodness of men and women who went out of their way to help an invalid” (261). Rather, he represents a “cross between fideism and despair,” (Ward 297) which reveals a deep concern for both the church and humanity.

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