

REINHOLD NIEBUHR: HIS PERSPECTIVE ON DESEGREGATION AS INFLUENCED BY CHRISTIAN REALISM

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Reinhold Niebuhr was a prominent figure in Protestant social ethics around mid-century as a theologian, writer, and political activist. The influences of his early family life, education, and experiences as a preacher in Detroit greatly shaped his theology. He has been significantly linked with forming the way of thinking called Christian Realism, which acknowledges corruption in society through its emphasis on the nature of man and sin. It attempts to find an appropriate role for ideals, especially in the moral deliberations of groups and nations. Niebuhr's theology informed his perspective on major political, social, and ethical issues of his time, including such a controversial matter as the Civil Rights Movement. The notion of gradualism is palpable throughout his writings on desegregation. The problem was rooted in humans' group pride and conceit, which he believed were best overcome by implicit, social means rather than immediate, governmental methods.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a prominent figure in Protestant social ethics around mid-century as a theologian, writer, and political activist. The valuable influences of his early experiences as a preacher in Detroit greatly shaped his theology, which has been significantly linked with forming the way of thinking called Christian Realism. This perspective acknowledges corruption in society through its emphasis on the nature of man and sin. Niebuhr's theology informed his perspective on major political, social, and ethical issues of his time, including such controversial matters as pacifism and the Civil Rights Movement. He frequently wrote on the development and concerns of the Supreme Court decision to segregate schools through his theological lens, discussing cultural, legal, and religious factors surrounding the matter.

Working in Detroit in the Twenties, Niebuhr experienced the realities of an emerging industrial area, and he was challenged to reevaluate his former optimistic approach to the Christian faith. Niebuhr saw workers forced from their homes and laid off while labor organizations remained separated by skill else labeled communistic and largely renounced by local government and churches.ⁱ Further, the Great Migration caused a dramatic rise in the black population from the South seeking unskilled work. This created difficulties and rifts for labor organizers and prompted considerable growth in Ku Klux Klan membership. Niebuhr began to notice the popularity of the Klan and in 1925 preached on race. After a local political confrontation involving the Klan, he joined other liberal Protestant ministers in speaking out against them. His sermon was quoted in the *Free Press*: "I hit Protestant bigotry the hardest at this time because it happens to be our sin... We are admonished by Scripture to judge men by their fruits, not by their roots; and their fruits are their character, their deeds and accomplishments."ⁱⁱ He called Protestants to remember their history that gave life to the Ku Klux Klan and repent of it. At this point he was a leading force in the local Protestant community and soon after became the chairman of the Interracial Committee. Over the next several years he would speak with various groups, religious and otherwise, about prejudice and more controversial issues like overcrowded

African American neighborhoods, which he found to be at the heart of the problem. Niebuhr believed African Americans had been so beaten down, however, they could not play an active role in reform, so he shifted focus to other areas he found to be more practical.

Niebuhr began to explore sin and death as the ultimate perils of humanity, intertwined in causation and symbolism. Humans naturally look for significance in their lives, which often leads to sin, but Christianity provides that those lives are part of God's larger plan, including forgiveness those sins. Until this time he had linked Christianity with moralistic idealism. As he worked within his parish, however, that perspective appeared overly simple and became less and less relevant among the complex labor and racial problems of an industrial city.ⁱⁱⁱ

By the 1930s, Niebuhr had embraced a neo-Orthodox approach to Christianity with American pragmatic tendencies, which travelled under the name Christian Realism. In this pragmatic vein, Christian Realists believe the truth must align with the facts already known in this world. Further, the global context for the development of his thought on Christian Realism cannot be ignored. Niebuhr developed his thought during a time when power structures, warring ideologies, and institutions dominated the landscape. Some of these served as displays of the destruction made possible by human corruptions, while others showed the problems created by rationalization and individualism. Niebuhr sought to find a balance in which people might be able to live well, and it was crucial for him that the Church find a meeting place between its idealism and practical thought and action. If it could not achieve this, it would become irrelevant in a modern society.

Niebuhr's first major work was *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he separated himself from pacifist thought and sentimental ideas of Christian love. He focused instead on class struggle and the self-interest, power, and pride in human activity. His skepticism toward institutions can be seen in this work, as he found individuals were more moral because their experiences become "diluted in larger social structures and organizations."^{iv} He was skeptical of intense group loyalties and encouraged people to adopt a willingness to learn about one another. The cynical attitude toward group pride was something he had been working out for years. Earlier essays mentioned the appalling bigotry of majorities and the resulting pride in minorities to counteract it. Although he wrote on the arrogance of the ethnic pride of his heritage, Niebuhr did not limit this sin to a particular ethnicity.^v *Moral Man and Immoral Society* began to explore his ideas on the nature of man and sin, Christian Realism thought, and applied a pragmatic approach to individual activities. All of these he would continue to fill out and develop in later works and with changing social and political situations.

Some objections were made by those theologians who sought transformative love as an answer to ailments of society. They believed Niebuhr had abandoned the notion of Christian hope for a revolutionary, even violent philosophy. In this work, he did, in fact, declare society to be "in a perpetual state of war."^{vi} Power organizes society on its various levels and unavoidably leads to fear, hatred, and ultimately revolt. Because of this, he did not believe a society of peace could be reached. From this point forward he did not use the same language he had in the 1920s. The terms moral idealism, Kingdom of God, and personality began to drop from his vocabulary. It was not total a denial of the power of love on Niebuhr's part, however, but an acknowledgement of the self-interest of human beings. He suggested more effective means of confronting and

handling political and social problems. The concept of true love was not abandoned, but Niebuhr believed it could not be attained by mere humans. Here he emphasized sin, especially pride, in hindering man. Instead he believed justice founded in love was the closest man could achieve.^{vii}

Niebuhr's Christian realism is a kind of moral realism. A moral realist believes moral claims can be true whether someone believes in them or not, just as God condemning something is what makes it wrong, not whether a human believes it to be wrong. A moral realist is interested in truths that are independent of an individual's belief. Christian Realism aims to find a view of human nature that is neither supremely optimistic nor pessimistic, acknowledging the natural law humans are limited by. With this acceptance of limitation, one can then see all the possibility of life and the systems at work in it. Christian Realism attempts to find an appropriate role for ideals, especially in the moral deliberations of groups and nations. When compared to the optimism of liberal theologies Niebuhr is often seen as a pessimist, but his view lends itself to seeing two possible resolutions, optimistic or pessimistic, from a conflict by examining conceivable possibilities. It is essential to not remain naïve of the corruption of power or limit the abilities of those who apply a plan to realistic aims. Niebuhr was able to bring together the cynicism of political realism and the confidence of theological realism.^{viii}

One is able to see Niebuhr's theology applied to his view on the Supreme Court decision on segregation of schools. His thought on power, group pride, and pragmatic approach permeate through. He wrote several articles on the issue throughout the fifties and into the mid-sixties for such publications as *Christianity and Crisis*, a liberal Protestant journal founded by Niebuhr, and *The New Leader*. Some of the recurring themes of his writing during this time were the ability of sports and arts to foster progress and a sense of brotherhood, the inability of law to overcome the attitudes of a community, and criticisms of the Protestant church, especially in comparison to the Catholic Church.

Christianity and Crisis published an article he authored less than one month after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision. The ideas on which he would continue to elaborate and work out over the following decade were present in this piece. The notion of gradualism is palpable throughout. He placed a heavy focus on the fact "no law can be enforced if it is not generally accepted by the people," perhaps the greatest underlying message of his many authored pieces. He found the 1896 decision that created the doctrine of "separate but equal" fair enough for its time. More progressive rulings may have resulted in overt revolt, and this doctrine allowed space for growth by creating opportunities for integration when equal institutions were not possible. While his moral foundation in these claims is questionable at best, he believed it was the best practical option until it had run its course and led to greater changes in conviction. In fact, Niebuhr was interested in how voluntary segregation may have played out without the law, a topic he revisits over the years. Since such realms as higher education had been forced to be opened to African Americans due to lack of equal spaces, he saw this as possibility in countless other spheres of life. Niebuhr was interested to see how this type of integration would have progressed on its own. The Court, however, declined to take such a position as Niebuhr's and unanimously overturned *Plessy v Ferguson*. The totality of their vote gave them a moral stance, and provided little for Southern dissenters to hang on. Their assessment was based on notions of psychology and inferiority in addition to the material factors. The separated minority could not

escape feelings of inferiority, and the segregated group could be psychologically harmed by this system.^{ix}

Race prejudice was an attitude embedded in ethnicity and cultural difference that had to be changed from implicit means, as laws cannot overcome stances of a community that is not morally and spiritually mature. Race prejudice is defined by Niebuhr as “group pride” rooted in instincts of survival, which for white Americans manifested itself as fear of miscegenation and mixed-race education hindering white children.^x Both of these fears were united in the greater anxiety over the decline of the white race by loss of white purity of body and mind. Niebuhr realized even science could not prove to be effective in transforming the culture that influenced the opinions of a prejudiced person. The problem, he believed, lie deeper than scientific fact or physical institutions. The problem was rooted in humans’ group pride and conceit. These are best overcome by implicit, social means rather than immediate, governmental methods. This is so because typically law “regularizes and symbolizes social realities and power relations that have been achieved by gradual accommodation.”^{xi} The prejudices of people are not overcome by legal action, but law is often a reflection of the opinions of citizens that have been shaped by other means. Over the time of his writings, the responses from those in the South developed to nullification to circumstances of outright violence and denial. The ruling exposed and accelerated extremes in the South. Those already making progress were pushed to further progression, while those in even moderate opposition were pushed to a more radical defiance.^{xii} As late as 1964 he reiterated this belief that “local custom is more powerful than the national law.”^{xiii} The law can attempt to change action, but it will not change the minds of those who are not morally prepared for the change. He believed cultural engagements prove more effective in transforming the hearts and minds of those opposed because they resonate more deeply than a top-down enforcement that may harden the hearts of community members.

In several of his articles, Niebuhr provides sports and the arts as examples of the cultural engagement he supports. These provided openings into spaces rarely transgressed otherwise. Through these expressions, blacks had opportunities to prove themselves against whites in physicality, intellect, and talent. Many African Americans excelled, taking advantage of the opportunity to prove themselves against the prejudices of whites. In these realms of life, whites should have been able to see “vivid reminders of the potentialities of a common humanity and a refutation of those who insist on educational inequality as the natural consequence of an inherent inequality.”^{xiv} Accomplishments in these fields began to break down the walls around group pride by showing success is not founded in ethnicity. They were able to challenge notions of racial superiority and create common ground for fellowship. Niebuhr saw these spheres as providing voluntary association apart from legal measures. These practical examples of growth toward tolerance have been shown historically to surpass the Church and government in breaking down barriers of race.

The articles on the Supreme Court decision are filled with criticisms of Protestants’ response to racial issues, while praise for the Catholic Church is sprinkled throughout. It was noted that churches “have long been the most segregated communities in the South and, for that matter, in the nation.”^{xv} He harkened back to the notion that blacks and whites interact more in voluntary, secular activities and settings. The irony of this was exposed, considering the core principles of Christianity are run through with notions of love and fellowship. His qualms with the sinful

nature of man are abundantly clear in his writings: “Group pride of men is one of the most ineradicable of human weaknesses. . . We Christians will have to be modest in surveying the whole situation and recognizing the failure of the churches to give a clear call to the conscience of man.”^{xvi} He was extremely disappointed in the church for not only failing to correct the problems within its community, but also indulging them. Despite favorable opinions of democratic structure over more authoritarian processes, Niebuhr found the democratic nature of Protestants to be problematic here. Local congregations manipulated those core principles of the Gospel, and if church leaders followed Biblical ethics over popular opinion, the congregation had the ability to dismiss them.^{xvii} Alternatively, the hierarchy of Catholicism sets and maintains the standards for clergy, not the assembly whose opinions sway according to the political and demographic landscape. Moreover, several Southern parishioners were excommunicated for attempting to stop black priest from his work.^{xviii} (The tradition of Catholicism also reinforces the message of universality of the Bible that was clearly lacking in the Protestant community.) Decades after he called Protestant communities to repent of such sins as the Klan, Niebuhr was still compelled to condemn their racial position. There was no excuse for the Protestant church’s failure to act on God’s commandment of love and provision of leadership to move toward racial justice, an issue he found “crystal clear.”^{xix} Niebuhr had great concern over the state of white American Protestantism’s impulse to nurture pride when the church should be instilling discipline.^{xx} They were not fulfilling their potential or mission by making themselves comfortable in their sin.

Niebuhr’s stance on the Court’s decision, as well as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, led to some critique of both self and Christian Realism. Many critics would highlight his tentative attitude toward the reliance on the legal system to enact change. Herbert O. Edwards particularly criticized his sympathies with white families and, in the process, promoting racial stereotypes. While Edwards was not completely off the mark in these comments, he failed to acknowledge Niebuhr’s writings and work toward racial understanding and tolerance over the span of several decades. However, Edwards’ consideration of Christian Realism as a conservative stance appears quite right on the issue of race. Many aspects of Niebuhr’s writings may have appealed to those wishing to maintain the old social forms.^{xxi} Further, throughout the pieces his focus is almost solely on whites, even when writing on issues directly related to blacks. He found the problem to be with whites across the nation, and took these opportunities to either critique whites lack of interracial cooperation or to sympathize with those who were not prepared for immediate adjustments in attitude and lifestyle. In taking this approach to most of his writings, he appears to have actively ignored the other central piece of the puzzle, whether or not he was also working toward a greater understanding.

Niebuhr’s support of the *Brown* decision appears to only be in principle, not application, which appears to contradict some of his own thought. These articles indicate Niebuhr’s greatest focus was actually aimed at preventing violent backlash from Southern whites by way of gradual implementation of reform. This caution toward immediate desegregation can be justified by his realist, pragmatic perspective, yet his focus on justice through human action should indicate a more open acceptance and support of the decision. While this perspective on the segregation issue can be somewhat justified by his theological history, there is space for a greater effort into seeking racial equality and justice for the oppressed than white comfort with change.

Although a supporter of integration and a man committed to confronting racism as early as the twenties, Niebuhr struggled with the ruling of the Supreme Court on school segregation. He repeatedly expressed his desire for a more gradual approach to integration. In his pragmatic way, Niebuhr believed if the people did not have an opportunity to accept this change at a pace, the enforcement of such a law could lead to extremism. His fear was that such polar reactions would destroy any progress already made toward a moderate approach regarding the issue segregation in the South. He believed laws were typically the symbolic reflections of the changes of society, not that laws made the changes. The natural changes of society happen gradually unless drastically upset. Over the years he grew somewhat less hesitant in his support of Civil Rights, admitted thanks for such laws' abilities to "restraint the heartless until they change their mind and heart."^{xxii} He also began to suggest tackling the segregation issue from both "authoritative affirmation of norms and by the gradual achievement of the community through common interests and pressures."^{xxiii} Although these comments do not contradict his earlier opinions, they show an admission of usefulness for the use of authority in addition that was not overt in previous pieces. Both of these positions show a slight progression from his earliest writings and the influence of his Christian Realist perspective.

ⁱ Kegley and Bretall, 4-6.

ⁱⁱ Fox, 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kegley and Bretall, 4-7.

^{iv} Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 41.

^v Ibid, 221.

^{vi} Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 19.

^{vii} Fox, 141, 133.

^{viii} Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12-18, 29-30.

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- ix Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools," *Christianity and Crisis* 14, no 10 (June 14, 1954): 75-76.
- x Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," *The Reporter* 15, no 9 (November 29, 1956): 24.
- xi Ibid, 25.
- xii Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Effect of the Supreme Court Decision," *Christianity and Crisis* XVII, no 1 (February 4, 1957): 3.
- xiii Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Struggle for Justice," *The New Leader*, no 14 (July 6, 1964): 10.
- xiv Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," 24.
- xv Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," 25.
- xvi Reinhold Niebuhr, "School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration," *Christianity and Crisis* XVI, no 16 (October 1, 1956): 121-122.
- xvii Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," 25.
- xviii Niebuhr, "The Race Problem in America," *Christianity and Crisis* XV, no 22 (1955): 170.
- xix Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Montgomery Savagery," *Christianity and Crisis* XXI, no 10 (June 12, 1961): 103.
- xx Ibid, 103. This can be traced back to his idea that the Church needed to find balance between hopeful idealism and practical action.
- xxi Halliwell, 226-228.
- xxii Niebuhr, "The Montgomery Savagery," 103.
- xxiii Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Comments On the Negro in America," 25.