Nemesis and Fulness
Reinhold Niebuhr’s Vision of History, 1927-1934

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

NEMESIS AND FULNESS: REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S VISION OF HISTORY, 1927-1934

There are many excellent studies of the life and thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), prominent Christian ethicist, social philosopher, and political activist of the American Century. Most studies focus on his mature works of mid-century, particularly his theological ethics. The following study treats his emergent theory of history between 1927-1934, especially the idea of progress and the narrative of modern capitalist society. During this formative period Niebuhr wrote three major books (*Does Civilization Need Religion?* [1927], *Moral Man and Immoral Society* [1932], and *Reflections on the End of an Era* [1934]) which reflect his intellectual passage from religious liberalism and the politics of persuasion to “Christian-Marxism” and the politics of power. The following thesis will trace the diverse historiographical influences found in these works, from the church-historical perspective of Ernst Troeltsch to the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx. It is common to say that Niebuhr was purely a theologian of history. But following Ricoeur and White, I describe the main ingredients of a philosophy of history that are present in these writings: myth, plot, social processes, patterns of progress and cycle. Moreover, he was a "thinker in time"—these philosophical elements combined to render a plausible and meaningful narrative context for social action. In the early period Niebuhr began his lifelong critique of Enlightenment, capitalism, and the idea of progress. Following Robert Nisbet’s analysis of the concept of progress in Western cultural history, I will argue that Niebuhr traverses his own peculiar dialectics of history, moving from the idea of progress-as-freedom (in the twenties) to the idea of progress-as-power (in the thirties); from the form of irony to the form of tragedy; from the concept of the voluntary reform of the excesses of capitalism to the concept of the frank use of coercion to implement a socialist alternative to capitalism. His philosophy of history in this period thus reflects in Christian idiom aspects of the very antinomies of the Enlightenment regarding personality and power, freedom and fate, which he desires to overcome.
To Niki

A little farther
we will see the almond trees blossoming
the marble gleaming in the sun
the sea breaking into waves

a little farther,
let us rise a little higher.

—George Seferis, Mythistorema
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Tod Moquist
Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was, arguably, one of the commanding moral voices of the twentieth century. His broadest vocation, as Martin Marty has written, was that of a public theologian, an exemplar of Protestant jeremiad. In that capacity Niebuhr reinvented the age-old tradition of civil-religious interpretation that stretched from transatlantic Puritanism and Jonathan Edwards to the Social Gospel and Walter Rauschenbusch. Like his spiritual ancestors, Niebuhr sought to make sense of issues of the day in view of the ethical traditions, religious and secular, of the Western canon. His was a passionate, and complex, voice that resonated with the themes of salvation history, which move through the pages of the Torah and the Gospels. Reflecting his broad reading in classical moral and political philosophy, his voluminous writings and body of rhetoric serve as a model of a civil discourse in a religious mode. He was, to borrow Garry Wills' phrase, a "certain trumpet" of spiritual and political leadership in an era of total war and social transformation.

Viewed from a slightly different angle, Niebuhr might be just as appropriately described an exemplary public historian, a paradigm of Neustadt and May's "thinker in time." Composed in a unique mode of religious, ethical and political discourses, his twenty books (not counting collections of his essays) contain a remarkable body of narrative. *The Irony of American History*, written at the height of the Cold War, is but the most famous. It is a public history broadly conceived: historical discourse, brimming with practical implication, which joins the debate over the "moral meaning" of history and its lessons for contemporary decision-makers. During Second World War and Cold War decades of consensus seeking, Niebuhr addressed the task of constructing a common vision of human destiny with an uncommon energy and intelligence.
In his academic life as professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, one of Niebuhr's special scholarly interests was the problem of universal history. History in this context was a form of moral discourse; ethics by other means. There was a time mid-century when his more theoretical work was ranked with that of the century's leading speculative philosophers of history, including Spengler and Toynbee. The high point of his reflections came with the publication of his Gifford Lectures in two volumes under the general title of *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (1941, 1943). Niebuhr's negations of modernity and the idea of progress enjoyed widespread international acclaim, especially among influential Protestant circles in North America and abroad. His ardor for social justice was wed to an Augustinian understanding of human fallibility and historicity. Political conflicts were, in the final analysis, problems of *humanity in passage*.

The present inquiry is a study in the general problem of narrative and historical interpretation. In particular, it is an examination of the growth of Niebuhr's view of history, with special reference to its evolving narrative "essence." I shall focus on the first two phases of his thinking about history. Between 1927 and 1934 Niebuhr wrote three major books: *Does Civilization Need Religion* (1927), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934). (When generalizing about the transitions between these works, I shall sometimes refer them simply as Books One, Two, and Three, according to chronological order.)

By all accounts, this trilogy exemplifies the first two intellectual periods in Niebuhr's pilgrimage: the religious liberal and the Christian Marxist. The subject of history is, admittedly, just one stratum of his thought during this time. Yet Niebuhr's historical thought would prove to be one of his most enduring legacies. As C.T. McIntire has reminded us, Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures, delivered in 1939, "mark a beginning point in what has become a widespread renewal of interest in a Christian view of history."¹ I have used the phrase, or formula, "revisionism
toward realism" to capture the thrust of the thematic development of Niebuhr's historical thought between 1927 and 1934. "Realism" can be defined as his increasing openness to the permanence of conflict in human affairs. "Tragic and revolutionary realism" further qualifies Niebuhr's particular take on historical conflict after 1932.

I have undertaken an analytical and critical approach to the subject of Reinhold Niebuhr's early view of history during the eight crucial years between 1927 and 1934. Analytically viewed, the present study offers a systematic investigation of the narrative structure of his writing. This structure includes the various levels of conceptualization ingredient to Niebuhr's vision of history: Metahistory, emplotment, social explanation, and narrative proper. Central to the investigation is the belief that his various "modes of emplotment" unify and lend dynamism to these disparate levels.

This aspect of the study has benefited from the "narrativist" approach to the problem of interpretation in the philosophy of history. In particular, I have consulted Hayden White's structuralist *Metahistory* and volume one of Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological *Time and Narrative*. Since their publication, both works have themselves been subject to subsequent postmodern criticism, but I still find them outstanding introductions to the issues of narrativity and interpretation.

White's theory of tropes and modes of emplotment—and their transformations—in historical writing has helped me to delineate the levels of conceptualization in the Niebuhr texts, as well as the interaction between Metahistory and History, to use his rubrics. Reading White (in tandem with Richard Reinitz' excellent study of Niebuhr, *Irony and Consciousness: American Historiography and Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision* [1980]) originally lead me two explore the development of Niebuhr's "dramatic" conception of history. White's contention that great works of historical interpretation consist of two modes of emplotment in tension contains an important
truth about the relation between irony and tragedy in Niebuhr.

Ricoeur's theory of narrative and causal explanation presents a balanced, interactive treatment of the interpretative (meaning) level and the explanatory (causal) dimensions of historical representation. In doing so, he helps bridge the fact/value distinction in the theory of history. Ricoeur builds upon White's notion of emplotment, but there is an openness to the role of historical experience in historical interpretation that is absent is White's early structuralist treatment. Ricoeur's hermeneutic allows us to explain what scholars believe about Niebuhr's interpretation of history (and what Niebuhr himself said about it): that it changed in response to the enormity of events in his time. But Ricoeur allows us to see that the accommodation to new "facts" of history, and the incorporation of new causal explanations, takes place in the transition from interpretation to re-interpretation.

Critique leads us to a preliminary understanding of the development of Niebuhr's thought. I shall endeavor to explicate the profound thematic transitions in his historical thought between religious liberalism of Book One to the Christian Marxism of Book Three. One of the most telling intellectual transitions occurs in the area of Niebuhr's understanding of the dramatic dimension of historical consciousness. At different stages of his career, Niebuhr referred to both the tragic interpretation of history (Beyond Tragedy [1937]) and the ironic interpretation of history (The Irony of American History [1952]) as normative for a Christian understanding of the past and historical present. The crucial point for readers of Niebuhr today is how we understand his shift from a soft ironic mode of configuration in the 'twenties to a hard tragic mode in the 'thirties.

The two ways of emplotting the events of the past were well developed before the Second World War, the tragic largely supplanting the ironic as the dominant mode of interpretation by 1932. Moreover, in the 1934 volume, irony and tragedy clearly form two stages
of the dramatic cycle—what I term the quintessential Niebuhrian plot twist. Niebuhr’s complex conception of dramatic emplotment is the key to the interpretative power of his later narratives of contemporary history.

Analysis in the context of this study also includes an apprehension of a still more fundamental thematic transition in Niebuhr's philosophy of history. I will examine what continental philosophy came to regard, in Adorno and Horkheimer's phrase, as "the dialectic of Enlightenment": the antagonistic, or contradictory, developments of the ideas of freedom and nature that are Kant's legacy to modern philosophy, particularly in the line of development from Hegel to Marx. The inquiry at hand has benefited enormously from the neo-Calvinian approach to the history of ideas, developed initially by Herman Dooyeweerd in the 1930s. Dooyeweerd traced the enduring ontic and epistemic dualisms in the history of modern western thought and the resulting tensions and outright contradictions that become manifest in the history of post-Enlightenment philosophy, including the theory of history. This is not the only way to approach the internal dynamics of Niebuhr's thought. Feminist criticism of Niebuhr’s ethic sheds light on the same problematic. The case can be made that Niebuhr’s disavowal in 1932 of the ideal of personality as insufficient for political ethics may be justly regarded as a masculine under-appreciation of the so-called womanly, or “sentimental,” virtues of pacifism. Niebuhr’s over-appreciation of the so-called manly, or “realistic,” virtues of power is similarly gendered.²

The thematic dialectic in Niebuhr's early writing is, in fact, a distant legacy of the nature/freedom duality that haunts Kant's architectonic. Given Niebuhr's preoccupations, it is perhaps more aptly characterized as a fate/freedom or a power/personality duality. In Moral Man Niebuhr rendered the dialectic in more poetic terms. Regarding mankind's hope's for social progress, he writes: "Each generation originates a new complexity and each new generation faces a new vexation in it. . . . The society in which each man lives is at once the basis for, and the
nemesis of, that fulness [sic] of life which each man seeks." (1) The terms "nemesis" and "fulness" offer a neat handle to Niebuhr's fundamental insight, and I have employed them in the present study's title.

On the "freedom" side of the duality, stands Niebuhr's early commitment to Kant's ideal of personality or "personalism," as I shall advisedly use the term. Personalism is a complex of ideas surrounding the concept of personhood. Personalism as an outlook consists, first and foremost, of the belief in the transcendental individual, whose rationality, religious imagination, free will, conscience, and energy is able to transform the world for the better. The moral freedom of the individual is an end value, or telos, for the individual. But moral freedom is also an instrument, or techne, for the realization of the values of the "harmony" and "equality" of persons in society as a whole. Certain human associations, communities, and institutions are closely associated with personalism (primarily religious organizations in Civilization, and liberal democracy in Reflections) as vehicles for the realization of the values of the personalist project. When these organizations come into play in the texts, I shall refer to Niebuhr's "politics of personalism." Courageous acts of moral freedom lead to social transformation, or social "fulness."

On the side of "fate," collective power—the aggressive egotism of human groups—lies at the heart of Niebuhr's understanding of the opposite facet of the thematic duality. There are shifting emphases between Books One, Two and Three. Prior to his encounter with theological neo-orthodoxy and Marxism, Niebuhr lumps all forms of human selfishness in Civilization under the heading of "nature." Subsequently, Moral Man and Reflections are more focused on one special case of human selfishness, the "egotism" of the group, the hubris of collective power. With increasing frequency, he describes the historical impact of this form of selfishness as mankind's "fate." Throughout these latter two works, in passages on recent history, he
imaginatively juxtaposes the politics of power and the politics of personalism.

At this juncture in Niebuhr's life of reflection, which Gilkey aptly terms "pre-
theological," the terms "nemesis" and "fulness" have connotations that convey something more
and something less than biblical meanings. Nemesis can indeed be construed to imply the
biblical idea of divine judgment; but his use strikes me as too redolent of the classical notion of
fate. Fulness, on the other hand, seems to echo the scriptural understanding of shalom, that is,
the prophetic notion of a renewed earth and the tangible blessings of communal peace. But I
believe that fulness, as Niebuhr uses it at this time, functions rather like a transcendental ideal—
an imagined form of a society of equal persons existing in perfect harmony—and is
eschatological only insofar as it is a relevant but unrealizable and therefore disembodied concept.

It is the thesis of this study that the development of the antagonistic themes of the
Enlightenment tradition and, indeed, modernity reappear in Niebuhr's developing vision of
history, albeit in creative, moderated and Christianized forms. The essence of history for Niebuhr
shifts from the idea of progress as individual ethical freedom in the 1920s (the Kantian
contribution) to the idea of progress of collective power in the 1930s (the Marxist contribution).
This shift will parallel the movement in his thought from an ironic to a tragic apprehension of
historical events. In Book One, Civilization, freedom of personality trumps fate of power, but
ambiguously so. However, in Book Three, Reflections, fate trumps freedom. So prevalent is the
role of collective egotism and power in Reflections that Niebuhr exposes his theory of history to
the charge of determinism, quite contrary to his intention.

Furthermore, to a significant degree the sequence of solutions that Niebuhr develops
with regard to the fate/freedom problematic between Book One and Book Three is driven by
tensions internal to the problematic. The interpretative framework helps Niebuhr to disclose the
reality of conflict in history. However, it also diminishes his appreciation for the processes of
reconciliation at work in history (processes that a historian such as Ranke, for example, might celebrate). To use a common metaphor, Niebuhr's narrative paradigm serves as a lens through which history is read. Tragic realism focuses on the violence of history, bringing conflict to the foreground of the author's, and the reader's, historical consciousness. The same lens relegates more pacific trends in modern history to the background of his, and our, awareness. The obvious question arises: Does Niebuhr's ever sharpening focus on the violence of history do "violence" to the "text" of the human past?

As something of a history of ideas, the study at hand is concerned with Niebuhr's place the larger liberal tradition. Since this interest is implicit in the chapters to follow, allow me to spell it out briefly. Niebuhr, according to his most acute students, spent a lifetime at working and struggling within the liberal tradition. As a young man Niebuhr received his theological and philosophical training at Yale University divinity school that was fairly steeped in the religious liberalism of Ritschl, Harnack and Troeltsch and its concerns with historical criticism and idea of progress. Religious progressivism lay claim to the authentic tradition of Kant and Enlightenment.

Five philosophical assumptions form the starting point of Niebuhr's liberalism in the 'twenties, all of which bear on the formation of his subsequent reflections on the idea of history: (a) The individual is a transcendent "personality," ontologically superior to the forms of human community. (b) Social groups, although originally organic in character, are constituted in the modern period by surreptitious contracts for the purpose of enlarging group power and individual rights. (c) In human life, nature functions either as an obstacle to or instrument for moral self-realization. (d) Ethics is the recognition of each person's due as a subject; justice is the norm of an ideal community of equal souls. In Niebuhr's hands, the categorical imperative of spiritual equality was subsequently rendered into a radical imperative of material equality. (e) History is
the progressive unfolding of human moral destiny.

With the outbreak of war in Europe and revolution in Russia between 1914 and 1917, religious liberalism underwent its own epistemological crisis, especially with respect to the ideas of modernity and progress. At first there were surprisingly few in the tradition who were willing to acknowledge a gross lack of correspondence between their pacific ideas and realities of collective conflict and mass suffering. Beginning in the 1920s, Niebuhr emerged as one of "Progress' discontents" in the phrase of Christopher Lasch. Niebuhr used the experience of the Great War and industrial turmoil to rework and incorporate the idea of historical "catastrophe" into his native liberalism from the alien quarters of neo-orthodoxy and Marxism.

Yet the majority of Niebuhr commentators agrees that he continued to work within the boundaries of liberalism during this time in a Herculean effort to reform its intellectual foundations. Nature and freedom, science and values, power and personality—the broadest themes underlying Niebuhr's philosophy of history during the period under investigation—were products in equal part of Kantian and pragmatic liberalism to which he attempted to graft certain anti-liberal themes. From Marx he would borrow the concept of structure and superstructure; from Barth, transcendence and finitude.

The present study has been further enriched from attempts to examine developments in philosophy in terms of traditions. For histories of liberalism and the idea of progress, I have relied upon Robert Nisbet's History of the Idea of Progress, William Hutchinson's The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism, and Alasdair MacIntyre's Whose Justice? Which Rationality? One of the challenges for the interpreter of a person's systematic thought, according to MacIntyre, is to describe adequately the intellectual tradition in which the subject theorizes and how theoretical reformulations are carried out in response to periodic "epistemological crises."
An explanation of my usage of the terms Metahistory and History is in order. These terms are pivotal to the study of the narrative quality of Niebuhr's early writings. "Metahistory" is used to refer to the symbolic forms (including metaphysics, myths and dramatic metaphors) that serve as narrative resources in the construction of what Niebuhr would later term "overarching interpretative frameworks." As such, it is employed synonymously with "historical imagination" or "historical vision." The term Metahistory is also used co-extensively with "metanarrative," minus Lyotard's pejorative ideological connotation. For Niebuhr, the realm of Metahistory is the realm of "value" and "meaning," of "form" and "understanding."

The word "History" is used synonymously with "narrative" or, more narrowly, "historiography." History refers to actual written accounts of significant temporal segments of human events, the activity of making empirical human passage intelligible. The contents of History include human agencies and actions (whether individual or social) as these are staged upon a larger background of social and cultural structures and processes. For Niebuhr, the sphere of History is the sphere of "fact" and "cause," of "content" and "explanation."

The presiding rubrics of this present study—the terms Metahistory and History—have been employed (and capitalized) not to indicate some strict adherence of White's theory of tropes, and certainly not to reintroduce the older fact/value dualism into my critical analysis of the problem of narrative and interpretation in Niebuhr. Rather I use them simply as convenient devices to draw attention to the inherited problematic with which Niebuhr wrestles. Niebuhr, as indicated, tried to refute the Diltheyan dualism and spent the better part of a lifetime advancing the argument for the relevance of theology to historical interpretation.

In the main, I have tried to understand the Metahistory/History problem in terms of Ricoeur's theoretical solution found in *Time and Narrative*; although I am afraid that I have reproduced his argument rather imperfectly. Emplotment, or narration, is the historian's creative
bridge linking the common human ability to understand and judge individual actions in time (i.e., the common person's and the dramatist's "pre-scientific" practical wisdom) and the "scientific" explanation of the multifarious causes and complex temporality of the collective behavior.

Throughout the study we shall critically assess the interpretative results of each book in terms of its coherence, adequacy and practical implication, the complex criteria of truth to which a Christian interpretation of human history conform according to Gilkey. The Christian interpretation of history involves the theological interpretation of appropriate biblical symbols, so that "they are made capable of reflective application to the generic traits of concrete historical experience . . . to historical praxis . . . and to the disciplines or forms of inquiry relevant to the understanding of history and of action within history." 4 It is my belief that the effort to construct an alternative to the Enlightenment philosophy of history during the period under study was an enormously creative failure. Through successive efforts at interpretation and re-interpretation of the historical forces that shaped his century, in profound conversation with Augustinian tradition, Niebuhr would, by Gilkey's standard, achieve increasingly compelling interpretation of human destiny.

Finally, we shall attempt to assess what is the pragmatic significance of the text. As a Jamesian pragmatist, Niebuhr would throughout his writing put the matter thus: the ultimate value of any general world-historical view or interpretation lies in its capacity to elucidate the "moral meaning" of past and current events. In this spirit, he would draws upon all of the metahistorical resources at his disposal (metaphysical, mythic and dramatic) to illumine the ethical import of human destiny, constructing in the process a kind of public-historical guide for decision-making and action.

The present study consists of three chapters. Each chapter is devoted to one book in chronological order, so as to describe and analyze the fundamental transition in Niebuhr's
historical thought. Each chapter in turn is organized into four major sections, representing one of
the four levels of the narrative structure of the texts: (1) a section on metahistorical, or mythic,
forms (2) a section or subsection on the dramatic modes, or modes of emplotment (3) a section
on social change and the explanation of its causes and (4) a section on historical narrative
proper.

The reader will note that the first two sections in chapter one, and the first three sections
in chapters two and three, are mainly descriptive of the conceptual apparatus that constitute the
narrative structures under investigation. I have reserved the more explicit work of critique (in the
sense of exposing the thematic and conceptual tensions, or ambiguities, in Niebuhr's early view
of history) for each chapter's fourth section (on narrative proper at the historiographical level)
and conclusion. In doing so, I am merely following up on Niebuhr's own suggestion that the test
of Metahistory is History. I am applying the test.

Ten years ago Niebuhr's most influential biographer, Richard Fox, urged a Niebuhr
moratorium upon scholars. Niebuhr was dead. After all, he had little or nothing to say to
feminism, environmentalism, or multiculturalism. A decent interval should be respected before
his intellectual resurrection. The moratorium, if indeed it occurred, was a short one.
Contemporary interest in pragmatism casts Niebuhr as an important American figure: John
Patrick Diggins claims that, paradoxically enough, Niebuhr's essentialism with regard to human
nature has instilled a wholesome realism into the pragmatic tradition. While the work of
contemporary social philosophers, such as Michael Sandel, helps us to view Niebuhr's challenge
to the individualism of modernity but one episode in the periodic communitarian critique of
liberalism.5

Now in the post-Cold War era of pluralism and postmodernism and at the beginning of a
new millenium, the task of historical synthesis has become a daunting, if not forbidden, task.
Doubtless, Niebuhr would have relished the challenge. Who knows, the corpus of his interpretative work may yet be rediscovered as a model for public history in the twenty-first century: firm in its rejection of the monopoly of secular interpretation; resolute in the affirmation that interpretation is embedded in communities of memory; and committed to the recognition that the work of the historian is a vital part, after all, of the quest for a community larger than one's self.6
"To Save the West": Religion and History in

Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927)

INTRODUCTION

"Christianity, as Dr. Ernst Troeltsch has observed, is the fate of Western society." So wrote and affirmed Reinhold Niebuhr in 1927. Saving civilization was the thirty-five year old Protestant minister's preoccupation, as it had been the sumnum bonum of the Social Gospel movement for a generation. His first book, Does Civilization Need Religion? marked the beginning of his lifelong passion of viewing moral and political issues through the lens of history, making ample use of a wide array of philosophical and historiographical resources. The "ethical reconstruction" of Western society was predicated upon a certain religious conception of civilization. The explanation of social change, in turn, presupposed a theory of history original to the author.

In the decade after the Great War, saving transatlantic civilization from the anarchic tendencies of modern capitalism and imperialism meant the preaching of a rejuvenated Social Gospel. "There is therefore a resource in the avowed loyalty of Western civilization to his ideal
[the ethic of Jesus] which may yet become the basis of its redemption."(80) Niebuhr weighed in as of one of the disillusioned generation's harshest critics of capitalist individualism and the resurgent nationalism threatening Europe. He was fighting on two fronts. On his right, where he concentrated most of his ammunition, he did battle with the older laissez faire liberalism and the idea of inevitable progress as flowing from individual economic freedom. On his left, he warned his readership of the new forms of collectivism and the idea of inexorable progress stemming from the power of the working class or the State.

The study of Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of history begins, logically enough, with *Civilization*. This early volume was a product of Niebuhr's thirteen years in a Detroit pastorate, during which he battled Henry Ford, racial segregation and pious, middle-class complacency. A popular treatment of serious ideas, the book presaged the historical reflections contained in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *The Irony of American History*, writings normally cited as high water marks of his mature reflection on universal history and the American past.

Niebuhr scholars have called *Civilization* a book mirroring a mind "filled with tensions." One biographer describes it as caught between youthful idealism and seasoned realism, a "dilemma" to be "resolved" subsequently in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. describes it as a "book shot through with premonitions and misgivings about the prevalent liberal creed." "Doubts about the assumptions of liberalism" provide a realistic "minor theme," which in time would become a major theme of his writing.9 The overall impression is that *Civilization* is not a coherent work.

In 1927, Niebuhr recognizes the important role that the philosophy of history would play in twentieth-century thought and politics. Various philosophies of history make their appearance here, including Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. He read the work in German shortly after the two-volume work was published between 1918 and 1922. Spengler gave immediate
impetus to Niebuhr's project of historical reflection. His response to the decline thesis would ultimately rank Niebuhr with the great speculative philosophers of history of the twentieth century.

One of the most important features of *Civilization* is Niebuhr's proposition that the redemption of the West depends, to an important degree, on the articulation of a new philosophy of history. The proposed philosophy would be both descriptive and prescriptive, that is, an empirical account of the causes of history's contradictions and a normative account of a way out of them. Beginning with pragmatic foundations—the bedrock *experience* of moral conflict in the world—he sketches the outlines of a new Metahistory. It would consist of a creative melange of metaphysics (i.e., Whitehead's speculative ontology) and mythology (i.e., Schweitzer's apocalyptic rendering of Jesus' ethic). This philosophical construction I shall refer to as realistic idealism, that is, idealism or personalism with a touch of "ethical dualism." These metahistorical resources offer a suggestively emplotted vision of divine activity in world in terms of "transcendence and transformation."

Metahistory meets History through Niebuhr's theory of social change. Borrowed for the most part from Troeltsch's historical sociology of religious sects and social reform, Niebuhr's concept of social transformation works its way into the basic narrative of Western civilization. The story of the West is the story of hard won moral progress generated by the ebb and flow of religious renewal and social reform. The historical pattern (which Niebuhr terms "conflict and compromise") echoes the overarching metahistorical pattern. I shall refer to Niebuhr's theory of social change throughout this chapter as the concept of religious revitalization and secularization. Moreover, the movement from religious renewal and secular decline has a pronounced ironic quality.

Some of the most significant tensions within the text of *Civilization* are discernible at the
level of narrative proper. At this level of "simple" historical story telling, Niebuhr chronicles the story of the development of modern capitalist society, secular in all its essentials, as the cause of so much industrial and international conflict. There is a gentle satiric realism in the retelling of the story of Puritan work ethic, and its unintended secular consequences, i.e. the triumph of the market economy with its singular focus on commercial value. With considerable poignancy Niebuhr sketches the historical limits of his own brand of personalist politics in the poisoned atmosphere of class warfare in postwar Europe.

The present chapter pursues two lines of inquiry as it attempts to tease out the stratum of historical narrative in a book of social and religious criticism. These two lines of inquiry conveniently dovetail: the search for the narrative style in *Civilization* reveals the form of history; the exploration for the substance of progress discloses its content.

The first line of inquiry (concerning the form of historical narrative) has been suggested by Richard Reinitz' remarkable literary analysis *Irony and Consciousness,* which details the development of Niebuhr's "ironic" theory of history, commencing with the publication of his *The Irony of American History.* I concur with the main line of argument in Reinitz, but would argue that Niebuhr's view of history was throughout his writings both tragic and ironic, in varying degrees depending on circumstances. In the early period under discussion one sees the interplay in Niebuhr's narrative between both modes of emplotment and their associated theories of social change.

The second line of inquiry (concerning the content of historical narrative) has been inspired by Robert Nisbet in his authoritative studies on the history of the idea of progress and his treatment of the two prevailing (and, I would add, antagonistic) themes of modern philosophy of history—the idea of "progress as freedom" and the idea of "progress as power." Niebuhr himself is aware of these looming themes and endeavors to expose their common and
contradictory roots in the Enlightenment. "[T]he reaction from Hegel to Marx is a perfect symbol of the whole course of Western thought."(203)

I shall describe the philosophy of history found in Civilization as a version of the progress-as-freedom school, a reworking of Troeltsch and the liberal Protestant historical tradition. It is a guide to history from the pen of a self-styled "tamed cynic," incorporating a new political and historical realism into the older Kantian idealism. He offers a putative alternative to "sentimental" liberalism and "cynical" collectivism. A dissident from modernism, Niebuhr pits his radical vision of the contingent possibility of progress against the bourgeois notion of the inevitability of progress.15

The following chapter organizes the several historical themes that Niebuhr treats in Civilization under the general rubrics of Metahistory and History. The first section deals with the metahistorical vision that constitutes the framework of Niebuhr's narrative of human passage. The second section outlines his early theory of social change, namely, the broad processes of religious revitalization and secularization. The third and fourth sections delineate the narrative of modern and contemporary history—the account of the pattern of the past—contained in the pages of Civilization.

Under the theme of "freedom," Niebuhr includes the elements of personalism. In brief, Civilization is written in the most personalist mode, the starting position of religious idealism: Schweitzer's "reverence of personality" as a "motive" and "method" of social reconstruction.(61) The politics of personalism consists of prophetic individuals who will practice the virtues of "mutual compromise and mutual sacrifice" and will form sectarian communities of deep reciprocity with the goal of promoting the "equality" of persons and "harmony" between warring labor and capital and among fractious nations.(59-60) This is progress as the advancement of ethical freedom—and the consequent conversion, or transformation, of society to the Good.
Democracy, democratic values, and institutions (including the League of Nations) are conspicuously absent from Niebuhr's analysis. The previous generation had elevated democracy to the status of a natural ally of personalism, an extension of ethical freedom. As a member of the disillusioned generation, Niebuhr was skeptical of democracy's post-Versailles triumphalist claims. (In a later "Marxist" mode, Niebuhr would similarly marginalize the role of democracy in Books Two and Three.)

Under the theme of "nature," Niebuhr places all manner of human selfishness. It is the business of personalism to root out selfishness, wherever it exists, and to transform it into a transcending desire to achieve the Good. Niebuhr's early writing includes an assessment of the pervasive selfishness of group, especially the "greed" of economic classes and the "will to power" of nations. These vices, individual and social, contribute to the "forces of nature in society." Subsequent contact with Barth and Marx leads Niebuhr to opt for a more trenchant vocabulary in Books Two and Three. There is less nature-talk, more reference to fallen humanity's "fate"; less speech about human selfishness, more concerning "collective egotism."

The critical analysis of the thematic tensions within Niebuhr's concept of history in Civilization will be concentrated in section four and expanded upon in the conclusion. As mentioned in the general introduction, the test of Metahistory lies in the success of narrating ordinary History. Niebuhr is fully aware that he is pitching a new philosophy of history, the validation of which lies in its power to illuminate the moral import of recent history. The narrative of Civilization weaves together the Metahistory and History, offering analogies and lessons for decision makers, for political praxis. Throughout the 1927 text there is a lively juxtaposition of the elements of "ethical freedom" and "the forces of nature" in human history and politics. The very point of the narrative is the tension between personalism and power politics. The lesson of history for peacemakers, according to Niebuhr, is the extreme difficulty
of realizing the ideals of economic and international harmony in the face of class and ethnic strife.

It is the thesis of this chapter that during this crucial period, Niebuhr's interpretation of history is, in a sense, driven by aspects of the same nettlesome dialectic of Enlightenment—the very same problematic that bedevils modern Western thought. If the tension that arises from Niebuhr's articulation of the interpretative framework (i.e. the contradictory themes of power and personality) is the point of the narrative, then it is also the problem of the narrative. While successfully colligating a good many historical observations, the interpretive scheme cannot account for certain anomalous "experiences" of the immediate past, cannot explain certain difficult "facts" of contemporary history. There is, first, the perplexing experience of the tragic, the descent into evil which the war (and revolution) represents. Second, there is the fact that economic problems of imperialist conflict can only be explained by economic causes and whose solution must involve economic, not personalist, measures in the first instance.

As a result, after Civilization Niebuhr is compelled to reinterpret the field. He resolves to re-work both his interpretative themes and explanatory theory of social change to achieve an even more "realistic" narrative in Moral Man. This subsequent revisionism will move him from a broadly history-of-religions approach to a history-of-revolutions approach; from a predominantly ironic emplotment of history to a more consistently tragic one. Practical reason will reject the concept of progress as ethical freedom in favor of the idea of progress as the advancement of power in the interest of economic justice.

METAPHYSICS, MYTH AND METAHISTORY

One of most important objectives in Civilization is the construction of a normative
philosophy of history. To this end Niebuhr outlines the new philosophy in the context of his
diagnosis of the crisis of modernity. The critique of modernity involves a judgment of the
concept of progress in its contemporary guises. Accordingly, he develops a comparative
treatment of contemporary philosophies of history, a simple typology that anticipates later, more
rigorous treatments. He divides historical theories into "sentimental" ones (or "optimistic" and
"idealistic") on the one hand and "cynical" ones (or "pessimistic" and "realistic") views on the
other. (192-193, 209) Sentimental and cynical views of history correlate with the idea of progress
as freedom and the idea of progress as power, respectively.

The sentimental idea of history, commonly associated with the Enlightenment, predicates
progress upon the goodness of human nature, the autonomy of reason and the cumulative
character of scientific knowledge. The eighteenth-century concept of human destiny is
furthermore linked with individualism—the idea that the moral and material advancement of
humanity depends on the liberation of the good will of the individual from oppressive
institutions, primarily the Church and the State. Niebuhr singles out the political economy of
Adam Smith and the social philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and their heirs (the "children of
light" as he would later call them) as progenitors of the sentimental concept. (165) The problem
with the Enlightenment idea of human perfectibility and progress is that when turned into a
general system, the concept leads to a kind of historical determinism, or automatism. With
obvious chagrin, he makes the telling point that this view of history has been mediated to modern
popular values through his own tradition of liberal Protestantism. (167)

The cynical view of history, in both its idealistic and realistic versions, has its origins in
the romantic movements of the nineteenth century. Under the cynical view he categorizes the
historical theories of the modern heirs of Hegel and Marx ("the children of darkness," as he
would later call them), who believe, as fascists or communists, that progress occurs under the
collective aegis of either the state or the proletariat and, furthermore, that power is the legitimate means to promote communal ends. The emergence of historical cynicism represents a sea change—a dialectical swing—in the Western attitude toward history. The post-World War I climate of opinion experienced a 180-degree turn from the belief in moral progress to the belief in the prerogative of power. Unfortunately, the really important action within the crosscurrents of European ideology was happening between the schools of historical cynicism. "The real history of Western society is being written by Nietzschian and Marxian cynics who have subdued every scruple which might qualify their contest for power." Niebuhr underscores the relationship between fashionable concepts of historical inevitability and the growth of violence in contemporary European politics.

What the sentimental and cynical theories of history have in common is their deterministic progressivism—the sense of inevitable perfection of mankind. To paraphrase his later formula, their transcendent principles of meaning become immanent in history. The "implicit ideal" of both kinds of philosophy of history "is certain to become real in history." Niebuhr does not dispute the reality of progress in history; however, in his view, both incarnations of Enlightenment progressivism too readily locate moral progress (the "meaning of history") within history. In this sense they are "monisms" and are to be vigorously rejected.

It is in this context that Niebuhr makes his appeal for a new philosophy of history—a mediating theory, one which is simultaneously "transcendent" and "transformative," idealistic and realistic. The proposed philosophy of history, which he traces in outline, will serve as an alternative to the deterministic progressivism found in the absolute idealism of a Hegel or the historical materialism of a Marx.

Contra the monism of Smith and Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, the new philosophy of
history embraces the "qualified dualism" of William James' moral philosophy. (213) Niebuhr's vision of history is built on the bedrock of moral experience. What modern men and women need "is a philosophy . . . which will do justice both to the purpose and to the frustration which purpose meets in the inertia of the concrete world." (209) Niebuhr embraces James' notion that the fundamental fact, the foundation, of human consciousness is the experience of conflict in the Universe. All human reflection, too, is built upon this pragmatic foundation. The experience of conflict in both natural and human domains is to be perennially "elaborated" in two distinct but related ways: "philosophically" in metaphysical speculation and "dramatically" in religious myth.

The new philosophy of history thus will posit an overarching interpretative framework consisting of the building blocks of metaphysics and myth. For this purpose Niebuhr proposes a rather surprising synthesis of Alfred North Whitehead's recently published speculations on process ontology and Albert Schweitzer's historical investigation of Jesus' eschatology. The metaphysics of process and the myth of apocalypse compose a Metahistory that can, in Niebuhr's view, realistically disclose the meaning of human history in terms of the conflict and progress, which co-exist between catastrophe and millennium. 17

METAPHYSICS AND METAHISTORY

Generally speaking, Whitehead's process ontology helps Niebuhr prefigure natural history. More particularly, Whitehead's metaphysical description of the natural history is a representation of cosmic evolution in terms of potential, indeterminacy and innovation. Niebuhr finds in this prefiguration, or representation, a philosophical elaboration of the fundamental experience (and observation) of "conflict" in the physical universe: nature's "resistance" with regard to transcendent "purposes;" the indifference of chaos, or "inertia," with respect a cosmos
of ever higher orders and more complex entities. The speculative theory of an emergent creation delineates the general pattern of the world's destiny and comports with Niebuhr's notion of the conflictual dimension—the "many dualisms"—within the natural world and human experience. It is this perceived realism of Whitehead's evolutionary system which appeals to Niebuhr's narrative sensibilities. Summarizing the general movement of the idealist ontology, Niebuhr describes three stages in the process of concretion of natural happenings (and mutatis mutandis human events):

1. the initiative of the ideal ("the ideal which fashions the real" [209])
2. the resistance of concrete realities ("the real which defeats the ideal" [209])
3. the resulting synthesis of the ideal and the real (a "stubborn conflict with the intractable forces of nature and history results in some kind of compromise."[122]).

According to Niebuhr, the new theory of the universe discloses the reality of chaos as well as the substance of cosmos.

Niebuhr takes pains to distinguish Whitehead's conception of an open universe from the closed universe of Hegelian absolute idealism, one source of modern historical determinism. Niebuhr embraces the Whiteheadian concept that God does not "determine the universe; he is not the sufficient "cause" of the events of the cosmos. Rather divine activity in the cosmos is self-limiting, "that in reality which is not concrete but the principle of every concrete reality."(212)18 Neither physical novelty nor emergent orders of increasingly higher complexity occur in a causally necessary manner. Rather, each novel concretion is just one incarnation of a range of ordered possibilities and, indeed, each concretion falls short of the beckoning ideal. God is the author of possibility within the range of existing realities. This aspect of the cosmic vision is captured in the oft-repeated phrase in Civilization "transcendence and transformation" that depicts the fundamental relation of God to the world.
The representation of the ontological process is subsequently transposed onto Niebuhr's historical discourse. To use a musical metaphor, the theme of "transcendence and transformation" apropos natural history is shifted into the key of the theme of "conflict and compromise" apropos human history. Whitehead's metaphysical language of purpose and resistance, novelty and inertia, is conscripted into the service of Metahistory in Niebuhr's narrative of modern and contemporary History.(90-91)

**MYTH AND METAHISTORY**

If metaphysics prefigures natural history, myth (and its inherent dramatic elements) *configures* human history. Through the vehicle of "myth" in general, and through the mythology of the cross in particular, we are able to re-tell the story of the human universe in terms of power, freedom, and social change, based upon Jesus' paradigmatic experience of moral conflict. It is in this spirit that Niebuhr turns to the Judeo-Christian scriptures in which "the idea of omnipotence was elaborated dramatically rather than philosophically" as the archetypal mythology of world religions.(195)

Niebuhr's reflections on the hermeneutic power of myth occurs in the context of a revival in the twentieth century of scholarly interest in mythology and the persistence of myth in the form of ideology in modern society. Niebuhr's interest in myth appears to be inspired by Schweitzer's studies of the Jesus of history, his ethics and apocalypticism, and their meaning for task of civilization.19 Myth brings to language the inner consciousness of moral conflict in their external world.(195) Myth is but an imaginative narrative of the relationship between divine transcendence and worldly transformation. In this manner mythology is equated with "symbolism."(199)
More particularly, Niebuhr is keen to fathom the basic plot structure—the "dramatic" element—of the biblical "account," especially the prophetic strands of Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In turn, this basic structure will help Niebuhr, and his readers, re-empt ordinary human history. In *Civilization* there is a near constant association of the term "drama" with the subject of mythology. So we can understand his keen interest in the "dramatic portrayal" of the conflict of good and evil in myth that "has a practical and ethical value." Indeed, the superiority of Judeo-Christian tradition lies in the claim that God acts as a sovereign in the theater of human history, a favorite notion of Niebuhr's throughout his writings.

The life of Jesus in the New Testament is interpreted on two levels, mythically and dramatically. On the mythic level, the life of Jesus is contextuated within the saga of the kingdom of God. God's agency for good in this world—the "ideal" that Jesus represents—is "frustrated" by the "inertia" of human nature, its moral "indifference" and "egotism." But the ideal "transcends" the world in the messiah's ultimate act of self-sacrifice. The "transformation" of the Roman world through Jesus' followers proceeds from this compassionate deed. The early Christians' belief that the progress of God's intention in the world is not "automatic" but difficult is a permanent challenge to the theodicies of the Enlightenment.

On the dramatic level, Jesus' conflict with the agencies of moral evil in his day is characterized by Niebuhr as a "tragic" drama—an implicit contrast to the romantic interpretation that the previous generation of religious liberals imposed upon the sacred text. Niebuhr gestures at a definition of tragedy when he writes of "the helpful symbolism of the cross in which the conflict between good and evil is portrayed and the possibility as well as the difficulty of the triumph of the good over evil is dramatized."(200-201)

But exactly what is "tragedy," according to Niebuhr, and how is the crucifixion tragic? Niebuhr fails to provide us with a baseline definition. It appears that first and foremost the tragic
protagonist is not a passive victim. Instead, Niebuhr implicitly celebrates the life of Jesus because Jesus chooses to risk some value—his earthly well being—for the sake of a higher good. Jesus pathos is therefore transformed into "tragedy" by the ingredient of his conscious choice of the Via Dolorosa.20

Nevertheless, there is still an unmistakable romantic element in Niebuhr's characterization of the tragic dimension of the Christian drama. The self-sacrifice of the protagonist in the New Testament plot yields, ultimately, earthly triumph. "Yet only by such sacrifices can man prove the reality and potency of his creative will."(48) The catastrophic event of the cross finds its moral meaning within the context of the realization of the kingdom in the here and now. Human history moves toward the "ethical ideal," i.e., toward Kant's metahistorical kingdom of ends. Indeed, Niebuhr uses developmental language that would warm the heart of the most stouthearted Kantian: "the fact that in spite of the pressure of the struggle for survival, man has created a kingdom of values in which truth, beauty and goodness have been made real."(49)

Without the traditional elements of judgment and atonement, the tragic import of the cross seems diminished almost beyond recognition. Oddly, Niebuhr adduces the catastrophic strain in New Testament symbolism in order to demonstrate the essential idealism of a Christian faith, a faith that bravely confronts the forces of social injustice.

The search for historical realism in Civilization begins with the rather fuzzy "tragic" interpretation of New Testament metanarrative. A decade later, in Beyond Tragedy, Niebuhr would elevate tragedy to the exclusive "principle of [Christian] historical interpretation." But in 1927 Niebuhr is content to make the pragmatic case for a catastrophic understanding of the cross and a tragic mode of interpretation for secular history. The failure of modern women and men to grasp the dramatic character of the cross parallels their inability to assess the tragic significance
REVITALIZATION, SECULARIZATION AND SOCIETY

The metahistorical themes of transcendence and transformation are brought down to history, so to speak, through a pair of social processes that, in Niebuhr's estimation, inform and shape the broadest developments of humanity. He terms these processes "ethical reconstruction" (or what social scientists refer to as religious revitalization) and "secularization." Here we encounter the influence of Troeltsch's historical sociology, especially his The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches. There is no systematic presentation of these concepts in Civilization. Rather, they are presupposed throughout the text and function as a general theory of social-historical explanation. The generalizations produced by the theory of revitalization and secularization are employed as covering laws to impute the causes of the exemplary events, or paradigmatic "facts," of Western history.

Niebuhr's ethical discourse occurs in these larger developmental contexts of metanarrative. As a specific response to the ethos of capitalism and the liberal theory of Economic Man, his positive ethic represents a renewal of the "clerical critique of capitalism," aspects of which are at least as old as the Protestant Reformation. One notes a palpable affinity in Civilization with the Social Gospel tradition and its belief that capitalist society can and will be transformed through a process of religious, or personalist, conversion. The processes of ethical reconstruction are identical to what Rauschenbusch and the previous generation of Anglo-Saxon Protestant reformers termed the "Christianization" of the modern industrial economy.
THE ETHIC OF JESUS AND REVITALIZATION

There is a dynamic, historical dimension to Niebuhr's exploration of the ethic of Jesus and its opposite, the ethic of secularity. Already in 1927 Niebuhr is engrossed with the idea of a radical distinction between the morality of the individual and collective behavior, particularly the behavior of economic groups, which would later be amplified into his classic Moral Man-Immoral Society thesis.

As Richard Fox has observed, *Civilization* is in some respects but a proposal for a new monasticism. The life of mankind is divided into two unbridgeable ethics, and so two practical strategies of great historical significance: an ethic of love and self-sacrifice and an ethic of self-interest and gain. In contrast to the enlightened worldly philosophers' dream of "happiness" and the contemporary fundamentalist gospel of worldly "success," Niebuhr posits a premodern ascetic ethic to transcend and transform the values and institutions of modern capitalism. He embraces a love absolutism as the categorical imperative by which the both the individual and society are to live. Personalism is predicated upon a rigorous love/egotism dualism —the belief in the basic antithesis of self-sacrifice and self-interest.

The motive and method of social reform espoused by Niebuhr can be variously described as the ethic of Jesus, of love, of personality. The ethic has for its starting point, according to the Kantian tradition of religious liberalism, in the nonderivative and so absolute nature of the values of transcendent personhood: love and reason, freedom and purpose. In the mode of Schweitzer and Troeltsch he writes that the meaning of Jesus for Western civilization is his "attainment and incarnation" of the "absolute and transcendent" ideal of personality. The source of the ethos is the conscience of the individual in communion with divine personality. "Love at bottom is a religious attitude." The vertical relationship with the divine enlarges the self, universalizes
reason, gives scope to moral imagination, liberates the will.

The practical objective of the ethic of Jesus is twofold. The first objective is the attainment of individual "ethical freedom." "Ideal religion," Niebuhr writes, "makes reverence for personality the end of human action."(79) The ethic strives for freedom from selfishness and the desire for individual's gain--the political economist's "interests" or the utilitarian's "satisfactions." The virtuous person of enlarged selfhood and goodwill serves the interests of the other before his or her own. Virtue exempts the needs and self-interests of the individual from the totality of interests of the "larger community of mankind", the inclusive circle of human needs.(141)

The second objective of the ethic of Jesus, according to Niebuhr, is social: the "harmony" of interests, needs and claims of the total community. Harmony is imbued with a spiritual coloration—a transcendent tincture—that the more immanent, utilitarian "equilibrium" does not convey. Social harmony based upon the sacrifice of one's contractual rights—not the "justice" of a fair or efficient distribution of property or social goods—is the highest good of the kingdom. "High religion" enjoins "sacrifice rather than the stubborn preservation of individual rights is enjoined."(72) The ethos of Jesus underwrites a society of earnest selflessness and generosity rather than self-serving competition and acquisitiveness.

Social revitalization works through the sacrifice of self-interest and intends deep cooperation. Niebuhr's preferred term for this cooperation, this law of love that binds individuals into a society, is "mutuality," or more exactly "pure mutuality." The symbolic kingdom of God is thus characterized by a non-contractual reciprocity, yielding a perfect harmony, not an imperfect equilibrium; true equality rather than mere equality. The net result of aggregate individual self-sacrifice is the "ethical renewal" of society, even a revolution.

The ascetic ethos is, paradoxically, an ethic of social revitalization—and a new basis for
the Social Gospel movement. The ideal of personality may be individual in its source, but it reaches out to achieve a social realization. The arc of the individual moral imagination entails "an ethic which helps the individual realize his highest self by sacrificing personal advantages for social values."(62) Thus Niebuhr echoes Troeltsch's interpretation of the unintended but historical consequences sectarian movements in Western civilization.

Finally, the ethic of Jesus, and the process of revitalization rooted in it, is inherently progressive. Civilization gives expression to a classic variation on the concept of progress as freedom—in this case the ethical freedom of the individual to "transcend and transform" her world. It has an eternal source yet envisions an immanent future realization. It presupposes the contingent perfectibility of the human nature and history.

THE ETHIC OF CAPITALISM AND SECULARIZATION

The process of revitalization has as its counterpart the process of secularization. As in the case of revitalization, there is no substantive treatment of secularization in Civilization. Instead, Niebuhr presupposes the factual truth of the general cultural de-conversion Western society in modern times. Roughly speaking, secularization—like revitalization—is treated in an idealist manner. The process involves more than the disappearance of a Church-directed society. Subtle shifts in the sphere of ideas, values and beliefs (culture) yield marked differences in social behavior and organization (civilization).29 A secular spirit characterizes modernity, then, and the ethic of capitalism is the embodiment of a preeminently worldly ethos. Although he is aware of the political and scientific forms of secularism in modern life, it is the ethic of capitalism—and utilitarianism, specifically—which Niebuhr, for all practical purposes, identifies with modern secularism.
The secular ethos of political economy, like the religious ethos, has as its starting point
the individual. Political economy, in fact, proffers a counterfeit of the ideal of personality. The
consciousness of the capitalism is, Niebuhr believes, immanent in outlook rather than
transcendent. As expressed in laissez faire theory, the secular ethos is premised on self-regard,
so that Adam Smith's classic metaphor of the Invisible Hand suffices to explain the complex
phenomenon of capitalism. As one looks toward one's own interests, one ensures the common
welfare of society.

In theory the pursuit of self-interest is restrained by reason, the enlightened inclusion of
the self's interest within a larger community of interests. Niebuhr uses the term "prudential
ethic" in association with the ethic of capitalism, invariably in a disparaging sense. Once the self
is authorized to discover and seek its own interests before those of its neighbor (i.e., customer,
co-worker, competitor, etc.), it will invariably seek his or her own interests to the exclusion of
the neighbor's. Self-interest thus denotes possessive individualism and functions as the
equivalent of original sin in Niebuhr's concept of modern society.

Secularizing movements do not achieve historical realization through isolated individuals
but through networks of social groups. This applies to capitalism as a modern secularizing
process, too. Despite of its official individualism, the ethos of capitalism confers upon economic
groups (businesses, classes, empires, etc.) the motives and objectives of enterprising
individuals—and the same legitimation of the pursuit of collective self-interest. In what is his
important pre-Marxist contribution to social theory, Niebuhr argues that social groups are even
less inclined than individuals to heed the prudent counsels of reason. Groups exploit the ethos of
political economy to achieve exclusive and selfish interests. This is the meaning of his statement
that idea that the "doctrine of laissez faire was ... as much an admission of defeat" by its well-
intentioned theorists "as it was a conscious effort toward secularization."(125)
The secularizing process of capitalism is closely connected in Niebuhr's mind with the concept of inexorable economic growth. Political economists from Adam Smith to J.S. Mill have presupposed the perfectibility of autonomous, rational, reward-maximizing Economic Man eventuating in an ultimate, harmonious equilibrium in society. This is economic liberalism's version of the idea progress as freedom, built upon "the consoling reflection that 'in the providence of God each man seeking his own shall serve the common weal.'"(125)

But the worldly philosophers, the heirs of the Enlightenment, do not take into account the fallibility of human nature in their accounts of capitalism, sanctioning the sphere of competition. This fallibility of human nature becomes transparent in the historical process of secularization—the widening of the sphere commercial competition. The universal experience of the disparity between the "ideal" and the "real" as human action passes from the individual and his personal associations (family, village, congregation) to large collective entities (nation, race, empire) is replicated as individual businesses pass into the sphere of large-scale industrial competition and cross-border rivalry.

The process of secularization—the divorce of the values and institutions of production and exchange from religious sanction—threatens the life of civilization. Niebuhr describes a two-step path in the failure of secular ethos in realizing its historical goals of immanent equilibrium. First, the "virtue" of the utilitarian culture of self-interest lies in its producing a "prudent" truce to prevent overt aggression among competitors, to economic and class anarchy. Second, a secular ethos—with only a worldly reference point—fails to transform natural group egotism for the sake of long-term social harmony.
NARRATING THE PATTERN OF THE PAST

Metahistory and social theory in *Civilization* converge in Niebuhr's brief narratives of Western history. The form of narrative (irony) and the content of the narrative (progress as ethical freedom) come together in the interpretation of two exemplary historical episodes (medieval papal internationalism and early modern Puritanism) of western history. The interaction of the divine and human activity—the process of religious revival and secular decline—produces a pattern of "conflict and compromise" from which historical lessons Niebuhr's beleaguered generation can learn.

These narrative representations are inspired in equal parts from German religious idealism (particularly Troeltsch's historiography of sectarian movements) and to a lesser extent by neo-Kantian sociological researches (especially Weber's classic study of Protestantism and capitalism). From both schools, Niebuhr borrows the view that religion is the soul of civilization; Christianity in its specific historical forms is the heart of West. Niebuhr student Ronald Stone goes so far as to say that "it is difficult to distinguish ideas in *Does Civilization Need Religion?* from those of *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*: "the clash between civilization and religion, the central issue of Troeltsch's book, is the theme of Reinhold Niebuhr's book."32

Civilization, even in the twentieth century according to Niebuhr, is a proper object of spiritual redemption. Inward revolutions in religious life yield changes in the outward makeup of a civilization's institutions and balances of power. The three stages, or epochs, of civilization are engendered by (and identified with) their religious, or broadly cultural, values: Roman Catholicism creates feudal civilization; Protestantism produces commercial civilization; and secularism yields scientific civilization. (A causal order that, significantly, would be reversed in
Within the tradition of religious liberalism, there is a pronounced tendency to associate the moral progress of the West with the ethical evolution of society through these three stages.

From the historiography of Protestantism and capitalism, Niebuhr inherits the idea that Protestantism is the cultural heart of capitalism. The historiographical environment of Civilization is very rich. Niebuhr's analysis of the secularizing impact of utilitarian culture and industrial advancement draws heavily upon two remarkable studies on the intimate relationship between Protestantism and capitalism published in the previous fifteen years: Max Weber's The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism (the 1920 German edition) and R.H. Tawney's Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (1926). It is difficult to imagine Niebuhr's critique of modern capitalist society taking flight without the strong draft provided by these two works.

A second dramatic theme—the ironic mode of interpretation—makes its appearance in the most historically informed portion of Civilization, chapter five entitled "Religion and Life: Conflict and Compromise." Here Niebuhr's native sense of paradox and incongruity is combined with the ironic patterning of historical movements found in the encounter with the narrative sense of Troeltsch and Weber.

"Irony" by Niebuhr's later account involves the transvaluation of values as when "virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect of virtue." Such is the case in the narrative sketches in Civilization. Spiritual ideals are contradicted by eventual realities as great reformers or reform movements grapple with the dilemmas of power. Germane to Niebuhr's early sense of historical irony is the suggestion that, once in power, a reform movement's eventual "compromises" with the forces of the old order are really unconscious corruptions of their original idealism. A modicum of self-delusion always figures into the power-seeking "hypocrisy" of revitalizing movements. Even the most "Christian" of social ideals can be distorted in their conception.
(In Moral Man he would use the term "ideology," freighted as that term is with Marxist irony.)

Thus, the successive societies of Western civilization "pay tribute to the ideal even while they are corrupting it."(80)

This definition comports well with the irony embedded in Troeltsch's church-sect thesis with its general social explanatory ramifications. The thesis includes the law-like generalization that the most socially fruitful religious movements begin as radical sectarian or minority movements, indifferent to the needs of civilization. The minority's interest in transformation in the intimate spheres entails an interest in world transformation. A transvaluation of values occurs when, through the exigencies of time, circumstance and the temptations of power, the dissident movement evolves into an established Church and bulwark of the status quo.

A comparative history-of-religions approach is adopted here. Niebuhr utilizes a typology of "ethical strategies" that religious movements have employed through the centuries for the solution of pressing social problems. (The typology is reminiscent of the one used by his brother Richard Niebuhr, also inspired by Troeltsch, in The Social Sources of Denominationalism [1929]) The ideal types are simple enough. Historically, religions employ three social strategies in relating themselves to the larger social world: "conflict," "withdrawal" and "capitulation without conflict." As mentioned, Civilization is a proposal for a new religious idealism, embracing both secular social reform and sectarian community. With this in mind, two passages reminiscent of Troeltsch's basic scheme are worth quoting in full:

The paradox of religion is that it serves the world best when it maintains its high disdain for the world's values. Its social usefulness is dependent upon its ability
to maintain devotion to absolute moral and spiritual values without too much concern for their practical, even for their social usefulness. (77)

And:

It was probably inevitable that the church should adjust the spiritual ideal, which to propagate it ostensibly regards as its very raison d'être, to the practical needs of the various ages and social orders with which it came into contact. (80-81)

The retelling of exemplary instances, or paradigm cases, from Western religious and social history serves to demonstrate the discernible ironic pattern of history. Two spiritual movements illustrate the historical pattern: one from the Catholic Middle Ages ("papal internationalism") and one from the early modern period (Puritanism). Again, the best description of the pattern of history is found in chapter five of Civilization, in which the three ethical strategies are treated as phases in the unfolding of movements of social reform: "conflict" followed by "capitulation," then "withdrawal." A "transcendent" sectarian or minority movement achieves partial "transformation" of the larger social world, but then yields to "compromise" with various internal and external forces.

The phenomenon of papal internationalism in the Middle Ages provides Niebuhr's first illustration of religious idealism in search of world transformation. Like all progressive movements in the history of religion and society, papal internationalism is in its early stages a by-product of authentic religious idealism of a small minority. The Protestant Niebuhr makes the ecumenical concession that "a measure of ethical idealism" informed the "political aspirations" of the eleventh and twelfth century popes, Gregory VII and Innocent III. Setting Christ above the
world, they endeavored to transcend and "dominate" a fragmented Christendom in order to create a centralized and "unified Christian society."(84)

The pattern of conflict and compromise unfolds as the vision of papal internationalism meets resistance from external forces. The "ideal forces" enjoys partial success. In their ascent to power, the reforming popes manage to suppress the anarchic impulses of the kings of England, France and the Holy Roman Emperor, but in time accommodate the secular imperatives of early nationalistic powers. Social transcendence encounters political inertia and achieves only partial transformation. "Naturally [the papacy's] efforts did not result in any ideal society."(85)

Papal idealism also succumbed to internal forces, namely the self-delusion which in the classic Niebuhrian formulation of irony accompanies exercise of power by the "righteous." The fragmentary realization of the ideal of a Church-brokered international harmony is made problematic as the papacy makes concessions to the negative forces of self-interest. Emphasizing the unconscious sources of irony, Niebuhr writes that the "Christian ideal of an ethical international society was . . . corrupted by imperial ambition." Furthermore, the "historical realities" which resulted deviated fundamentally "from any conceivable ideal."(84) The ultimate irony and failure of medieval history is manifest, as the papacy becomes an instrument of group egotism. That moment signals the secularization of the Western spirit.

Puritanism, the preeminent revitalizing movement of the early modern period, provides the second illustration, or paradigmatic case, of the ironic pattern of conflict and compromise. The Calvinists exemplify the idealism of reformist sects. Like the papal internationalists, they eventually seek to make their influence felt throughout much of Western civilization, holding aloft a Christ who is the Transformer of culture. "In Calvinism the religion of the modern world makes its boldest bid for the ethical mastery of life." Individual temperance, thrift and industry are "the stuff out of which a new society could be built."(97)
In the Puritan movement, one also finds the internal forces of compromise—and failure. As a species of religious idealism, it exhibited self-delusion regarding the absolute righteousness of its program. A profound transvaluation of Calvinist values occurs when the sacrificial life was exchanged for the pursuit of worldly gain. In particular, "Puritanism failed to see how easily the virtue of thrift might be transmuted into the vice of avarice."(103) They are victims of their own confidence in their ability to "overcome the world and change society."(101)

Niebuhr's abridged narrative again stresses the unconscious source of irony that exacerbates the dilemmas of power. Calvinism was a "spiritual discipline" ideally suited for the achievement of middle-class power. But the Puritans are confounded in the "use of power once they achieved it."(104) As the great popes before them, they are unable to wield political power "without making it a tool of their own desires."(104) Thus the selfless ideal of stewardship becomes the servant and rationale for group egotism, a tool in the growth of Puritan merchant hegemony—and so secularization—in the New World and England.

Irony qua historical realism emerges as the apparent norm of historical interpretation in Civilization. The pattern of conflict and compromise—the historical refraction of the metaphistorical pattern of transcendence and transformation—is ingrained in his conceptual resources. In language echoing the representation of divine activity in cosmos, he summarizes:

A stubborn conflict with the intractable forces of nature and history results in some kind of compromise. Neither papal internationalism nor puritan plutocracy are what the idealists who were responsible for them really desired. And what they really desired fell short of their pretended goals.(122-123)

What is left out of the historical narratives in Civilization speaks volumes. Notably
absent in Niebuhr's representations of the medieval and early modern periods are large-scale destructive conflicts. He sketches epochs without violent termini, whereas historians among his contemporaries, like Butterfield, boldly underscore the furious aftermath of European religious wars. Neither wars nor revolutions interrupt the pattern in Civilization. Nothing in this chapter-length description of the historical patterns of "conflict and compromise" prepares the reader situations of profound political and economic irony punctuated by the calamitous "tragedy" of World War I.

THE PATTERN OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Narrative in Civilization is a kind of public discourse; it is history for a new generation of Social Gospel practitioners. The re-telling contemporary history is modeled, in part, after the same pattern of conflict and compromise that Niebuhr uses to interpret the history of papal internationalism and Calvinist reformation.

The heart of our critical analysis focuses on this final level of the narrative structure, the level of narrative proper. In the passages on contemporary history we sense a tension or incoherence in Niebuhr's interpretative and explanatory scheme. Intriguingly, Niebuhr only makes tangential reference to the metahistorical and explanatory resources he develops in chapter five. Niebuhr attempts neither to understand the moral significance of the enormity of the Great War by reference to ironic story of unintended consequences nor to explain its causes in terms of the cultural theory of secularization.

Western civilization, in Niebuhr's view, has reached the end of the modern period. Spengler's pessimistic, post-war negations seem to hover over the text and struggle, as it were, with Troeltsch's positive, pre-war affirmations of the possibilities of the Modern. From the
threshold of a new and uncertain era, Niebuhr describes the last days of liberal Western society. In *Civilization* he demonstrates his burgeoning powers as a thinker in time, a public historian. Through the use of historical analogies, he attempts to demonstrate that contemporary history is informed by the pattern of the past, and he labors to bring home its lessons.

The narrative fragments of Niebuhr's history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are buried in chapter six, devoted largely to social criticism and entitled "Social Complexity and Ethical Impotence." But the real story, which pervades the entire text, is the event of World War I, its causes and consequences—and its meaning. For Niebuhr, as for almost all thinkers of his disillusioned generation, the twentieth century was a great divide and the war was its watershed. The war marked the terminus of the old era—both symbol and fact of the changing contours of Western society.

World War I is symbolic event, whose enormity is subject to historical understanding. Modern consciousness is steeped in "brutal realities of economic conflict, the disillusioning realities of international relations, and the monstrous arrogance of nations and races."(207) The war as terminus of the era is "the great tragic event of modern society," the bitter finale, in effect, of the long ironic tale of nationalistic and economic contradictions that begins with the Puritan revolution and ends in the anarchy of capitalist imperialism.(208)

In the recollection of the recent past and the observation of the present, Niebuhr finds evidence of the recrudescence of malignant powers. The war had dissolved Europe into the constitutive groups of industrial capitalism, both nations and classes. These same groups are aggressively reasserting themselves in the bitter aftermath of the war, a development that portends yet more discord, more irony . . . more tragedy. The relatively gentle satiric sense that exposes the "hypocrisy" of the "compromises" which reform movements make with power gives way to a hardened tragic apprehension. And the tragic essence of the war lies in the
apprehension that no concrete moral or political redemption is to be found on the horizon of the future. Thus, the "real history of Western society is being written by Nietzschian and Marxian cynics who have subdued every scruple which might qualify their contest for power."(192)

As a world-historical fact, the Great War is an "event" precipitated by social causes which are subject to historical explanation. Curiously, Niebuhr does not explain World War one by reference to his the theory of religious revitalization and cultural secularization. Instead he explains the key characteristics of modern society --and the origins of war--by introducing the theory of social differentiation, the theory of structural secularization. He describes "the growing complexity of social life," and a modern society "divided not only by vertical but also by horizontal divisions."(125, 147) Modern life has witnessed the division of the religious, political and economic spheres of activity and the proliferation of new, powerful social groups, most notably the nation-state and economic classes.

The complex differentiation of modern society--is not an autonomous, morally neutral development. Unlike archliberal Herbert Spencer's theory of differentiation, Niebuhr's concept of social complexity, far from being the very definition of Progress, is shot through with moral ambiguity. (Niebuhr associates Spencer's view of the structural transformations at work in modern society with "sentimental optimism."[195]) The resulting autonomy, stratification and gigantism are forces of the de-personalization of society, the objective conditions of secularization.38

Nationalism is a primary force of secularization, operating beyond "ethical control" and unleashing European and Asian group passions. In prehistoric times, nationalism is the product of the organic processes of the development of tribal, ethnic and racial identity. "Natural causes have operated to make social units larger and larger" and more diverse.(153) In the historical period, nationalist movements are, presumably, the offspring of the dissolution of medieval
political synthesis, or papal internationalism, that Niebuhr briefly treats.

Group loyalty—the defining characteristic of nationalism—while necessary and healthy in limited contexts, amplifies the group's tendency to collective aggression. In a process first suggested to Niebuhr by William James' study of the "paradox of patriotism," the virtue of individual self-sacrifice to his group is "transmuted" into the vice of collective egotism.(132-133) Moreover, group egocentrism of this kind penetrates all the structures of society. Without the salutary influences of religion and education to transcend their parochialism, large social groups naturally live in an atmosphere of mistrust of and hostility toward their neighbors. Niebuhr writes: "A suspected peril may lead to a gesture of defense, the defensive measure be regarded as offensive and in turn prompt an actual attack which will be justified in turn as a defensive measure."(154-155)

Capitalism is similarly an objective force of secularization, liberating mankind's instinct to compete for economic resources from religious restraint.(95) So, too, the process of the evolution of humankind's rational powers is identified with the secular moment, giving direct impetus to technological growth in the modern era and, indirectly, to the depersonalizing stratification of relations between the classes in the capitalist period.

The industrial revolution, a more recent historical phenomenon than the formation of the nation-state, is closely bound up with the growth of capitalism. It has added new complexity to society and so secularization, moving Western civilization to new levels of uncontrolled economic competition and social conflict. Large-scale means of production and rapid communications, characteristic of the industrial revolution, are chief among the causes.(125) The interdependence and impersonality of vast privately-owned manufacturing processes exacerbates contemporary social antagonisms: "The unethical nature of modern civilization . . . is due largely to its mechanical perfections which have increased the extent of social cooperation
while they have decreased personal contacts."(126-127)

The war was thus caused by the twin phenomena of nationalism and industrialism. Within the structural theory of secularization and social change, they are paired up as necessary cause (nationalism) to sufficient cause (industrialism). The spread of mechanization through industry compounds the negative tendencies already inherent in the age-old process of group differentiation and enlargement. "The intricacies and propinquitues of an industrial civilization tend at some points to increase the imperial desires of nations and at others to make their ordinary lusts more deadly."(135) The "ancient" feud of Germany and France in the 1920s and the territorial status of the Ruhr is a case in point: "the need of French industry for German coal and the need of German for French iron explains some aspects of their present difficulties which are not derived from ancient animosities."(135) In short the cause of the war was economic imperialism. The belief in the "economic roots of war" (145) is a conviction that the young Niebuhr would carry over into his "Christian-Marxist" period. 40

For Niebuhr the dialectic of the modernity--the ironic unfolding of the modern era beginning with the Calvinist reformation and ending with secular liberalism--is nearly complete. The epoch initiated by the Puritan political and market revolution has fallen into a kind of terminal moral contradiction with the triumph capitalist imperialism and war. The apparent failure of Wilsonian idealism to ethically reconstruct Europe, to stem the future course of conflict, has produced its opposite: the cynical belief in the salvific character of power. The communism of the Russian Revolution and the proto-fascism of Italian, Spanish and German nationalists now vie to re-emploit the course of contemporary history, piling new, entangled ironies upon the tragedy of World War I.
CONCLUSION

Saving civilization will be a huge undertaking. Niebuhr makes the case that a new philosophy of history must support a healing social praxis. An idealistic Metahistory infused with an incipient historical realism controls the narrative of *Civilization*. The mission statement of the previous generation of Social Gospel activists declines in Niebuhr's writing from a unqualified confession of faith to a more conditional affirmation: "Civilization may be beyond redemption; but if it is to be redeemed a religiously inspired moral idealism must aid in the task."(238)

*Civilization* is, as I have tried to demonstrate, is a more coherent book of intellectual discovery than the historians of twentieth-century American religion and society have led us to believe. Metahistorical themes provide the book with its theoretical unity; redeeming civilization is Niebuhr's practical focus. That it contains only anticipations of the classic Moral Man-Immoral Society formula does not render it an incoherent work. (One can imagine Niebuhr's positions in *Civilization* would serve a less adventurous thinker for a lifetime.) The coherence of *Moral Man* lies in the power with which it spoke to twentieth-century Christians and secular realists in the midst of the Depression. But the power of *Civilization* to do something of the same was not lost on a generation of dissenting idealists. Albert Schweitzer, preoccupied in his own way with saving civilization from a remote African outpost, wrote the young author an encouraging and congratulatory letter.41

Niebuhr positions the new vision of history as an authentic alternative to sentimental and cynical views of human destiny. It aspires to be a mediating construction, transcending the perceived contradictions of naturalism and absolute idealism—a philosophy of history grounded in hope without optimism, in realism without despair. But, Niebuhr's theory of the past was too
affirmative of human progress to be proffered as a simple alternative.

To successfully effect the transition from a "sermonic interpretation" to a "realistic interpretation" of modern and contemporary history, Niebuhr must fully exploit both dramatic modes of irony and tragedy as well as the two schemes of social explanation. Historical realism requires that the welter of events be colligated into an intelligible narrative. The truth criteria of coherence and adequacy demand a high degree of "clarity" and "correspondence." The war is in important respects unintelligible in Niebuhr's exposition. World War I is strikingly unlike the paradigmatic cases that Niebuhr treats in his narrative of revitalization and secularization. Instead, the war appears more like an anomalous experience and an inexplicable fact. In other words, it seems to have an inner moral meaning that "irony" and "tragedy" so conceived do not quite capture. A web of causes exists that cultural "secularization" does not satisfactorily explain.

In the opening section we described the unity of Metahistory—the apparently seamless weave of metaphysics, myth and dramatic sensibility. Whitehead's ontic vision (with a boost from James' pluralism) seems to support the Niebuhr's conceptions of irony and tragedy. The "purpose," "resistance" and "ideal possibilities" of being in general have their counterparts in human being. In other words, cosmic indeterminacy is translated, on the human plane, as moral autonomy; cosmic inertia as moral drama. The pattern of human action presumably refracts the larger cosmological one.

However, there is a remarkable hiatus between the dramatic modes and the Whiteheadian metaphysical vision. The primary difficulty is with Niebuhr's notion of tragedy. It does not help that there is no well-defined relationship between irony and tragedy, so we have to look for "tragedy" as it is implied or connoted in the text. First of all, tragedy of the sort that Niebuhr claims is revealed in the story of Jesus' crucifixion seems pale. In the romantic view of
the cross, which I suspect is implicated in at least part of Niebuhr's theological imagination. Jesus and his heroic followers transcend the world of Roman injustice and reconcile the empire to God in the wake of the resurrection.\textsuperscript{42} This version of tragedy does not convey the horror of historical "catastrophe" as fully as he would like. In his interpretation of the central biblical symbol, tragedy is too closely conjoined with triumph, defeat with victory. There is too little an interval of meaninglessness, terror or judgment. As Langdon Gilkey points out, it is extremely difficult "to explicate helpfully the tragic character of historical existence, in terms of Whitehead's conception of a creative and orderly advance into novelty." Process philosophy may support a progressive Metahistory, but certainly not an apocalyptic one.\textsuperscript{43}

The narrative of "conflict and compromise," while helpful in disclosing Niebuhr's early ironic sense, sheds no light on the tragic. The narratives of unintended consequences of papal internationalism and the Puritan reformation, which function as exemplary events or paradigm cases in \textit{Civilization} are not terminated by tragedy. If the processes of revitalization and secularization in Western history have generated contradictions and conflicts leading to wholesale violence—we might think of the crusades in the case of papal internationalism, or of the English civil war in the case of the Puritan revolution—such conflicts are wholly absent from Niebuhr's narrative sketches and shed no historical light on the meaning or the causes of World War I.

Turning to contemporary history, Niebuhr strains to make his theology of the cross as tragic as the horrendous events of the war and its desolate aftermath. What he criticizes in liberal theology, applies equally well to his own: "The war itself was a disheartening revelation of the moral obfuscation of modern religion when dealing with the tragedies of history."\textsuperscript{208} The Metahistory of \textit{Civilization} fails to disclose possibility of a moral evil or a suffering beyond comprehension of the liberal theological or historical imagination. In the wake of the Great War,
according to Niebuhr, there are only more contradictions, a piling up of new ironies giving way to a new round of tragedies. There is no sign of redemption on the horizon of the story of post-war Europe—only bitterness and ruin. A cross thus "staged" on a processive and progressive universe lacks an eschatological depth commensurate with the dawning era of total war and totalitarianism.44

If World War I is an anomalous experience in terms of its symbolic significance, it is also a difficult fact to explain. Niebuhr seems to want to explain the war as a phenomenon of cultural secularization, in terms that would conform to the general “conflict and compromise” pattern. Niebuhr explicates the new realism in history in such a way that true progress, ever contingent, is bound to the destiny of a rejuvenated sectarian movement. History is the story of a provisionally obstructed but ultimately triumphant providence acting through a faithful remnant. But the war is not an overtly religious event, and he does not try to explain it by reference to historical analogies such as the Crusades or the English civil war. Moreover, Niebuhr seems unconvinced that the brokenness of the West will be quickly healed by the religious revival of an influential elite or the masses.

In fact, he turns to a structural theory of secularization to explain the war—the “impersonal” growth of a highly differentiated Western society composed of competing nations and classes. Significantly, Niebuhr’s idea of progress as freedom does not included the political and economic organizations of ordered liberty and equality. Yet in a modern world of great social complexity and even greater moral need, these organizations that norm and distribute social power, must be part of the politics of personalism. Small-scale, spiritualized cells of free personalities will not be enough. The institutions of democracy—parties, interest groups, public opinion, courts, constitutions, and legislatures—are marginalized in the narrative, discredited by nationalism and war.
In the main, the narrative passages of *Civilization* combine to form a narrative of hope. Progress as freedom is the substance of Niebuhr's historical narratives in *Civilization*, the marrow of his style. The goal toward which all human history tends is the "perfect ethical freedom" symbolized in the kingdom of God—perfect social harmony and the equality, justice and peace that issue from it. "The hope of an ethical society" is depends upon the partnership of ethical religion and spiritualized moral reform.(242) Generally speaking, the idea of progress toward the goal of social harmony seems more probable to the self-professed "tamed cynic" in the 1920s than at any other period during his long tenure as a leading American thinker.45 Typically, his justification is pragmatic: to affirm the contingent possibility of progress—the very basis of human hopefulness—is to stem the loss of confidence in human potential and providence and so to arrest the "moral bankruptcy" of the West.(237)

With liberal or Whig historiography, *Civilization* shares a progressive metanarrative. On the whole the pattern of history points to human progress. It presupposes a pattern of advance, or a hierarchy of solutions, associated with the idea of civilization's ascent. The major epochs, or stages, of Western civilization signify the growth of freedom: the religious emancipation of Christendom; the political enfranchisement of the era of democratic revolutions, and the coming socio-economic liberation. Both Anglo-American Whigs and German idealists embraced the outlines of such an interpretation.

However, if the idea of progress as freedom (and the ideal of personality) survived in *Civilization*, it was because Niebuhr, in his own estimation, presented it in a radically revised form. Stripped away were its evolutionary underpinnings and any sense of automatism. The voice of William James resonates in Niebuhr's early declarations: through moral rigor man may "defeat the real in the name of the ideal in history." Progress, or the "creative process," was not natural; it occurs exclusively through moral agency and its surrogates—love and self-sacrifice.
"Yet only by such sacrifices can man prove the reality and potency of his creative will."(48)

Nevertheless traces of despair haunt the same narrative passages. The lessons of War demonstrate the failure of Wilsonian and secular liberalism. The proclamation of a spiritual victory on the horizon, after the Great War, has a hollow ring. Yes, metahistorically speaking, all things were possible. But historically, even the most impressive victories have been followed by inevitable compromise and defeat. Niebuhr doubts. He is disturbed by the thought that progressive spiritual forces will be powerless to breathe life into the bones of Europe ("the West may be beyond redemption"); that on the tragic stage, the politics of personalism are impotent.

In *Civilization* we find the first account of Niebuhr's reading of the dialectics of modernity, with special reference to modern philosophies of history. The swing between the cynical world-historical views (the "reaction from Hegel to Marx")—both characterized by historical determinism and the mystification of power—bodes ill for the future of Western society.(203) In formulating the problematics of history as he does in *Civilization*, Niebuhr traverses his own dialectics of Enlightenment, albeit in Christian idiom, between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. The model of progress as the achievement equality through ethical freedom (based upon a reinterpretation of personalism of Whitehead and Troeltsch) gives way to the model of progress as the achievement of equality through political power (based upon a reinterpretation of materialism of Marx). He would thus risk in the 1930s the very moral cynicism and historical determinism that he cautioned against in the 1920s.
"A TRAGIC REVELATION": POWER AND HISTORY IN MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY (1932)

INTRODUCTION

Five years after the appearance of *Does Civilization Need Religion?* Niebuhr published what he would later refer to as his "first major book," *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). *Moral Man* is still described as "a book of uncommon genius." Indeed, it was a landmark by several measures. It marked the author's formal break with the liberal idealism that informed so much of his first book. *Moral Man* was the most important product of his self-described "Christian Marxist" period, during which his thought anticipated aspects of Latin American liberation theology of the 1960s and 1970s. One Niebuhr scholar summarizes it this way: "The proper course of action for a Christian in this hour Niebuhr finds in the creative synthesis of Christian realism and Marxist realism." From the intellectual ferment on the political left,
Niebuhr appropriated "the collectivism and the catastrophism of Marxism"; from the theological neo-orthodoxy, he borrowed the concept of original sin and the idea of the "limitations of human nature."

*Moral Man* also represented a crucial step toward Niebuhr's emergence as one of the twentieth century's leading political philosophers of power and conflict. More specifically, as a "study in ethics and politics," the book signaled the maturation of his polemic against liberal democratic capitalism and the effort to put forward a authentic socialist alternative. Several chapters of *Moral Man* were devoted to an evaluation, philosophical and historical, of the three principal social justice traditions and their disparate methodologies: revolutionary violence, parliamentary socialism and non-violent resistance. The book signified a kind of Popular Front reconciliation of the varieties of Left-leaning praxes of "coercion," or what today we might term strategies of empowerment. As such, *Moral Man* marked a monumental shift from an earlier Social Gospel politics of personalism to a religious socialist power politics.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze and critique Niebuhr's view of history as manifest in Book Two of our trilogy. To be sure, *Moral Man* is a largely synchronic treatment of the social problem—flatter, historically speaking, than *Civilization*. But under the surface of the text, we observe in the 1932 volume a profound change in the less visible diachronic dimension of his social criticism. If "political realism" is the goal, historical realism becomes an active partner in its achievement. A generic Marxist scheme (i.e., a history of revolutions) supplants the earlier Troeltschian perspective (i.e., a history of religions). The theme of Christianity and the civilization-renewing roles of sectarian movements is but the faintest gloss on the margins of *Moral Man*. The historical field is now composed largely of the huge, impersonal structures of society and monocausal agents of change. The consensus of scholarly opinion regards *Moral Man* as an intellectual breakthrough, in which Niebuhr establishes his
now classic positions on political morality. It is "the end of a nagging inner debate" and a "parting blast at liberalism." According to Langdon Gilkey, Niebuhr develops themes regarding power and morality in *Moral Man* that would establish his "fundamental position from thence onward" through both Marxist and centrist expressions.48

Some of these same interpreters suggest that the dilemmas encountered in *Civilization* are resolved in *Moral Man*, and at one level they are. In 1932 Niebuhr develops central insights regarding power and the norm of justice—the core of his political realism—that will outlive the hyper-tragic and Marxist stylings.49 But I concur with Charles Brown when he writes that Niebuhr "moved well beyond [Civilization’s] themes." Of particular interest to this study, is the fact that Niebuhr would move beyond the book’s historical perspective. Indeed, I shall argue that he was compelled to do so given the inner tensions, if not outright contradictions, of the dramatic and radical modes in which these prime political and historical insights were cast.50

The two lines of inquiry laid out in chapter one of this study will be pursued here: the critical analysis of the form and content of Niebuhr’s philosophy of history.

First, on the level of narrative form, Niebuhr’s writing between the decade of the Depression and the postwar decade "gradually moved in the interpretation of history from the category of ‘tragedy’ to the motif of ‘irony.’"51 Looking at an earlier period, I see a transition going the other way. I have argued that in Book One (a swan song of old-style Social Gospel idealism) the predominant narrative mode is irony, with intimations of a civilization-wide reconciliation of social forces. Book Two, composed during the gloom of the Depression, makes the transition to a full-blown tragic interpretation, laced with premonitions of large-scale, future social conflict. The latter work may be properly read as Niebuhr’s effort to retell the story of Power writ large in the narrative of the human history—or, as Simone Weil once characterized it, "force as man’s instrument, force as man’s master."52

Second, on the level of the content of the narrative, a significant area targeted for
criticism is the liberal theory of history and idea of progress. Although history is not the object of lengthy reflection in *Moral Man*, the critique of the idea of progress is closely connected to the primary thesis. Niebuhr expresses the matter this way: Individual and social egoism "is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony." (xii, my emphases)

However, Niebuhr is not a skeptic with regard to the idea of progress in the 1932 volume. Instead, the concept receives new content. In *Civilization*, he sets his bearings by a cluster of concepts sociologist Robert Nisbet associates with as the "progress as freedom" tradition, specifically social progress born of spiritually inspired "ethical freedom." In *Moral Man*, progress is defined in terms of Nisbet's "progress as power" tradition, replacing the religious liberal's wary optimism with the Christian Marxist's near-term pessimism. The history-of-religion perspective is displaced by the history-of-revolution point of view. The content of the narrative consists of the people's power to leverage "the progress of the equitable distribution of physical and cultural goods" (1) and the advancement of a new equilibrium of social forces. The presumed story of the West is that of its epochal advancement toward an ever more egalitarian social order.53

The following analysis of Niebuhr's theory of history is divided into four sections, which reflect the several levels of narrative structure in the text. The outline of chapter two parallels that of chapter one. Section one treats his approach to Western tradition of eschatology as Metahistory, i.e., the symbolic forms of historical interpretation. Section two deals with the social theory that Niebuhr brings to empirical History, especially his new explanation of the role of power in social change. Section three focuses on his Christian-Marxist schema of periodization and progress.

Finally, section four reflects on the actual narrative line of *Moral Man*. Critical analysis
of the historical themes of Moral Man culminates in this section on narrative proper, focusing on the duality of fate and freedom, "nemesis" and "fullness." We shall inquire into how these themes ambivalently play themselves out in Niebuhr's representations of modern and contemporary history. The ideal of ethical freedom and the goal of moral progress are muted but still present concerns in Moral Man. However, the politics of personalism is now accommodated to a more radical agenda, reflecting the despair and anger of the Depression. Niebuhr candidly urges communities of conscience to adapt themselves, in concert with the working class, to the new political techniques of coercion rather than the old politics of pacifism and persuasion. Strikes, boycotts, civil resistance, and (possibly) selective violence are the order of the day.

Furthermore, the notion of the conversion of the individualist culture of capitalist society to the collective Good is traded in for the idea of redistribution of material goods, for the achievement of an "equilibrium of power" in an irremediably pluralist society. In the new Christian-Marxist phase, as in the earlier religious liberal phase, the nation-state and democratic institutions are marginalized in Niebuhr's analysis—not as imperfect extensions of personalism, but as ineffective tools of redistribution.

**TWO VERSIONS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TRADITION**

As in Civilization, Niebuhr in the pages of Moral Man continues to re-envision history through the exploration of metahistorical forms—imaginative paradigms sourced from the great mythic and dramatic narratives of the Western canon. These are the biblical and classical story forms into which the contents of ethical, political and historical discourses are poured. Moral Man, as he expresses it in the subtitle, is a book devoted to the seemingly timeless subject of "ethics and politics." Yet his moral arguments are constructed with the help of perspectives borrowed from the philosophy of history and dozens of historical illustrations. To borrow an
image that we shall find in *Reflections*, the mythic and dramatic elements of *Moral Man* are "woven" into the fabric of Niebuhr's narrative of the moral dilemmas of modernity.

In *Moral Man* the metahistorical forms are reduced to two: biblical apocalypticism and Marxist historical materialism. One is theocentric and pacifist; the other anthropocentric and activist. These two streams of Western eschatological tradition share the basic themes of egalitarianism and catastrophism. But they diverge crucially on another fundamental theme—the notion of human agency and responsibility, or the idea of praxis. As a Christian ethicist, Niebuhr is committed to the normativity of the biblical paradigm of salvation history, yet he critically reflects on the "ambiguity of religion." He proposes a reconciliation of the two types of eschatological expressions, a synthesis of Marx and the prophets, that presumably would overcome the "ambiguity" of the original tradition and, importantly, compose a new narrative paradigm.

In Book Two the typology of metahistories shifts therefore from the cynical/sentimental (or realist/idealist) categories that we encountered in Book One. The newly posited metahistorical types are the "religio-ethical" and the "religio-political," corresponding to the "purely ethical" ideals of Apocalypse and the secular "political ideals" of Revolution.

**THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND THE MYTH OF APOCALYPSE**

There is more than a hint of new enthusiasm for the subject of history in *Moral Man*, almost certainly born of contact with recent developments in continental neo-orthodox theology with its theocentric emphases and the renewed interest in *heilsgeschichte* from that quarter. Apocalyptic movements, we learn, have their source in an order radically different from ordinary history and the power-seeking kingdoms of this world. Eschatological causes are otherworldly, theocentric, having their symbolic origins in the deepest recesses of the human conscience in its
encounter with the corruption of history and the God who transcends history.

Biblical apocalypticism is enlivened by a passionate egalitarianism. God's kingdom is one where all persons are equals, and none oppresses the other. The apocalyptic seer dreams a "dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society." The prophet sees a "vision prompted by the conscience."(21-22) Nevertheless, there is a transhistorical or ideal aspect to the vision of equality. Niebuhr declares the order of love and justice is wholly transcendent to "the compromises, relativities and imperfections of historic society."(61) The apocalyptic kingdom of God exists in radical contrast to the natural, political, and technical processes which shape mundane history.

Even so, the "religio-ethical" stream of the eschatological imagination exhibits a passion for history. The dynamics of world history are conceived of in provisionally dualistic terms with good and evil as two antithetical forces at work in human destiny. The prophetic concern for the future and with the ideal of brotherhood gives meaning to the temporality of human passage. It envisions of time of the ultimate reconciliation of God with the world. "[O]ccupied with the absolute from the perspective of the individual," the apocalyptists are "nevertheless capable of conceiving an absolute society in which the ideal of love and justice will be fully realized."(60)

Prophetic religion is also animated by an attitude of catastrophism—the hope of salvation through divine judgment, through the violent overthrow of the world's sinful order.(62) It is "the peculiar genius" of the apocalyptic seer that while he views "the millennium in this-worldly terms," he harbors few illusions about reality of conflict in history.(61) The way is narrow. Few of the mighty would relinquish power and position voluntarily. The new society would come in the final instance by a miracle of God's catastrophic reckoning. "In the imagination of the truly religious man, the God, who condemns history, will yet redeem history."(62) The Magnificat serves as a model of this revolutionary style of prophetism. Mary's utterance regarding the "casting the mighty from their seats" perfectly expresses her prophetic
belief in the "moral defeat" of the unjust and powerful.\textsuperscript{56}

The final feature of the ancient Judeo-Christian eschatology that distinguishes it from its modern Marxist counterpart is its thematic pacifism. As opposed to Marxism, prophetic religion is driven by a passive moral vision. Embracing the "millennial hope," the prophet awaits God's future. If she takes action, it is to exhort her neighbors to acts of repentance. Princely powers will be overthrown—morally, by means of witnessing, fasting and prayer.\textsuperscript{(156)}

**MARXISM AND THE MYTH OF REVOLUTION**

Marxism, the preeminent "religio-political" movement in modern history, embodies the second stream of the eschatological tradition. Taking his cue from Tillich's secularization thesis regarding the "mythic" dimension of Marxism, Niebuhr approaches Marxism as a secular, anthropocentric religion. "The Marxian imagines that he has a philosophy or even a science of history. What he has is really an apocalyptic vision."\textsuperscript{(155)} The metahistorical content of Marxism, with its dual emphases of catastrophism and egalitarianism, is lifted directly from biblical salvation history. Like the prophet, the "proletarian" is activated by a vision of a social equality. "The modern communist's dream of a completely equalitarian society is a secularized, but still essentially religious version of the classical religious dream."\textsuperscript{(61)} Similarly, the "religious quality" of the proletarian hope was also attested to by stress upon the idea of redemption through judgment. The liberal imagination "does not see the new society emerging from catastrophe," but the Marxist does.\textsuperscript{(62)} The communist believes that "salvation will come out of catastrophe."\textsuperscript{(169)}\textsuperscript{57}

Judeo-Christian and Marxist eschatologies part company, however, on their respective stances with regard to human agency and social praxis. The proletarian asserts the exclusive efficacy of the working class to induce large-scale, or structural, social change; whereas the
prophet passively awaits the kingdom with prayer and fasting. The revolutionary, in concert with
industrial workers, actively takes history into his own hands. He, too, dreams of casting the
mighty from the seats of power—politically, by means of coercion. Aggressively seizing the
tactical means at his disposal, he asserts his long dormant strategic force against the inordinate
power of the privileged. Driven by "hunger, vengeance and holy dreams," he acts on the basis of
class solidarity and class struggle to create a more universal form of social justice, to destroy the
old and build the new.(157)

Although Marxism is treated as an example of the political cynicism and hyperrealism in
the earlier book, Niebuhr makes a selective appropriation—domestication, Marxists would say—
of radical insights into a nascent narrative paradigm. He would risk error in the effort to borrow
truth from his opponents:

Since the political defeat of the mighty is more verifiable in historic terms . . .

than their moral defeat, the religio-political dreams of the Marxians have an
immediate significance, which the religio-ethical dreams of the Christians lack. .

. . . [S]ince political ideals are more capable of historic realization than purely
ethical ones, the Marxian dream is more germane to history.(156)

Anticipating in several respects liberation theology of the 1960s and 1970s, the proposed
merger of Christianity and Marxism happens first at the level of Metahistory, the fabrication of a
new theology of history. The ambiguity of Judeo-Christian mythos is overcome in synthesis.
Niebuhr emphasizes the passivity of the theocentric tradition. Making spiritual preparations for
God's intervention in history is contrasted with the activist, power-seizing tendencies of Marxist
eschatology. The apocalyptic tradition is, indeed, lauded for its vision of egalitarian justice and
the realism of its cataclysmic imagination. But in the final analysis, apocalypticism is too
transhistorical. Marxism offers a necessary corrective.

Derived from metahistorical sources, the ideas of "equal justice" and "catastrophe," are subsequently imported into his narrative of modern and contemporary history. Paradoxically, in making ancient apocalyptic compatible with the historical concerns of modern Marxism, Niebuhr is able to represent empirical history in more naturalistic terms than in Civilization. For maximum realism, however, Niebuhr adds still another ingredient—tragic emplotment—to the narrative mix.

**Metahistory and Tragedy**

As indicated in the previous chapter, there is an unexamined relationship between Metahistory and emplotment—what Niebuhr terms the "dramatic" dimension of religious myth—in the writings of the 1920s and early 1930s. The tragic sense in Moral Man gives expression to Niebuhr's urge to represent "realistically" the conflicts between good and evil in history, that is, to portray conflict in a non-melodramatic manner. From the myth of the Apocalypse and the myth of the Revolution, Niebuhr draws out the implicit dramatic elements of the Christian-Marxist paradigm and recombines them to form a narrative paradigm to re-emploit the course of Western history.

Many of the traditional elements of tragedy make their appearance in Moral Man: conflict and suffering, reversal of fortune, virtuous but flawed protagonists, moral dilemmas, defeats, enormity, revelation, and tragic compassion. But, simultaneously, there appears a distinctively Niebuhrrian mode of historicizing tragedy. Central to the story of mankind and the tragic account, according to Niebuhr, is man's perennial quest for social justice. The whole of "history is a conflict between human character and impersonal fate."(155) In the Niebuhrian dramatic conception, like that of Hegel, universal history is usually a struggle between two
parties embodying sets of opposing values of relative merit.

In *Moral Man*, the conflict also takes on a Marxist coloration. Every regime, past and present, is ruled by an oligarchy who game the system, so to speak. Rising social classes are perceived as competitive threats to the prevailing order. Conflict is joined when a group, embodying emergent values and social structures and energized by moral aspiration and class resentment, challenges the status quo in the name of justice. In short, revolution is depicted as the liberation of the oppressed, the destruction of the dominative power of the oppressors. However, history is not, as Niebuhr is wont to reminds us, a morality play. The values of the oppressed's "freedom" (i.e., from "the painful burden of injustice") and the oppressor's "solidarity" (i.e., through coerced order) are relative things.(175)

Revolutionary conflict throughout *Moral Man* is represented as tragic drama. He writes suggestively of revolutionary "heroic action," inspired by absolutism and imbued with a "noble sense of tragedy" when its titanic efforts fall short of the intended goal of social justice.(199) If there is a single source of anti-utopianism in the 1932 volume, it is found in Niebuhr's profound sense of tragedy. In tragedy, social antagonists consciously put the larger community in jeopardy. "[S]ocieties risk the lives of millions when they gamble for the attainment of the absolute" (199) and so deliberately imperil the prevailing distribution of social goods. Since the risk is reckoned, there is an element of self-sacrifice in the social struggle, a "tragic choice" between the greater good or, alternatively, the lesser evil.

The tragic quest for social justice is rendered, preliminarily, in an ironic mode. This playful incorporation of irony into tragic emplotment is the quintessential Niebuhrian dramatic twist. All tragedy is predicated on some prior communal transvaluation of values. As he would put it in *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), "the transvaluation of the hierarchies of history in the Kingdom of God" is the source of social contradiction and, consequently, conflict.59 The transformation of a group's natural will to live into an imperial will to power occurs via an unconscious fault,
which misdirects the human desire to do good. Irony supplies the meaning of political contradiction.

Tragedy yields enormity (hence its compatibility with the themes of apocalyptic and revolutionary catastrophe). In Niebuhr's hands, the tragic situation eventuates in the defeat or destruction of the old order—and the partial corruption of the new. Tragic conflicts of power are experienced as a "sorry fate" (2), as a the judgment or "nemesis" of social failure.(1, 199) This is the significance of Niebuhr's declaration that French despotism, as a consequence of revolutionary vengeance, "is a tragic revelation of the inadequacies of the human resources with which men must try to solve the problems of their social life."(17, my emphasis) Tragedy supplies the meaning of political conflict.

Lastly, there is a revelation of the tragic law that governs human affairs: mankind must learn to live within the limits of fallible human nature, to seek justice within boundaries of the human condition or lot. Pain of the tragic situation is transmuted into a profound moral and aesthetic pleasure: "[A] sense of noble tragedy may compensate for the defeat."(199)

Furthermore, "[t]here is a beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions."(276-277) Appeals to the gods of optimism, reason, or the marketplace for deliverance are futile. The lessons of history demonstrated that injustice is successfully resisted when fought with patience and humility—and without expectation of ultimate triumph. This is the extent of deliverance within the tragic framework.

All the discernible Niebuhrian story elements come into play in the following passage, illustrating his contention that human history is not a sentimental tale of the triumph of right over wrong:

Perhaps it is man's sorry fate [judgment], suffering from ills which have their source in the inadequacies of both nature and human society [delusive group psychology], that the
tools by which he eliminates the former should be the means of increasing the latter
[irony preceding tragedy]. . . . [I]t may be that there will be no salvation [no appeals to
false gods] for the human spirit from the more and more painful burdens of social
injustice [problematic quest for justice] until the ominous tendency [the recurrent story
form] has resulted in perfect tragedy.(2)

THE LAWS OF POWER AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Metahistory and History are bridged by social theory in *Moral Man*, a linkage similar to
the one we observed in *Civilization*. In chapter one of our study, Niebuhr's cultural theory of
social change was described at some length: the processes of religious revitalization and
secularization and their role in the renewal and decline of Western society. In *Civilization*
Niebuhr argues for the revitalization of the West through a new social monasticism. In brother
Richard Niebuhr's terminology, Reinhold's theory was one of "Christ and culture in
transformation"—a conversionist approach to civil religion and civil society. Metahistory is
bound to History via Troeltsch's ironic religious sociology.

By contrast the social theory of *Moral Man* has undergone a remarkable change. Marx
has overshadowed Troeltsch. The public sphere, conceived of as a realm of power, is profoundly
de-sacralized. Value-laden processes of religious and cultural transformation are replaced with
value-neutral processes of power equilibria and disequilibria. On one level Niebuhr wholly
affirms the secular conception of the social and historical field of investigation. *Moral Man*
represents the end of the "transformative dream," according to Fox. "It was time for reforming
the hard massive structures of the public realm, not for cultivating the spirit."62 The new theory
exemplified "Christ and culture in paradox"—based upon a forthright acknowledgment of the
"dualism" between the gospel of love and the law of justice. Metahistory (the eschatological
paradigm of catastrophe) in this perspective is linked to History (the tragic narrative of class struggle and revolution) through a Marxist-inspired theory of power realism.

Power is put at the center of the unfolding story of the stages of humankind. Niebuhr stresses the moral ambiguity of power as an instrument of both justice and injustice. On the negative side, however, he observes with great foreboding the destructive tendency of force in history. He lines up with the liberal historiographical tradition, specifically with the realism of Henry Adams. (In one recent commentator's view Niebuhr's "account of the genesis of power" surpasses the liberal tradition in which he works.) Adam's dictum "power is poison" is cited to confirm that social orders at their termini eventuate in injustice.(6) On the positive side, Niebuhr upholds the constructive value of power: it leverages all large-scale structural progress. The strong presumption of Moral Man is that, at the turning points of history, justice is realized in emergent social orders through the assertion of force against force.

The theory of social power found in the pages of Moral Man might be described as consisting of a Niebuhrian base and a Marxist superstructure. Generally speaking, Niebuhr's approach to social power is a premodern moral approach to power, the foci of which are hubris and nemesis. The agents of power in history play on a classical chessboard. The game of power, as set up by Niebuhr, would be largely recognizable by Thucydides or the Greek historian's English translator, Hobbes. But in a concession to Marx, Niebuhr paints the chess pieces black and red, for capitalists and workers respectively.

All told, Niebuhr commits himself to seven generalizations regarding the nature and destiny of power, which are deduced as corollaries from the Moral Man-Immoral Society thesis. Moreover, power is a casual concept. These insights into the ambiguity of power function as important law-like generalizations for history—what I term the "laws of power," or "power axioms." Sociological explanation is thus consistently brought to bear on problems of historical interpretation and narrative. These laws are given even more forceful expression in Reflections
on the End of an Era (1934), as we shall see in the final chapter.

After each Roman numeral below, I shall paraphrase a Niebuhrian law of power. This is followed by a brief explication of the central idea behind each law. Each enumerated section then concludes with a citation (with added emphasis) of Niebuhr's most succinct statement of the pertinent law.

I. Spiritual movements in history are relatively powerless to effect political change. In Moral Man Niebuhr marginalizes Troeltsch's idealist theory of society and history that figures so prominently in Civilization. Religion is rather more rigorously compartmentalized to the intimate sphere of society. The influence of spiritual movements on public structures of society is now regarded as indirect at most. The anthropology of the older religious idealism persists, however; indeed, the justly famous Moral Man-Immoral Society thesis is predicated upon the Kantian moral postulate. The individual is a morally free "personality," endowed with "reason" and "religious imagination." He or she is "self-transcendent," endowed with a capacity to rise above his or her social milieu. Furthermore, the individual is able to envision and willingly affirm the universal good, an agency empowered to imagine and build alternative futures.

But the central moral postulate is reformulated in ways that have "realistic," significance for both politics and historiography. In 1927 text it is the natural expansiveness of the spirit that is the determinative force in Western society. By contrast, in the 1932 text, the limit of the spirit in history is the important lesson. With Troeltsch, Niebuhr still affirms that "[t]he doctrine of the transcendent worth of all human personality does tend to become transmuted into the idea of the equal worth of all personalities." However the results, according to his 1932 view, are merely fragmentary historical successes in the political realm. Although spiritual movements "will always be a leavening influence in social life; the political structure of society cannot be built upon their achievements." With this first law of power the Troeltschian idea of history as
religion is effectively buried, never to be resurrected in Niebuhr's later thought. History and politics are now largely secular fields.

II. All large-scale collective behavior is driven by power seeking and self-interest. The Troeltschian religious concept is replaced by a classical balance of power theory with a distinctly Marxist spin. History is a secular field because history is about groups—large groups—whose natural "egotism" thwarts ideal (as opposed to instrumental) ends. (xx) In Book Two, the new theory is supported by the second feature of the Moral Man-Immoral Society thesis: "a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and social groups." Individuals may be "able to consider interests other than their own" and occasionally act upon them. But this achievement was "more difficult, if not impossible for human societies and social groups." (xi)

Risking moral and historical determinism, Niebuhr elevates power to the principal object of historical interpretation and narrative. The universality of collective self-seeking is expressed in a second law of power: "the persistence of irrational egotism, particularly in group behavior, [will] make social conflict an inevitability in history." (xx)

III. The power of elites leads to the internal domination of society. The Marxist-influenced social theory makes two law-like generalizations about collective power. Social stratification, the internal distribution of power and the predilection of power elites to rule over their fellows, is extensively analyzed in Moral Man. Modern societies are stratified almost exclusively in terms of class relations. Social goods are allocated along the lines of the ownership of the means of production, a trend magnified by machine technology. Besides the sentiment of group loyalty, there is another social bond of equal, if not greater, importance: the "coercive" force of social hierarchy. This is the dominative power of a small elite to suppress internal pluralisms. (3)
"Peace" is the initial product of the process of social cohesion; "injustice" is its byproduct. Social elites naturally "create injustice in the process of establishing peace."(16) In possession of strategic power, the elite that controls a given society "arrogates an inordinate portion of social privilege to itself."(6-7) Society's "common mind" or "general will" celebrated in liberal theory is, in reality, the unjust mind or will of the most powerful minority.(4)

So closely identified are phenomena of the formation of social power, the emergence of social ranks and the imposition of internal order that Niebuhr could collapse the entire process into a third power axiom: "any kind of significant social power develops social inequality."(7-8)

IV. The internal power of elites leads to a society's external aggressiveness. Social solidarity, in other words, in hierarchically arranged societies is advanced through belligerence towards outside groups. The concept is elaborated with the help of William James idea of the "paradox of patriotism," still laden with its original anti-imperialist meaning.64 The ethical imperative of Moral Man (in this case the "common man") is satisfied in the individual's self-sacrifice and identification with the larger social entity (tribe, race, nation or empire). However, the inner sense of obligation is misdirected. The individual's act of solidarity unconsciously expresses Immoral Society's will to power. Since group membership endows the ordinary citizen with more power than he or she would possess in isolation, the act of filial self-giving is ironically "transmuted" into one of collective aggrandizement. By a kind of multiplier effect, inter-group aggression is fueled from the bottom up.

The idea that expressions of collective solidarity are the root of all in-group/out-group feeling in history is captured in a fourth law of power: "the whole history of mankind bears testimony to the fact that power which prevents anarchy in intra-group relations encourages anarchy in intergroup relations."(16) The chief example of the paradox of good citizens giving energy and critical mass to evil social movements is the bellicose nationalism of 1914-1918.
V. The collective sense of justice is the most important factor in historical challenges to dominant power. Two ethical norms now obtain in Niebuhr's social theory as it appears in the text of Moral Man: an ultimate, or transhistorical, norm of love exemplified by personal altruism; and a penultimate, or historical, norm of justice exemplified by the pursuit of group self-interest. The "justice" Niebuhr has in mind is distributive justice, consisting of "the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods" in society, including power. (1) This is what is meant by the term "equal justice."(55)

As a historical norm, justice is both rational (something that reasonable women and men can articulate from the prompting of conscience) and, more importantly, empirical. The conscientious individual, often the intellectual, can inaugurate social change by her vision of social perfection. But the people's injured sense of justice is an even more powerful motivator for social change. The common person, the guy at the bottom of the social pyramid, "robbed of his privileges" resolves to take concrete action to rectify his "disenfranchisement" with a mixture of conscience and covetousness, righteousness and resentment. (11) This is the sense of the fifth law of power: Throughout history "the rational ideal of justice operates both in initiating and in resolving conflict." (32) Such history as one finds in Moral Man is story of epochal strides toward the "desired end of justice and social cohesion" through democratic and now socialist revolutions.

VI. Conflicts of power generate new social equilibria in history. Classical balance of power theory is another source of Niebuhr's reflection on the laws of history. In this tradition, new social equilibria in history occur when one power is successfully resisted by another. These challenges, whether internecine tribal contests or Machiavellian schemes, produce temporary tactical advantages. For history demonstrates that the only value of such arrangements is
producing momentary truces, since they are eventually subverted into pretexts for future
aversion. In a concession to Hegel and Marx, Niebuhr affirms that the real struggles in history
are struggles for "justice" on an epochal scale.

Niebuhr, however, stands Marxist realpolitik on its head. The assertion of power
in the pursuit of a radical "equal justice" is raised to the status of normative praxis. This insight
inspires him to craft a sixth power axiom that recognizes the inextricable amalgam of power and
principle in movements for social justice: "All justice in the less intimate relations is political as
well as rational... established by the assertion of power against power." (31) He finds
confirmation for this generalization in the convictions of the original power theorist of the West,
Saint Augustine of Hippo, whom he quotes: "To the end of history the peace of this world... must be gained by strife." (256)

VII. Unjust power causes its own revolutionary destruction. The Marxist theory of revolution is
evident in the Niebuhrian analysis of the ineluctable fate of collective power—the eradication of
unjust power in violent upheaval. Power and authority is tolerated for unity's sake, "[b]ut it
grows to such proportions that it destroys the social peace of the state by the animosities which
its exactions arouse." (11) This, history's contradictory dark side, is especially manifest in the
modern nation, where the modes of technological production have penetrated the fabric of social
relations. "The sharpening of class antagonism within each modern industrial nation is
increasingly destroying national unity." (112) Loyalty to class fast erodes patriotic feeling, and
the consequent social fault lines witnessed at home and abroad portend unparalleled civil and
international conflict. (49-50) A nation's ruling class "can hardly permit the logic inherent in the
present situation to take its course." (112) But "justice through revolution," met by stiff
resistance from conservative forces, is a probable future for civilization. (169)

Summing up this phenomenon, Niebuhr offers a seventh law of power: "All through
history one may observe the ominous tendency of power to destroy its very raison d'ètre."(11)

With Marx, then he affirms the predictability of this trend. "Inevitable" is the word used again and again to describe the destruction of inordinate social power by its victims.

HISTORY IN THREE STAGES

Before we proceed to an examination of the narrative content in Moral Man—how mythic and dramatic elements are woven into his retelling of modern and contemporary history, how the laws of power explain recent political developments—it is necessary to take a brief look at Niebuhr's account of periodization and progress.

For two millennia metahistorical vision and historical narrative have been freely and creatively combined in the Western imagination. Within a myriad of historiographical permutations, students of the theory of history ascertain certain thematic continuities. One such continuity pertains to the enduring problem of periodization and progress. As Nisbet and Lowith point out, a common thread spans the centuries, joining the ancient Augustinian framework with the modern Marxist approach to the concept of the stages of human development.66 The business of synthesizing classical Christian and Marxist views of history in Moral Man is predicated on this commonality.

Such permutation and continuity can be observed in Niebuhr's approach to periodization and progress between Civilization and Moral Man. The religion-friendly theories of the ethical progress of the West of Troeltsch in Civilization have been replaced in favor of aspects of Marx's revolutionary theory of the advancement of mankind's material equality in Moral Man. What has not changed is that Western history is still represented in three stages, in which each stage
unfolds according to a pattern of "conflict and compromise."

The first two eras, previously defined by their religious content (medieval Catholicism, early modern Puritanism), in Civilization are now defined more exclusively by their economic and political content (landed feudalism, merchant capitalism). The direction of causation has undergone a striking shift. In Book One he predicts that humankind stands of the brink of a third era, namely, a new ecumenical era based upon a spiritual radicalism (the "new monasticism"). Likewise, Book Two presupposes the dawning of a new stage for humankind, in this case a socialist era marked by profound structural change or revolution. An era's political and economic content defines its religious form, rather than vice versa.

The analysis of social stages has been influenced, however indirectly, by Ferdinand Tonnies' seminal community/society distinction. The main difference between agrarian societies of the past and contemporary civilization was not the existence or non-existence of class relations for "all societies," past and present, "perpetrated and perpetuated social injustice" and unmerited privilege.(142) Rather the difference lay in the character of the dominant social power. A comparison of "organic," pre-technical societies and modern "mechanical" or "technical" societies highlights the acceleration effect of technology upon the stratification of society in terms of economic class. The locus of power in the modern and contemporary eras is the proprietary control of "machine production."

Offered here is an interpretative alternative to Marx's economic determinism. (The community/society distinction is surely a dividing line between orthodox Marxist interpretation and Niebuhr's heterodox approach.) Power takes various forms. The content of the form may be "priestly," "military" or, as in modern history, "economic." Indeed, earlier stages of Western society had shared characteristics: they were power-driven and hierarchical but non-economic in character. Niebuhr avers that Marx reads the economic motives and technological imperatives of the modern and contemporary eras into previous stages of society, a critique that had gained
currency in non-Marxist interpretation. What is of primary importance is the growth of social power, its hegemonistic purposes, its causal role in conflicts. Of secondary significance is the form it assumes.

For critical radicals of the 1930s, such as Niebuhr, it is precisely this interpretative tactic that relativizes Marxist historical interpretation and makes integration possible. It creates room for non-economic forces in the theory of human passage.67

In Niebuhr's hands, the Marxist theory of history becomes a moral one. Though somewhat submerged in Moral Man, the idea of the "moral logic" of history, which first appears in Reflections on the End of an Era, already informs his historical interpretation.68 There is an irreducible moral dynamic in the formation and deformation of the successive societies of Western civilization. So he discerns in the rise and fall of feudal and bourgeois civilizations the providential governance of history, the outworking of a penultimate "law of justice"—first empowering, then judging successive regimes.

However, the path of power is not merely cyclical. From the narratives in Moral Man there can be little doubt that Niebuhr believes that over the course of history new, more just social orders do emerge out of the conflict between "moral" and "immoral," "just" and "unjust" forces. With the prophets he affirms the transmundane goal of history as perfect equality, when the law of love will govern all human relationships. Concurrently, he asserts that only a "miracle" could accomplish such a state of affairs.(82) Although mundane history unfolds as a "projection of nature" (xii) and a "jungle" (81), the ongoing struggle for social justice yields progressive though imperfect results.

Niebuhr's avowal of progress in Moral Man is nearly lost in a stream of rhetoric poured out against Enlightenment optimism. Progress in the political sphere would always be an offspring of power and principle, and as such tainted with ambiguity. Throughout the text there is an implied Long March from medieval feudalism to bourgeois liberalism to contemporary
social egalitarianism. The road of humanity's ascent is neither a circuit nor a straight line nor Vico's upward spiral, but something much more contingent and fragmentary. One imagines a broken mountain trail, or as he puts it in *Reflections*, the "tortuous routes" of social progress.

**NARRATIVE OF MODERN HISTORY**

The practical test of Metahistory is the narrative of ordinary History. Niebuhr endeavors to validate his new philosophy of history in terms of its capacity to elucidate the moral import of past and current events, to construct in outline a kind of public history for fellow radical activists, both Christian and secular. As in chapter one of this inquiry, I shall concentrate the critique at the level of narrative proper, following up on Niebuhr's suggestion that the test of metanarrative is to found in "moral meaning" it narrative discloses. The narrative portions of *Moral Man* incorporate all of the metahistorical resources and social theory elements discussed in sections one through three. Large sequences of modern and contemporary history are subject to two related kinds of dramatic treatments: an ironic narrative of unintended consequences and a tragic narrative of catastrophic fall.

The themes of individual freedom and collective fate thus give shape to the text. The themes of freedom and fate—as well as the concepts of tragedy and power that support them—serve to focus the reader's attention on conflict in history. But as the interpretative lens through which contemporary history is read, the themes bring a certain amount of conflict to the text, as I shall try to demonstrate. Do these overarching concepts adequately, "factually," disclose the movements and counter-movements of contemporary history? Does Niebuhr's narrative suggest a way out of the predicaments of the historical present?
Whereas modernists of every stripe made increasing appeal to the findings of the social sciences, Niebuhr in an old-fashioned humanist way appeals to History (not Metahistory) to articulate "lessons" or find wisdom for the present. Rather incongruously, Niebuhr turns to no less an authority on the lessons of history than the father of the English Enlightenment, David Hume. Niebuhr writes that "[i]t is difficult to read the history of mankind and arrive at any other conclusion" than Hume's own that egotism and power are the perennial hallmarks of politics, not moral progress.(141) Contemporary social scientists, oblivious to this stubborn "fact" about collective life, are attacked for their uncritical progressivism and, by extension, their presentism.

*Moral Man* is Niebuhr's second reading of the dialectics of modern history, of the necessity and ambiguity of the both liberal and radical traditions, "the great promise and the great peril" of modern revolutions.(169) The narrative line of the 1932 volume continues the anti-modernity theme of *Civilization*. As the embodiment of the Enlightenment "ethic" of self-interest and the "harmonies" of economic progress, bourgeois society is subject to relentless criticism. But as an expression of these same economic themes, communist society is similarly judged. The point of the narrative is how "little progress has been made" toward the goal of equal social justice. Historical representation in Book Two is but a reprise, transposed in a different key, of the "conflict and compromise" pattern of *Civilization*.

The historiographical references in *Moral Man*, like those of *Civilization*, evince a remarkable erudition. Since 1927, Niebuhr has mined a wealth of secondary sources to sketch his own first-draft history of the historical present. What strikes the reader is how effectively he presses history—and the purported realism of the average historian's chronicle—into the service of his own passionate and present-minded politics. His historiographical preferences can be safely described as anti-imperialist in international affairs and anti-capitalist in national ones, thus his appreciation of Trevelyan's history of nineteenth-century British empire building and Beard's and Parrington's studies of the American revolution.
The most pronounced difference with the *Civilization* text is this: Niebuhr in *Moral Man* does not delve into the ideational background of the modern capitalist era, the Puritan clan. Instead, the historical field of the latter volume consists solely of the clash of power-motivated behavior of collectives within Western capitalism's sphere of influence (classes, nations and empires).

The narrative passages, or historical sketches in *Moral Man*, are a combination of commonplace leftist generalization and extraordinary personal insight. On the one hand, Niebuhr offers up the rather moralistic perspectives of the progressive and Marxist interpretations of the day, satisfying his satiric appetite for unveiling hypocrisy. The "privileged" in each generation array their power in strictly conservative modes, resisting social change from below. On the other hand, the story line is reshaped by the uniquely Niebuhrrian moral complexity, or dramatic twist. What we learn from the past is the "inability" of the human spirit, including revolutionary spirits, "to conform collective life to individual ideals." (9) Because revolutions, liberal or communist, depend on coercive methods, they are ultimately mastered by the instruments of force. Ironic complications and tragic dilemmas negate both liberal and Marxist successes.

Described in broad narrative strokes are four crucial moments in modern and contemporary history: the age of democratic revolutions, nineteenth-century Anglo-American imperialism, the recent history of communism, and the World War I and its aftermath.

The age of transatlantic democratic revolutions offers analogies to contemporary political situation. In the manner of progressive historians, Niebuhr demythologizes the bourgeois content of the American Revolution and liberalism, its animating ideology. In scattered passages he treats the rise of liberal democracy and the cultural contradictions of democratic capitalism as rooted in the "illusions" of the Enlightenment. (xxv) "The Age of Reason was social injustice and medieval traditions and superstitions so intimately related to each other, that
it was natural to conclude that the elimination of the one [superstition] would result in the abolition of the other [injustice]." The faith of the *philosophes* that universal education would "result in an ideal society" has been a notable failure.(234)

Making use of Beard and Parrington's now classic studies, he highlights the economic interests of the Founding Fathers. As the primary beneficiaries of a limited revolution, they show half-hearted zeal for substantive "equality." Niebuhr reads into the ideology of Madison and Federalism a post-revolutionary irony. James Madison's writings on the differences of human faculties and the Federalist's hostile reaction to Jeffersonian egalitarianism and frontier populism exemplify the *conservative* rationale for the inequality of property.(113-114, 132) So Niebuhr debunks the modern world's first "classless" democracy.

Nineteenth-century British and American imperialism comes in for like treatment, and offers similar lessons. For what is Anglo-American colonialism if not an experiment in bringing the blessings of liberal democracy and capitalism (not to mention Christianity) to the backward races? The tale of British imperialism, in this perspective, is the story of aristocratic and commercial class aggrandizement abroad, managing the Crown's mercantilist policies. "[T]he class character of national government is a primary cause, though not the only cause, of [nation's] greed."(111) Minor aristocrats and business middlemen living abroad leverage their bureaucratic and commercial functions initially into property and social prestige, and subsequently into political privilege and power.(113)

The analysis of class hypocrisy of imperial policy is suggestively ironic. British ruling-class ideology bounces between Gladstone's bourgeois naivete and Churchill's aristocratic cynicism. Acting in the name of universal ideals in Africa, the Levant and the Far East, the British ruling classes help themselves to the material wealth of the colonies, rising to the heights of international power in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the United States, President McKinley piously echoes evangelical sentiments to urge America to save and civilize
There is also a distinctively tragic element in Niebuhr's brief narrative of Anglo-American imperialism. The export of liberal values and institutions to their colonies and protectorates has led to the positive administrative and humanitarian accomplishments. This much he concedes. But the same will to mission, so to speak, has also brought oppression and the consequent revolt of subject ethnic peoples. "It is questionable whether [Britain's] achievement is great enough to make the attainment of international justice, without conflict, possible."(109) Imperialism, furthermore, contributes to unrest of factory workers back home. There is also something of the English historian Temperly's sense of the tragic dilemma, in Niebuhr's sketch of British and American colonial policy. Temperly believed that if it were a sin for the British masters to stay, it should be an even greater sin to go. Niebuhr, the anti-imperialist, clearly reverses the emphasis, believing that if it is perhaps wrong to go, it will be a monumental wrong to stay.

If the American Revolution (and the attempts to disseminate its democratic ideals in former Spanish colonies) falters in ironic contradiction, the French revolution comes in for a surprisingly Burkean judgment. Nowhere is revolution more necessary, yet more ambiguous, than in France. The story of "democratic sentiment" against "traditional absolutisms" is not a tale of romantic heroism (as radicals would have it) Rather it is a story of terror and catastrophic fall, the causes of which are explained by the law of the self-destruction of power. In a remarkable statement that presages so much of Niebuhr's later interpretation of history, he writes: That "the French revolution could turn so quickly into the nightmare of Napoleonic imperialism is a tragic revelation of the inadequacies" of human nature.(17, my emphasis) Egalitarianism transforms itself into despotism, as the effort to export revolution eventually leads to destruction on a continental scale.

The Napoleonic conflicts are the first modern wars, that is, ideological conflicts with
totalitarian aims. Niebuhr implicitly links the French and communist revolutions and the meaning of their dramas, but his analysis of the two spectacles is incomplete.

In a book by an aspiring Christian radical, we should expect that his vignette of the history of socialism in *Moral Man* would provide an edifying counterpoint to the history of the liberalism. But the author defies expectation. Socialism, too, is subject to a narrative of unintended consequences. Since the late nineteenth century, the forces of socialism, both parliamentary and revolutionary, have carried on the Western revolutionary tradition at home and abroad. The parliamentary socialist movement is represented in England by the Labour party and their Fabian mentors and on the continent by the social democrats and their theoreticians, Karl Kautski and Eduard Bernstein.

Conflict with the forces of private property and privilege has led to success in terms social welfare reforms—and incongruous compromise. A co-opted parliamentary leadership vitiates practical efforts at structural reform, underscoring the Niebuhrian theme of the contradictions of power, even socialist power.(223)

The hour of socialist decision (to use Tillich’s term), according to Niebuhr, is a time filled with tragic apprehension. It is the West's genuine misfortune that the Great Transformation to a collectivist economy (the *summum bonum* of radicalism) has, regrettably, occurred under the aegis of Soviet Union. Communism under Stalin already shows discernible abuses of power. "If the Russian [communist] oligarchy strips itself of its own power, it will be the first oligarchy in history to do so."(193) Russia stands poised at the threshold of profound contradiction, hubris before nemesis. Just as Niebuhr fails to draw a line between the French and Bolshevik revolutions, so he stops short of applying the law of the self-destruction of power to the case of Soviet Union.

Shifting his gaze back to Western Europe, Niebuhr saves some of his most impassioned rhetoric and deft analysis for a brief description of the aftermath of World War I. The post-war
misfortunes of the West are traced through its most ignominious events—including the mendacity of the Treaty of Versailles, the vengeance of France, the injustice of reparations, ineffectiveness of the League of Nations and the hypocrisy of Woodrow Wilson's diplomacy—with an eye toward the prospect of revolutionary change in the present.(19, 105) Economic meltdown is a global phenomenon related to the nationalistic and economic causes of the war. (Oddly, the world depression—the presupposition of the text—is seldom its explicit subject.)

The labor-friendly social responses of Britain's and Germany's advanced economies to the challenge of war and depression will be models for the rest of the West because these nations have yet to fall into Russia's contradictions. "[T]o predict the future of revolution in Western civilization, we would do much better to make Germany, and possibly England, rather than Russia, the basis of our prediction."(187) All this would be rather commonplace were it not for Niebuhr's unremitting sense, unique among dissident commentators, of the fatedness of post-war disorder. Moral and rational resources adequate to solve large-scale problems are simply unavailable to collective man. "What was not possible in 1914-1918 when the world was submerged in dishonesties and hypocrisies . . . will hardly become possible in a decade or a century, or in many centuries."(107)

CONCLUSION

That Moral Man was a sensation in liberal political and religious circles is well documented in Fox's biography. Today Moral Man has become, along with Human Nature and Destiny, the most widely analyzed book of the Niebuhr canon. Scholars are right to regard it as a "ground-breaking book." What are identifiably classic positions on power and justice first emerge in these writings. Moral Man is a search for a useable past to shed light on how best to "destroy" capitalist "special privilege" and "unequal power" in the quest for "equal justice" in the
"technical age." I shall confine my concluding remarks to some observations regarding the problem of internal consistency in Niebuhr's representation of the past in *Moral Man*.

What is groundbreaking in *Moral Man* is fourfold:

First, six years prior to the publication of *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr elevates tragedy to the normative principle of historical interpretation. In Hayden White's terms, he makes a subtle but all-important shift of perspective, placing in the foreground of the historical scene the realities of conflict while relegating to the background the possibilities of reconciliation. It is a shift from a soft-edged irony to a hard-edged tragedy. Second, the concept of power and power politics is significantly secularized. Fox aptly speaks of *Moral Man* as signaling the "end of the transformative dream." It certainly is the end of Niebuhr's earlier politics of personalism and revitalization. Power is now characterized as inert concentrations of large-group egotism—to be arranged and rearranged, poised and counterpoised, in the interest of "equilibrium" and "equality." Third, the norm of justice, critical to Niebuhrian political realism and historical theory, is reconceived in a secular mode, evoking a natural law theory with a Marxist spin. Justice and the delineated laws of power, in turn, render service as formal elements of a quasi-revolutionary interpretation of history. Fourth, the three-stage division of Western civilization common to Marxist historiographical conventions is assumed. Feudalism and capitalism are understood as unitary and hierarchical "social systems." Deep structural changes occur by way of ironic contests of power and, ultimately, by "catastrophic" or "tragic" revolutions.

The main tension, if not contradiction, of Niebuhr's historical consciousness is felt at the juncture of the concept of freedom and fate, personality and power, as problematized in *Moral Man*. The sphere of the spirit's maximum effectiveness in history is constitutionally limited to person-to-person relationships or small-scale communities, in which religion can add "wholesomeness to the more intimate social relations." These are the realms where disinterested love can achieve perfection, realizing pure social harmony—and justice as an
unintended bi-product. This is the proper domain of progress as ethical freedom, celebrated in
Book One for its expansiveness, now narrowly encompassed in Book Two. Niebuhr writes that
it is almost “inevitable that the religious spirit of love should lose some of its force in proportion
to the size of the communities which profess it, the impersonal and indirect character of social
relations in which it operates, and the complexity of the situation which it faces.”(73)

But history is more than the story of the formation of anti-social power, as Niebuhr
himself concedes. Contrary to the law of the relative powerlessness of religious movements, he
describes in Moral Man positive "tendencies" and "trends" in the direction of new, more just
social orders in response to the growth of human conscience over time. In several contexts,
Niebuhr extends the implication of his central moral postulate, to imply that men and women are
free to innovate in history to arenas beyond the intimate spheres, transcending even the first
order entities of history. He argues that "[s]ociety must always remain something of a jungle,"
but quickly adds that even power-oriented secular society "might be brought a little closer to the
kingdom of God if only the sensitive spirits could learn . . . how to use force in order to establish
justice."(81, my emphasis) In a similar vein he writes that the new breed of Social Gospel
activists must avoid the pursuit of social perfectionism. They must rather try “to make the forces
of nature the servants of the human spirit and the instrument of the moral ideal.” In this way he
returns to the book’s passionate theme—the ethical and rational use of force to leverage structural
change in order that “a progressively higher justice and more stable peach can be
achieved.”(256)

At this intersection in the argument, an internal inconsistency is revealed. Niebuhr
affirms that religious or idealist communities are able to realize progress through ethical freedom
in the intimate spheres, to incarnate pure justice on the small scale. However, when these same
communities avail themselves of instruments of social power, they are shortly caught up in the
same compromises, injustices and tragic cycles as other less scrupulous historical agents who
traffic in power. He declares the incompetence of religious or idealist communities in the larger public sphere because the same quality of ethical perfection is not realized. Throughout his career Niebuhr would offer countless cautionary tales about Moral Man becoming entangled by Immoral Society in his quest for social power. The saints' resort to power would seem to be what Niebuhr proscribes, after an inspection of the historical record. He warns of “the danger to social life of this impartation of the absolute value of human life” to historical projects, citing the examples of the Spanish conquistadors and the messianic nationalism that precipitated World War I. (65, 66)

But the use of force as a means of leveraging historical transcendence and social reconstruction is exactly what is prescribed. In the critical passage cited above, he suggests that religiously- and ethically-informed movements can enjoy a competence beyond the intimate spheres, that an authentic and wide-ranging social reconstruction can be achieved through the instrumentality of force toward the rational goal of equal justice. Moral Man has potential to overcome Immoral Society. Against Marxist critics of “otherworldly” religion, he offers the example of the Puritan revolution and what it was able to accomplish using force for the sake of justice. “The power, by which the middle classes defeated the landed aristocracy in the political and economic battles of the past three centuries, was partially derived from the puritan sense of the religious worth of the personality and the spiritual character of secular pursuits.” (65, my emphasis)

The internal inconsistency in his historical theory argument can be fairly reduced to this: Past religious or idealist movements are impugned both for defaulting on their historical mission in the larger public realms and for compromising their apostolate when they make use of the mechanisms of coercion in civil society as citizens and rulers in periods of reformation. Niebuhr’s argument about the essential aims and competencies of religious personalism in its transcendental purity seems all the more puzzling, when we reflect on what Niebuhr is try to
accomplish with this book. He is making the case for the ethical use of the various forms of coercion, of power, (civil disobedience, parliamentary socialism, revolutionary direct action) in the hope of renovating a Social Gospel-type movement as the proper response to the demands of justice in a vastly complex society.

Which is the story of human destiny? Moral Man overcoming Immoral Society? Or Moral Man overcome?

On the level of historical form, or style, let me offer a brief critique. Niebuhrian tragedy as expressed in the 1932 volume is historicized as the recurrent story form. Much of the book contains compelling narrative, and works as far as it goes. In Moral Man there is really only one story, namely, the tragic. But the tragic form, like any form, can misrepresent the complexities of a situation. Overused or stylized, it can become a false analogy for both the historian or policy maker.

There is, in short, a sort of scarcity of alternative drama amid the plenty of tragic imagination in Moral Man. Historian Donald Kagan, among others, has warned of "unreasoning from analogies" and has defined historical competence as the ability to deal with a pluralism of past/present parallels. Of the danger of the single analogy, Kagan writes that the "best defense against this is to multiply the number of analogies" which bear on the problem.73

On the level of historical content, or substance, another criticism seems in order. The search for the pattern of the past and the possibilities of the future, leads Niebuhr to traverse the dialectical themes of Western development. In 1932, he characterizes the political dialectic (the "dilemmas of freedom and power") as the choice between "the Scylla of [capitalist] anarchy and the Charybdis of [communist] despotism."(21) The challenge for the "disillusioned generation"—and the exhausted Social Gospel movement—is to negotiate a middle course that would strategically synthesize the insights of Marxist realpolitik with the body of truths of historic Christianity.
In like manner, the shift in Niebuhr's historical consciousness is striking, as he explores a vastly different idea of progress. In terms of historical theory, he attempts to steer a mediating course between from the idealist's view of progress as the achievement of perfect ethical freedom and Marxist's of progress as the violent seizure of the state and society's productive enterprises. Progress, in this version of history, awaits the empowerment of Moral Man, as he masters the political skills of non-violent resistance, parliamentary rule, and, ultimately, revolutionary direct action.

But *Moral Man* is also a work of a mind very much in transition. His normative conceptualizations of political power (and its historical correlate, progress as power) are conditioned by these temporary, Depression-era modes of thought: the "inevitability" of the revolutionary scheme and the fatedness of the tragic sensibility. It is my view that the pale cast of determinism created by the marriage of these two modes of thought is greatly at odds with the implication of his central moral postulate that men and women are free at critical junctures in history to shape their larger institutional existence. As a historical construction, it would prove untenable. The text of *Moral Man* gives evidence, in my view, of Niebuhr theorizing in troubled water. He is exasperated with the varieties of liberalism, including the Whig tradition of progress as political liberty. Eventually, in *Reflections on the End of an Era*, he will despair of the norms, institutions and narratives of democracy—including those of parliamentary socialism. There we shall find him caught up in the cross currents of the Enlightenment's radical legacy and resigned to the fate, in Conor Cruise O'Brien's phrase, "of attempted Utopias culminating in Terror."
"THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CIVILIZATIONS":
REVOLUTION AND HISTORY IN
REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF AN ERA
(1934)

INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), Niebuhr's fourth published book, was written shortly after Moral Man. An expansion of the Taylor lectures delivered at Yale University in spring of 1933, the book's essays were modestly described by the author as "merely tracts for the times." Reflections is Niebuhr's third reading of the dialectics of modernity. It was a volume full of passionate musings on history's big themes: the course of political power through time, the fate of capitalist civilization, and the role of religion in the dawning collectivist era. During this period, the subject of history assumed center stage in Niebuhr's analyses and polemics. Whether
discussing democracy or socialism, religion or ethics, he addressed every topic in new, sometimes startling historical perspective. The parts and sum of his argument were vividly colored by his deepening sense of the relevance of the past, presaging his sophisticated treatments of history in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943) and *The Irony of American History* (1952).

Niebuhr's biographers and students have noted his growing interest in Metahistory and History in *Reflections*. Paul Merkley, for example, has recorded Niebuhr's increasing "enthusiasm for Marxism," especially its mythological and dramatic interpretation of proletarian destiny. Richard Wightman Fox has written that Niebuhr "took the high ground of Spenglerian judgment: civilizations rose up and then decayed, history was cyclical, western bourgeois society was crumbling from within." Langdon Gilkey has gone so far as to call the cycles of history "the book's main theme." In the preface Niebuhr himself writes: "Perhaps [these reflections] will help a little to shake the easy faith by which modern liberalism lives and through which the actual and tragic facts of contemporary history are, in the opinion of the present writer, obscured."(x, my emphasis)

Niebuhr underwent profound intellectual changes during this period that would forever mark his reflections on the past and present, embarking upon the passionate quest for an ultimate kind of political and historical revisionism toward realism. At the time he described this phase of his spiritual and political journey as "Christian-Marxist." The hyphenated moniker was startling for the times, representing, as he himself realized, the improbable effort to wed Christian orthodoxy with radical socialism, or in his words "to combine political radicalism with a more classical and historical interpretation of religion."(ix)

At this stage in the study we can begin to consider the development of Niebuhr's vision of past, the stratum of his historical consciousness. In *Civilization* Niebuhr envisions Metahistory in largely idealistic terms. A nascent historical realism, however, impinges upon the
Whiteheadean concept of a progressively evolving cosmos. Borrowing Troeltsch's history of religion scheme, he identifies human progress as the advancement of ethical freedom. An ironic narrative of History depicts successive waves of sectarian reform movements—movements that are inevitably involved in the unintentional corruption of their original idealism. Nevertheless, already in the text there are intimations that Niebuhr is at odds with his own earlier version of critical idealism and personalist politics.

Four years later in *Moral Man*, Niebuhr's theology of history is recast into largely tragic terms, reinforced with metahistorical images drawn from prophetic and Marxist sources. The overhauled *Metahistory* gives scope to an impressive 'thirties-style social realism. The sphere of History is represented as secularized, almost Hobbesian realm of power, fraught with internecine conflict. The narrative of History takes on a history of revolutions approach, which renders the past in terms of the struggle between oppressed and oppressor, power domination and power equilibrium.

I term Niebuhr's historical viewpoint in *Reflections* as "tragic and revolutionary realism" (or shorthand, "tragic realism"). That is to say, the historical perspective of these essays is significantly controlled by a fatal vision and a radical politics. Both these thrusts are captured in his declaration that "more realistic souls" such as himself and his readers "behold the tragic spectacle of a civilization slowly destroying itself."(47) These two terms—"tragic" and "revolutionary"—form the historical-philosophical counterpart of the ideology of Christian-Marxism.

*Reflections* can be justly described as a book built upon a triad of inevitabilities: the mythic sense of *predestination*, the dramatic sense *fate*, and the cyclical sense of law like *predictability*. These are the three sources of the "illusion of fatality," to use a phrase of Raymond Aron, that permeates the Niebuhr's historical discourse during this time of troubles. I have organized this final chapter thematically in terms of the triadic forms of inevitability found
in the narrative passages of Reflections, passages so forcefully written over sixty-five years ago.

It is my belief that the philosophy of history which emerges from the pages of Reflections is a remarkably integrated, if unsystematic, one. The 1934 book climaxes a series of intellectual developments that we have traced from 1927. At each level of historical theory, Niebuhr attempts to resolve conceptual issues, as I have mentioned, in an ever more realistic direction—seeking imaginative coherence, factual correspondence, and practical implication within the tragic mode of interpretation.

Even so, important tensions exist between Niebuhr's vision of fate and his subordinate view of possibilities of freedom in history. The horrible events of the worldwide Depression and the passionate search for historical realism led to his representation of Western history as a series of dynamic yet closed social systems very much subject to deterministic and monolithic forces. These tensions create an important incoherence within the interpretative framework—between the inevitable catastrophes of collective power and the contingencies of democratic reform as an extension of personalism. The tensions play themselves out at the level of narrative proper.

In the following, I will attempt to analyze and criticize in detail the narrative structure of Reflections. The present chapter retains the arrangement and argument of the previous two chapters and the presiding rubrics: Metahistory and History.

On the level of metahistorical prefiguration (section one), Niebuhr develops a system of classifying the four dominant Western philosophies of history. The classification argues in favor of the necessity and the benefit of synthesizing biblical apocalyptic and Marxist dialectic, creating a viewpoint of viewpoints. Close inspection, however, reveals the ambivalence of the proposed synthesis.

On the level of emplotment (section two), Niebuhr elevates the tragic point of view to the very principal of historical interpretation. As the normative configurational mode, tragedy subsumes irony as a phase in the overall dramatic cycle. Like Aristotle, Niebuhr believes that
tragedy is the story form uniquely suitable to the mimesis of human action. He colligates the course of power in modern and contemporary history in terms of a royal "court drama"—conceived in social contradiction, maturing in hubris, and returning, full circle, in catastrophic fall. This potent image is presumably drawn from both classical and biblical sources.

On the level of social theory (section three), Niebuhr introduces the Spenglerian metaphor of the organic social cycle (of birth, growth, senescence, and death) to explain and predict civilizational change. The Niebuhrian laws of power, delineated in chapter two of the present study, survive in the 1932 text and lend nomic necessity to the concept of the cyclical path of force in history.

On the level of narrative proper (section four), the history-of-revolution perspective that informed *Moral Man* persists in *Reflections* and buries the history-of-religion framework of *Civilization* once and for all. It is here at the historiographical level that I shall focus the critique of the text. Niebuhr's dramatic modes of interpretation contribute an unmistakable stylistic coherence to the narrative of modern and contemporary history in *Reflections*. But the narrative reveals a deep ambiguity—a breaking point, really—in his account of progress in history in the face of the pervasive cyclical pattern. Niebuhr needs the persons, virtues, communities, and the story of freedom to give meaning to the idea of progress in Book Three. Progress as power is senseless, has no normative telos, when the original idea of progress as ethical freedom is so decisively pushed to the periphery of historical representation.

**COMPARATIVE MYTHS OF HISTORY**

Like other thinkers during the 1930s, Niebuhr explores at length the category of myth. His meditation on "Myth and History" (chapter ten of *Reflections*) contains his most important writing on myth and its relation to the interpretation of history to date. While Sorel explored the
relationship of myth and modern ideologies, Niebuhr endeavors to show myth as foundational to
the philosophy of history, to the task of constructing a new universal history.

Previously in *Civilization*, Niebuhr endorsed a critical appreciation of mythology as
Metahistory, emphasizing the sense-making role of myth in man's encounter with the confusing
moral "facts" of historical experience. Myth is a story that is neither a literal description of
events nor a logical explanation of their causes, but symbolic account of their "meaning." It is "a
vision of the whole which would give meaning to the specific events it seeks to
comprehend."(122) Using the metaphor of a loom, he characterizes the role of the mythic
paradigm this way: a mythology of history "may be used to weave meaning into the strands of
history."(124) Transposing Niebuhr's propositions in terms of contemporary narratology, one
might say that "event" and "meaning" are bound together through the mediation of myth-inspired
emplotment.

In a time of social turmoil ("the End of an Era"), man's sense of history's direction has
lost its clarity. Reminiscent of our own time of postmodern dislocation, Niebuhr's era of conflict
has bred a conflict of historical interpretations. In an effort to re-imagine history's symbolic
cohesion, he addresses the problem of pluralism in interpretation and, to a lesser extent,
perspectivalism.

Four mythologies of history, according to Niebuhr, have contended for
preeminence in Western historical consciousness: Hellenism, liberalism, apocalypticism, and
Marxism. Niebuhr casts these mythologies of history, or narrative paradigms, into types of
attitudes toward history and develops a classificatory scheme. The classification is bisected into
two broad categories—pessimism and optimism—each containing two subcategories. The
narrative paradigms are defined by the two positions at the extremes: ancient Hellenism and
modern liberalism. The former paradigm represents history as a scene of chaos, and its attitude
toward history is basically pessimistic. Meaning is transcendent to history. The latter paradigm
portrays history as the locus of an ultimate order and is at root optimistic. Meaning is immanently realized in human passage.

Although coherent in terms of "meaning," both Hellenism and liberalism as extreme attitudes toward history fail to meet the correspondence criterion of truth. Modern liberalism gives an "inadequate" account of the "facts" of moral chaos; ancient Hellenism (or Platonism) renders an "inadequate" account of "facts" of ethical progress. Between these polarities Niebuhr searches for a normative interpretative position, one that mediates between the extreme attitudes of optimism and pessimism.

Central to the agenda of Reflections is the task of creating a new narrative paradigm for the interpretation of universal history, one that is simultaneously "coherent" in terms of metahistorical meaning and "adequately" realistic with regard to the moral conflicts of lived experience. To this end he proposes, and partly elaborates, a novel Metahistory based upon a synthesis, or "compromise," of the mythic paradigms of apocalypticism and Marxism, the two eschatological streams of Western tradition. Articulated into a new philosophy of history, the new synthesis would offer an authentic challenge to the complacent illusions of the reigning liberal paradigm of progress.

**THE HELLENISTIC MYTH OF RECURRENCE**

Chronologically speaking, the first philosophy of history worthy of the name is the ancient Hellenistic interpretation. Located to one extreme of the philosophical spectrum, the Hellenistic view regards history quite suspiciously, narrowly focusing on the cyclical rise and fall of tyrants and city-states. This interpretative framework, according of Niebuhr, cannot give an adequate account of the meaning in history as a result of its preoccupation with the recurrent and unintelligible cycles of history. "In Greek thought the centre of life's meaning is always
found in the passionless forms of reason which are conceived as transcending history and to which the individual may escape from the confusion of history." (132-133) Human evil is an "inevitable" concomitant of human creativity through time. The Hellenistic perspective, though insightful of the threat or "nemesis" of history, was insensible to the promise or "fullness" of history.

Similarly Hellenism falls short of Niebuhr's pragmatic test of historical truth. He locates the Platonic Metahistory on the extreme (political) right of the spectrum, and asserts a historical connection between Platonism and social conservatism. (133) Christian orthodoxy, to take a prime example, transposes classical pessimism into the drama of personal salvation, i.e., the struggle of the individual for a faith which will liberate her or him "from the confusions of history." Evaluated in terms of the pragmatic criterion, Hellenism is but a rationalization for political fatalism.

**LIBERALISM AND THE MYTH OF PROGRESS**

At the opposite end of the paradigm spectrum is the modern liberal idea of progress. A product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, progress was a secularization of the eschatological horizon of Christianity, minus the ingredient of catastrophe. The *philosophe*, just as the early Christian, posits a Great Future and gives birth to immanent perspective of capitalism (and later liberal social democracy). The "mythology of progress" (123) envisions mankind's realization of the values of justice and peace not through the outworking of divine providence, but through the achievements of science, technology, and the unfettered calculations of the free market. "[H]istorical progress toward an ethical goal is portrayed as a gradual cumulation of individual triumphs of reason over matter until the whole of nature is subdued." (123) Although coherent within its own narrow terms, liberal progressivism fails Niebuhr's test of factual
adequacy, but for reasons opposite Hellenism's failure. Progressivism appreciates neither the
highest promise nor the basest threat of history. "There is no recognition . . . of the possibility of
catastrophe. Nor is the perspective high enough to discern the possibility of a new and more
perfect order in momentary chaos.(123) In the mythos of liberal capitalism, the meaning of
history will be immanently realized within history.

Niebuhr locates this myth on the (political) left of the metahistorical spectrum, and notes
that its more ardently bourgeois forms generates a kind of social utopianism. History through the
rise of the market economy and democracy is already a scene of redemption, "a pure triumph of
spirit over nature."(123-124) As the source of all forms of individualistic optimism, the liberal
idea of progress fails the pragmatic test for its implicit complacency toward fundamental social
ills.

**APOCALYPTIC MYTH OF CATASTROPHE**

Following the leads of Schweitzer and Barth, Niebuhr views Jesus' proclamation of the
coming kingdom of God as pure apocalyptic. As such, the New Testament myth is a strand
within Israel's larger prophetic tradition, notable for its singular focus upon the God's absolute
sovereignty and the belief in the imminent end of history. The eschatological time line is strictly
linear, progressing irreversibly from the past to the future through social contradiction and
conflict. All the contingencies of history work together to produce the establishment of
Yahweh's transforming rule of justice in Israel and the world. Apocalyptic is preeminently
catastrophic, suggestive of the possibility, and desirability, of a revolution in the affairs of the
earthly powers. Such a view is shared by apocalypticists of all eras: "With the prophets, with
Jesus and with the early church [the Christian sects of the disinherited] longed for the day when
the whole of history would be redeemed by a triumph of spirit over impulse and nature."(125)
The prophetic paradigm falls short of Niebuhr's adequacy criterion of truth: the idea that values of great and lasting worth—the “ideals” of the kingdom—can, and are, partially realized in the chaotic facts of mundane history. The myth of the Apocalypse is a mix of transcendence and immanence; meaning is beyond history—and yet inclusive of history. But the apocalyptic vision of history is enormously ambivalent on this point. Fixated with history's ultimate meaning, the prophets have difficulty in discovering real meaning or value in the welter of ordinary, sinful history. Apocalypticism was, and is, “too conscious of man as a source of evil . . . to trust in a man-made ideal society.”(126) How much meaning inheres in worldly events between the fall of Israel and the establishment of the messianic kingdom? Or between the resurrection and the parousia? Not much, according to the apocalyptic prophet.

Pragmatically speaking, apocalyptic is pessimistic regarding the moral efficacy of human agency in history, humankind's capacity for goodness. The myth of Apocalypse gives expression to theological determinism. It is a story of predestination as well as catastrophe. God will overrule human freedom and cupidity in future beyond the expected social cataclysm. History in the eschatological mode is "interpreted in terms of meaning even when the forces of history are not conscious of the end which they are achieving."(127) The method of history's transformation is therefore radically transhistorical even though the redemption of mankind is a historical goal. Accordingly, apocalypticism offers no political program, since the prophetic "spirit of resistance" discountenances the use of coercion. It "does not permit participation in the vengeance of history; for such participation involves the soul anew in historic injustice."(134) Apocalypticism, when imbibed straight, reveals practical implications that are too pessimistic, too fruitful of political passivity. In terms of Niebuhr's basic classification, the prophetic concern for social justice positions apocalypticism to the left of Platonism, but prophetic passivity places it to the right of Marxism.
THE MARXIST MYTH OF REVOLUTION

The Marxist myth of revolution is a secularized version of the apocalyptic myth of catastrophe. The myth of revolution fastens upon periods of violent social change and gives them meaning within the eschatological framework. Although Niebuhr studiously avoids the overuse of "class struggle" and "revolution," these terms have their Niebuhrian counterparts in his historical discourse. He refers to profound social revolutions through various surrogates, for example, a "judgment" on social evil (139), the "destruction" of a dying civilization (165) or simply social "catastrophe" and "disaster."(28, 195)

Classification helps Niebuhr to evaluate the truthfulness of the radical Metahistory and adapt it to his own heterodox purposes. Like apocalyptic, the Marxist stance toward history is a mix of world-affirming immanence and world-negating transcendence. "The Marxian mythology stands between the mythology of Christian sects and the faith of liberalism," sharing characteristics of both.(126) On the one hand, the Marxist was able to "affirm the moral logic of history"—the convoluted yet meaningful course of human resistance to collective injustice. On the other, "[t]he Marxian mythology belongs to the general category of Jewish apocalypticism in distinction to the Hellenistic interpretations of life and history," assuming as the Marxist does that profound social transformation occurs through cataclysmic rather than gradual change.(132)

The myth of Revolution is also a story of predestination. A common understanding of the inevitability of a Great Future is a parallel that goes to the heart of apocalyptic and Marxist mythologies of history.(130) "A force in history is assumed which makes for the triumph of man's highest social ideals, interpreted by the Marxian as that of equal justice."(127-128) Historical materialism exudes a kind of progressive determinism. It is a "faith that the 'objective' conditions of history support the moral purpose of the proletarian."(129) Thus, the revolutionary
cycles of history are not meaningless occasions of social violence. With each turn of the inexorable cycle, mankind is nearer to its destination of material equality.

The pragmatic implication of the mythic paradigm of historical materialism is equivocal; the determinism of Marxism has conflicting implications for praxis. The pessimism of the Marxist dialectic virtually nullifies the possibilities of peaceful "individualistic" action, the kind of action that presumably characterizes democratic capitalism. No other myth, as Niebuhr controversially asserted in *Moral Man*, so successfully mobilizes common men and women to heroic acts of self-sacrifice in concert with the working class. "The world-view of the proletarian is also optimistic. It is believed that a moral ideal will be completely realized in history." (194) Paradoxically, it is the morally problematic, coercive character of working-class action that accomplishes structural change for social justice.

**Synthesizing Marx and the Prophets**

The clear purpose of the classificatory exercise is to help Niebuhr build an interpretative framework out of the conceptual materials of apocalypticism and Marxism (an metahistorical ideal he would later term "authentic theism"), which would include and surpass both of paradigms while remaining faithful to the larger religious liberal tradition. Although eschewing the notion of a *rational* consensus in the philosophy of history, Niebuhr's theoretical ambitions are plainly constructivist. The new synthesis will achieve a comprehensive viewpoint of viewpoints—a distinguishing intention, according to postmodernists, of modernism. He acknowledges the invariable pluralism in historical interpretation, but at the same time aspires to a new universal history.

Although the nearest thing to an adequate mythology, ancient apocalyptic is not the exhaustive expression of the metahistorical ideal. It is, we are lead to believe, too transcendental
to fully embrace the immanent meanings of humankind's turbulent history. To obtain cognitive normativity it must appropriate insights of modern Marxism so that the constituent ingredients of immanence and transcendence, optimism and pessimism, are brought into proper balance and clarity of focus. "The Marxian does not share the liberal hope that an ethical ideal is easily achieved in history, nor yet the classical religious belief that only God himself can redeem the chaos of history and reduce it to harmony."(128) Marxism, it seems, is the de facto mediating ("stands between") position, offering insights (e.g., the concepts of class struggle and revolution) that would reinvigorate Christianity's historical vision and elevate authentic religion to a normative position in the classificatory schema.

Even so, the author's intention belies a classificatory muddle: Marxism belongs to two categories. There are statements that suggest a confusion, not to say a logical impossibility, regarding the execution of the synthesis. We read, for example, that are "important differences as well as similarities" between apocalyptic and Marxism (133); that the Marxist vision of history "stands between" liberalism and apocalyptic.(126) Yet he can claim opposite characteristics for the same Metahistory. Initially, we read that the Marxist myth "belongs to the general category of Jewish apocalypticism" (132); but subsequently he claims that Marxism belongs to the general category of liberalism because it is "optimistic."(194) Where exactly does Marxism stand? And what does this have to do with the commonality of Marxism and Apocalypticism around the theme of predestination?

The theoretical difficulty for Niebuhr in Reflections, it seems to me, is the problem of how to incorporate class conflict and revolution into a normative vision of history, while divesting them of the aura of mythic fatality. How, in other words, can one detach the historiographically useful colligatory and causal elements of the Marxist view of history from the sense of apocalyptic determinism, from the very eschatology that Niebuhr also is trying to affirm?
Mythic predestination is but the first component of a triad of inevitabilities. The proposed merger of the two streams of Western eschatological tradition, apocalypticism and Marxism, contributes significantly to the sense of determinism that pervades *Reflections*. Whatever Niebuhr's belief in this period about the ambiguity of Soviet power, the outlines of a new, hybrid Metahistory is affirmed. As we shall see, the exigencies of the "Christian-Marxist" narrative paradigm will dominate his retelling of modern contemporary history.

**IRONY, TRAGEDY AND THE DRAMATIC CYCLE**

The Niebuhrian sense of tragedy furnishes the second component of the triad of inevitabilities. As an element of the narrative structure of *Reflections*, tragedy forms a bridge, to use Ricoeur's image, between the metahistorical and historical planes. Theoretically, tragedy joins the predestination of revolutionary catastrophe with the predictability of the Spenglerian explanation of social change. Forging this link is a part of the strategy of historical revisionism toward realism.

In 1934 Niebuhr discourses at length on the subject of the interpretative power and contemporary relevance of myth for the understanding of secular history. For Niebuhr "drama" is immanent in myth. From mythology he intuitively unpacks dramatic elements, freely recombining them—emplotting them—into innovative story configurations. Thus "irony" and "tragedy" are the formal plot characteristics of myths, and are applied as interpretative frameworks to retell the ordinary events of history.

Irony and tragedy are also moral concepts, descriptive of inner value of public events. The "tracts" in *Reflections* are lengthy meditations upon the dramatic significance of public
events (and even those that occur in the private recesses of power) of the distant and recent past, communal offerings of civic meaning no less than plays of Aeschylus or Sophocles. It is the dramatic device of emplotment that "weaves moral meaning" into the narrative of contemporary history, mediating the implication of the Christian-Marxist narrative paradigm.

**IRONY: THE INNER MEANING OF POLITICAL CONTRADICTION**

One of Niebuhr’s most original contributions to historical understanding, according to Reinitz, is the application of the ironic mode of interpretation to history. Niebuhr historicizes irony, so to speak, by tracing the unfolding of human self-contradictions over time and through society. Ironic interpretation deals with the transmutation of social systems from hopeful beginnings to disillusioning endings; from creative power to despotic weakness. We may assume that he draws upon both classical and biblical resources for dramatic inspiration, although he cites neither in this context. Irony supplies the inner meaning of political contradiction.

There is, as we might expect, a Marxist coloration to irony in the 1934 book. Inherent in irony are the principles of Niebuhr’s social criticism. But it is imperative to recall Fitch’s observation that "[a]s far back as his Reflections on the End of an Era (1934) Niebuhr had an intimation that the real dialectic of history is not Marxian but ironical." Irony, like historical dialectic, is about perceiving collective moral contradictions. In Niebuhr’s hands, irony is a natural ally of the Marxist critique of ideology, including the unmasking of communist ideology.

A fairly stable definition of irony emerges in Reflections, as we can see from a comparison of the following passages describing ironic situations in history. (Notice the tendency to conflate irony and pathos):

It is a *strange irony* that a commercial and industrial civilization, which might
have had special reasons for being apprehensive about its vitality, should have been particularly optimistic. (1, my emphasis)

And:

With rather pathetic irony modern civilization proceeded to tear itself asunder in its conflicts between nations and classes while modern culture dreamed of perpetual peace. (14, my emphasis)

The first passage shows the ironic discontinuity—the surprising juxtaposition—between the bourgeois confidence and mood of pessimism growing among the working class and intelligentsia. The second passage builds upon the ironic theme of dreamt harmony and restless discord, suggesting that tragic violence invariably rocks social fault lines.

**TRAGEDY: THE INNER MEANING OF POLITICAL CONFLICT**

The tragic character of the human project is, to be sure, the dominant motif of Book Three, just as it was in Book Two. The ironic mode of interpretation in the later work is similarly subsumed under the tragic one; however, both are deployed to deepen the explanatory effect of historical realism. All the classic Niebuhrian tragic elements are in place. Tragedy supplies the inner signification of violent political conflict.

What is genuinely new in the 1934 volume is the introduction of a new archetypal tragic drama—the "court drama"—drawn, presumably, from both biblical and classical sources. The chief protagonist of court drama is the imperiled ruler or "oligarch." (This is the Immoral Man, the "man of power," encountered in *Moral Man.*) Court drama tells the story of the contest
between the ruler and the prophet (and behind the prophet, the people.) By the device of the court drama, Niebuhr emplots a host of historical conflicts.

The Marxist hue also suffuses Niebuhr's delineation of archetypal tragic situation. Through time societies become hierarchically arranged, dominated by a ruling elite, or "oligarchy." "Representative" oligarchs perform a custodial role in maintaining the original values of society, while securing their own disproportionate power and privilege. They thus become in time the "desperate defenders of the status quo."(121)

Court drama plays itself out in two acts. In the first act the regime of the oligarch is challenged by the prophet, who acts on behalf of cosmic justice. The oligarch ignores appeals to conscience and reason. He invariably succumbs to hubris, the arrogance of power. Spurning the call to repentance and peaceful reform, the imperiled ruler invites God's (and the people's) stern judgment:

In the final crisis the oligarch therefore defies the wise men and tempts fate. When he finds his reign suffering from a loss of reverence and prestige he attempts to maintain it by sheer power. Thus he increases the injustices and exactions of his rule and multiplies the social resentments which will ultimately prove to be the engines of his undoing.(34)

In the second act of the court drama, the oligarch takes defensive and repressive measures to preserve the old aristocracy, justifying his actions as a necessary expedient to avoid social dissolution. Contrary to the oligarch's intention, these measures provoke popular resistance and a democratic revolution of the people. The oligarch's vision of a "barbaric interregnum" is—tragically—realized. (Observe the role of the power, on both sides, in the progress of justice):
The fact that a moral judgment upon an outmoded society does not become effective, no matter how justified, until it is executed by an invasion of barbarians . . . gives plausibility and even a measure of justification to the moral pretensions of the men of power. The disintegration of any new society has the threat of a barbarian interregnum in it.(44-45)

The basic law of history is disclosed in the unfolding of the tragic drama. "At each new turn of history what has been covered is revealed."(142) What is revealed is the "the law of justice."(32) Niebuhr declares that "[i]t is not easy to discover a moral logic in history," but that "it is possible to discern the logic of an inexorable judgment upon evil."(139) He then partners the "law of justice" with the laws of power, which we encounter in Moral Man, that govern the social cycle, the rise and decline of political orders.

The Interplay of Irony and Tragedy: The Dramatic Cycle

The challenge for the interpreter of Niebuhr is to determine precisely how these dramatic devices, or modes of emplotment, interact in creative tension to produce plausible interpretations of past, to use White's formula. Again, I submit that the tragic motif in co-exists with the ironic motif in a superordinate manner, but with a special twist.

In Reflections irony and tragedy are more clearly revealed to be phases of a single dramatic cycle. The ultimate terminus of a large-scale historic process (e.g., the evolution of a particular stage of society) once set into motion, is "inevitably" tragic—what we have come to recognize the typical Niebuhrian move. The ironic situation is latent with tragic potential. The ironic situation is not **sui generis**; it is a temporary predicament, or impasse, whose contradictions harden into lethal conflict. The tragic mode lays stress on the fatefulness of the
ending: the destruction of a great political regime by means of violent revolution. There is no other story. Moreover, the articulation of a dramatic cycle is entirely consonant with Niebuhr’s construal of the Spenglerian metaphor of cyclical decline.84

SOCIETY AND THE METAPHOR OF DECLINE

The third level of the narrative structure concerns the content of the metahistorical forms: the "the first-order entities of history" (Ricoeur) consisting of classes, cultures, and civilizations. Niebuhr’s first task is to explain the unique organization of power in these entities and the behavior of power through time. Remember that he has cast off Troeltsch’s history of religions conceptualization of western society for Marx’s history of revolutions. Abstractly considered, then, the content of history is the progress of power.

It is at this level of historical conceptualization that we encounter the third source of inevitability in Reflections. Inevitability in this instance has to do with Niebuhr’s concept of the social stages of Western civilization. It is the idea of the life cycle of civilization, derived at least in part from his reading of The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler in the late twenties. Spengler’s historical theory is, in turn, based upon the analogy, or metaphor, of the physical and moral growth and decline of the human being. Society is a “person” (personified in the ruler or ruling oligarchy) who experiences life in distinct, predictable phases. This metaphor qua social theory is infused with the idea of historical inevitability, as Nisbet’s study of the role of the metaphor of “development” in Western historical consciousness has demonstrated.

At the level of civilization, Niebuhr fabricates what Hemple and the analytic philosophers have called “covering laws” to explain the major transitions and revolutions of Western society.85 Each stage in history takes the form of a cycle occurring in three phases, according to Niebuhr: the early formation of power (childhood); the concentration of power
(maturity); and the collapse of power (old age). Each phase inevitably leads to the next. The "moral logic of history" (not a material dialectic!) is revealed in the unfolding of the circular sequence. The laws of power (described in chapter two) govern the arc of civilizational development. The behavior of civilization, the play of its forces, is ultimately subsumed under the all-embracing law of "equal justice." The reader of Reflections cannot help but be struck by how idea of the social cycle, of cyclical decline, resonates in the historical imagination with the notions of mythic predestination and tragic fate.

The first, or inaugural, phase of the life cycle of society is characterized as the period of youthful innocence, a time of "revolutionary and creative" vitality. Although references are few, the basic idea in Reflections is that the major stages of history were in some significant way culturally engendered—revolutions led by an inspired elite, who themselves were driven by a new vision of social justice—"the irrational presuppositions of every civilization."(67) It is the "vital period," the time when "a new social system . . . better fitted to organize life under new conditions" emerges.(32-33) We hear echoes of his earlier idealist treatment of papal internationalism and the Puritan reformation:

[A] new governing force can finally maintain itself only if its program and purpose is in general accord with the needs and ethos of a community so that the right to govern may achieve plausibility in the total community.(153)

But the great Catholic feudal and Protestant commercial eras were not merely realized cultural ideals; they represent the formation of "new centers of power." Revolutionary movements are fueled by an admixture of and genuine idealism and self-interest. They are as much concerned to redistribute power out a functional need (to protect themselves and mete out punishment to the oppressor) as to exemplify an ideal. The first phase of civilization makes up a
trajectory from "birth" to "adolescence," when hidden and discrepant motives set in motion ironic power complications. The legitimation of the regime, even in society's childhood, begins to mask "exactions of power":

In the vital period of a social system the pretensions and exactions of power do not appear to be irrational and unjust because they actually succeed in organizing society and they participate in the reverence which common men give to the organization of life around them."(32-33)

The second, or middle, phase of the developmental cycle is characterized by Niebuhr as a period of maturation—society’s “adulthood,” or midlife. It is a time of the "realization of ideals" and the routinization of social ritual. It is also a time to centralize of power, to codify “a given equilibrium of power."(55) In the context of the middle phase, the ironic situation deepens, as the disparity widens between founding ideals and its midlife realities. At this juncture—the apex of the life cycle—the ruling elite "inevitably" appropriates to itself an unequal share of primary social goods, creating a discernible situation of injustice:

When the first fine careless rapture of a revolutionary and creative period of history is dissipated even oligarchs who consciously believe in equality may introduce inordinate privilege and power into society while they continue to pay lip service to the equalitarian ideal.(245)

A critical pass is reached when the vested interests of powerful subgroups overtake the ideals of the larger society. The passion with which these interests are pursued lend society a short-term elan; yet the same craving for dominance creates a untenable state of injustice. The
predictable crisis produces prophetic appeals to social justice and popular movements of social reform. But with the (similarly predictable) failure of movements for non-violent social change come intimations of the tragic denouement:

Thus every social system develops disproportions of power and privilege, greater than any rule of justice would sanction and dangerous to its own longevity. Yet the injustices which result in the premature death of a social system are also the expression of its vitality. (32)

In the third, or terminal, phase of social cycle is represented as one of "decline," or "decay." It is a time of emergency when the sharpest contradiction exists between popular sentiments and establishment realities. The original consensus fractures, swift action follows. A new revolutionary movement, a countervailing power animated by a countercultural ideal, rises to challenge the dominance of the old guard:

When the [social] alternatives which confront a society are wider than those which can be derived from old presuppositions and traditions, the new alternative will be presented with greater vigor than a democratic process allows for and the old one will be defended with a desperate courage supplied by both fear of extinction and a sense of righteous defense of the eternal sanctities (156)

The on-going conflict between old and new forces leads to typical situations of conflict, wherein violent struggle works to resolve the enormous contradictions between old and new centers of power. The defense of the old order merely fuels the revolutionary fire:
Thus the enterprises of collective man, his social orders, his enterprises and civilizations, must die a sanguinary death. . . . They combine the robust will-to-live of nature with the conscious man's pathetic discovery that the "best defense is an attack" and that the exercise of dominion is one method of escape.(18)

Niebuhr's effort to harmonize these Spenglerian meditations with the Marxist theory of revolution is obvious. The covering laws of power presuppose the class character of society and hierarchical rule. Concepts like "oligarchy" and "systems" of "inordinate power and privilege" lace the analysis. Class struggle is the motor force of history. Furthermore, the people's indomitable search for social "alternatives" more "vigorous" than existing democratic institutions ultimately necessitates violent revolution. The fate of history so conceived produces the darkest kind of reflection that, invariably, the "enterprises of collective man . . . must die a sanguinary death."(18)

There is an underlying dimension of predictability in the laws applicable to the development of political power over time.(157-158) Just as the cycle of growth and decay in nature is unidirectional and necessary, capitalism is fated to give way to socialist collectivism. The irony of political contradiction dissolves, irreversibly, into political conflict. The illusion of fatality is in this way reinforced in the historical imagination.

NARRATING CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

It is when Niebuhr narrates the historical present, representing the transition from capitalism to socialism, that we most keenly sense the ambivalence in the tragic realist vision. At what we have termed the level of the narrative proper, the historiographical level, a manifest tension exists between the themes of fate and freedom, "nemesis" and "fulness." Fate and
freedom do indeed help weave meaning into the narrative of contemporary history, as Niebuhr attempts to make sense of the facts of the recent developments in Germany, Britain, America, and Soviet Russia.

Both themes of fate and freedom are captured in the following passage on the transition from feudalism to capitalism: "History never moves, even to its inevitable goals, on a straight line. As an example one need only to think of the tremendous difference in tempo and diversity of method in which bourgeois democracy triumphed in France, England and Germany."(148, my emphasis)

Thus Niebuhr strives to incorporate into his retelling of the recent past the vital elements of freedom and contingency: moral personalism, humanitarian reform, and democracy. These values and institutions make possible deviations in the deterministic cycle, upsetting the inertia of old equilibria. The elements of freedom work together to compose an alternative, pacific future of social "fulness." Simultaneously, the narrative integrates the related elements of fate: collective ideology, class and tribal vengeance, and power-obsessed dictatorship. The dark elements of fate bind a people to an inevitable and violent future. It is these latter elements—the "nemesis" symbolized in the triad of inevitabilities—that ultimately dominate the form and contents of the narrative in Reflections.

Significantly, a close reading of Reflections reveals a narrow range of historical contingency based on trends at work in 1933-34. Despite the fact that the future moves inevitably in a collectivist direction ("the proletarian seems as certain to rule a new civilization" as the capitalist ruled the old), Niebuhr forecasts two indeterminacies.(148) First, future society could be either communist or socialist. That is to say, proletarian rule will be marked by a kind of revolutionary absolutism or it will be a regime rather more respectful of humanitarian norms. Second, the tempo of the transition from capitalism to collectivism could either be fast or slow. In the latter case, he speculates on the possibility of a fascist derailment of the collectivist
project.

But granted the constant refrain regarding the inexorability of a collectivist world order, historical contingency in the form of a plurality of possible outcomes seems extremely narrow indeed. One suspects that Niebuhr's openness to the historical horizon is perhaps more apparent than real. It seems as though the vehicles of freedom can never leverage a significant break in the processes of fate. Even democracy, the centerpiece of the personalist project, is unable to deliver a *bloodless* transition between capitalism and collectivism, a point to which we shall return in the conclusion.

The challenge for Niebuhr is to deliver an interpretation of modern and contemporary history that is a genuine, heterodox alternative to the orthodox leftist conception. The proposed tragic and revolutionary realism is not merely warmed over Marxist interpretation, if we are to believe Niebuhr. But is it enough? Let us see how freedom and fate play out in the End-of-an-Era narrative.

**GERMANY AND THE TRAGEDY OF OLD REGIMES**

The case of Depression-era Germany seems tailor-made for a unique tragic realist interpretation. The story of the emerging Nazi regime taking charge of a German civil society in chaos is a tale of modern apocalypse. Other western capitalist nations will, predictably, follow the course of the central European leviathan, according to Niebuhr. Although in retrospect he would be proven wrong in this judgment, it is fair to say that the chapter entitled "The Significance of Fascism" does indeed contain some of Niebuhr's most perspicacious reflections during the period under study.

There is a profound ambivalence in the passages on contemporary Germany in *Reflections*. On the one hand, we encounter a fairly conventional Marxist treatment of the
developments in post-Weimar Germany. Nazism is the last defense of a capitalist system on the verge of collapse, the triumph of a reactionary elite of industrialists and financiers, swept into power by an anxious bourgeoisie with the tacit blessing of Germany military aristocracy. The resolution of class conflict occurs through the pyramidal concentration of political and economic power into the hands of the agents of industrialism. Hewing the orthodox Marxist line, Niebuhr makes the claim that Adolph Hitler embodies class rule, serving the agenda of the faltering capitalist order. "A businessman would have been impossible for such a position because he would have vivified rather than obscure the social war which divided the nation."(72-73)

On the other hand, in its quest for absolute power German fascism reveals a distinctively tragic meaning. The forces of fascism are, collectively, a cast of tragic actors, desperately searching for a cure for a pathological social system. The oligarchy is deathly sick. "The fascist adventures, upon which most of the modern capitalistic nations seem destined to embark before they finally succumb, are most aptly characterized by the metaphor of the delirium which precedes death."(52-53)

But what elements of freedom could possibly interrupt the regimes collapse into violence and revolution?

For one thing, Niebuhr recognizes that Hitler's role, not that of the industrialists is singular. Hitler is an independent variable capable of derailing both capitalist and Marxist projects with his program of xenophobic National Socialism. As such, the fueher is suggestively cast as the leading protagonist, a villain of the darkest sort of conspiratorial plot involving spiritual wickedness in high places, illustrated by the assassination of Walther Rathenau.(45)

Niebuhr's more heterodox approach to the problem of explaining fascism permits him to sense that the Nazi movement has its own agenda. Not merely a tool of capitalism, Hitler is a historical agent. A successful fascist project is a historical contingency that orthodox Marxism simply seems not to contemplate. Fascism would possibly, in the short term, frustrate both
capitalist and Marxist ventures—by the suppression of democracy, by the revival of the cult of
government nationalism; by a non-Marxist economic revolution would restore prosperity for the
middle class. Such a situation potentially defies the Marxist narrative of class warfare. The
nationalist revolution is indeed beginning to suppress class warfare. "In the case of German
fascism, Hitler has used the money of the big industrialists, who feared a revolution, in order to
recruit a private army from the impoverished middle classes, who were promised a
revolution."(57) But, in the long-term, the orthodox Marxist predictions, he concedes,
will be vindicated, albeit with Niebuhrian dramatic overtones. The irony of an aggressively
nationalist, quasi-socialist regime coming to the rescue of the German industrialists would
ultimately segue into a violent and tragic scenario. If fascism can manage to prevent a German
civil war, it will almost assuredly precipitate another international war—which, in turn, will
hasten to destroy the very thing fascism sought to revolutionize, namely, German industrialism.

The story of contemporary Germany is resolved not merely in the direction of decline,
but in apocalyptic catastrophe. Niebuhr's prediction is that Hitler would follow the classic
pattern of the oligarch of old regimes. "The net effect of fascism" including presumably Hitler's
policies and actions, "must therefore be to guarantee that the end of capitalism will be bloody
rather than peaceful."(59) Narrowly averted in 1919, a Marxist revolution would be Germany's
certain fate in the event of a new round of European war.

Despite its seeming concession to contingency and the possibility of unpredictable
outcomes, Niebuhr's narrative of German contemporary history is unequivocal. Barring the truly
remote possibility of a future military junta against Hitler, he discountenances any reading other
than the Marxist.⁸⁷ If anything, his inclusion of tragic, cyclic and catastrophic images only serves
to reinforce the essentially orthodox narrative.
ANGLO-AMERICAN CAPITALISM: IRONIC CONTRADICTIONS, TRAGIC PORTENTS

If Niebuhr, surveying the world scene, is tempted to an alternative reading of the historical present—heterodox, if not exactly hopeful—it appears in his treatment of Anglo-American civilization. Here his primary interest is to evaluate the labor movement and the progress of parliamentary socialism in Britain and the United States. Niebuhr was a lifelong anglophile, and accordingly incorporates aspects of the prevailing Fabian and liberal progressive interpretations of recent British and American history into the account in Reflections. Thus Niebuhr seems to temper his otherwise pessimistic view of global events. In certain statements regarding social trends in English-speaking world, he allows a wider scope for historical contingency than in the case of Germany, signaling a possible exception to the revolutionary story form.

The career of British capitalism had previously been the subject of historical representation in Moral Man. In the brief narratives found in Reflections, the reader learns again of the vigor of English capitalism, imperialism being one of the fruits of its expansive spirit.(27) British capitalism, Niebuhr declares, is capable of surviving longer than any form of laissez faire.(51) Its vitality is due to the accommodation of the aristocracy to the contemporary interests of the democratic social welfare state.(68) The genius of bourgeois rule in Britain is also due in part to a constitutionalism that, despite class bias, permits a modicum of power sharing among all segments of the British population. Britain might well deviate from the German example, he suggests in some contexts.

Initially, the case of the American capitalism is also represented in terms of its exceptionalism. "Whatever the future of western civilization . . . it is not likely that American developments will follow the general pattern without unique and divergent elements of their own." He draws the readers attention to characteristically American behavior "makes all
prophesies futile": youthfulness, pioneer individualism, working-class pragmatism, and the like.(77)

But the gesture toward a heterodox alternative reading of Britain and America's historical present is subordinated to the imperatives of the revolutionary "realistic" conception. Niebuhr falls back on the standard Marxist critique of the Fabian and liberal interpretations of contemporary history. The progressive interpretation of recent history is, like democratic socialism itself, a product of a priori idealism—based upon wishful thinking. More justified in his view is the a posteriori belief, based upon the experience of recent blunders of the Labor Party in England and defeat of the Socialist Party in America, that true socialism will not be realized in either country by purely democratic means. That parliamentary politics will not accommodate a radical socialist option is a demonstrable fact.(155-156)

Against vaguely worded talk of British and American exceptionalism, the reader of Reflections is treated rather to sweeping declarations of the inevitability of class warfare, particularly with regard to the United States where the economic infrastructure is more advanced and thus more monopolistic than any other nation.(78) Niebuhr warns that any real working-class challenge from below will spawn a home-grown fascism reaction. But there is a notable lack of empirical evidence in his argument to support the idea of the emergence of German-style counter-revolutionary movement in America.

A tragic, and indeed apocalyptic, coda creeps into the narrative, wholly at odds with the fragmentary concessions to the progressive views of Anglo-American ascent but strangely supportive of the orthodox revolutionary interpretation. Niebuhr confidently predicts that the (phase-two) adolescence of English-speaking civilization will fast forward to (phase-three) senility and death! For all of their distinctiveness, the British and American cases reveal no fundamental differences from the exemplary case of Germany. Readers can expect no break with the tragic and revolutionary pattern, even if democratic procedures manage to slow the process of
disintegration. His forecast of "fascist adventures, upon which most of the modern capitalistic
dnations seem destined to embark before they finally succumb" strikes us as his final word.(52-53)
Fate and nemesis will overtake freedom and fulness.

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE IRONY OF NEW REGIMES

In chapter thirteen of Reflections, entitled "The Peril of Barbarism in the Spirit of
Vengeance," the author offers a short history—post-apocalypse—of the Soviet Union, the
world's first experiment in social collectivism. The main features of Russian communism are
traced from birth to the loss of youthful innocence. A cautionary tale for socialist decision-
makers, the narrative attempts to expose the inherently problematical nature of the revolutionary
regimes. The "perils of blindness and cruelty" inside the Soviet Union abound.(179)

In what represents a major departure from orthodox Marxist interpretations of 'thirties,
the Soviet experiment is treated along the lines of an ironic tale of unintended consequences. By
Niebuhr's account, the emergence of the Leninist regime represents the possibility of relative step
forward in human progress. However, it turns out that the adolescent communist regime is also
the most recent example of the hubris of all human collectivities, even youthful idealistic ones.
The Soviet elite has abused the legitimate task of centralizing power.

The principal actor in Niebuhr's dramatic account is the conflicted revolutionary, who is
in all probability modeled after the dead Lenin. (The living Stalin is mysteriously absent from
the narrative.) The revolutionary leader is portrayed as an "uncompromising radical" and
"intellectual idealist" who "dreams of an ideal social order in which no one will suffer from
injustice."(168) He has been "forced by conscience" to act (254); but in demonizing his class
enemies, the revolutionary tends to "dramatize himself as the pure instrument of justice. He
thereby reveals the egoistic elements in his spirit of justice."(168)
According to Niebuhr's cyclical concept, the Soviet Union is showing the signs of a more advanced phase-two civilization. As it consolidates power, forms of injustice appear. Soviet communists are described as "egotistic," "vindictive," and "ruthless" because of the ruling party's propensity to absolutize its claims, endowing the Russian revolution unassailable moral prestige.(168-169) The communists are, in their own way, religious fanatics who level all traditional values and institutions—peasant agrarianism, imperial patriotism, and orthodox religion—as stumbling blocks on the road to the workers' paradise.(171) He concludes that the "egoism and vindictiveness of communism threatens the western world with decades of internecine strife."(175)

As in the case of Britain and America, Niebuhr endeavors to observe the historical particularities of the Russian case, but such only has the effect of diluting the effectiveness of Niebuhr's tragic rendering of the revolutionary interpretation. The line between Niebuhr's alternative heterodox reading of the recent Soviet past and the orthodox Marxist interpretation is actually blurred when he makes allowances, based on historical experience, for communist behavior. "It is only when, as in Russia a decaying oligarchy continues its living death far beyond its day and meets new forces with blind desperation, that [the old regime] is completely destroyed."(68) In a similar vein he asserts that "communism has succeeded only in Russia, where the institutions and traditions of religion were particularly moribund."(185)

The narrative highlights an interpretative dilemma. The reader is challenged to believe that Britain and America would, eventually, follow the course of Nazi Germany—with little concrete proof that they would. At the same time, Niebuhr urges us to believe that revolutionary movements do not have to follow the path of Soviet Russia, although there was certainly reason to believe that they would. In other words, the fascist pattern is projected onto the capitalist future as "inevitable"; whereas "barbarism" is posited for the future of radical collectivism as a mere possibility, albeit a "perilous" one.
CONCLUSION

*Reflections on the End of an Era* marks the apex of the search for historical realism in terms made deliberately, imaginatively, consonant with neo-orthodox Christianity and Marxism. Tragedy, decline, and revolution—these elements make up an agglomeration of historical concepts unique to an era of social realism. They form, as I have argued, a triad of inevitabilities. By incorporating them into the historical imagination, Niebuhr creates a powerful hermeneutical tool to achieve a maximum level of what he defines as realism in understanding and explanation.

It is the thesis point of this present chapter that there are important expressions of Niebuhr's view of history in *Reflections* that suggests a fundamental antinomy. Whereas he expressly seeks to domesticate the insights of Marx from within a neo-orthodox framework, the opposite seems to be the case. The Marxist conceptual schema tends to dominate his reading of the events of the distant and recent past—as well as his expectations for a radical future.

The roots of the ambivalence in Niebuhr's vision of history in 1934 have to do with the illusions of fatality—the images of tragic fate, cyclic predictability and revolutionary predestination—built into in the narrative structure. In a somber passage illustrative the intersection of jeremiad with detached analysis (to use Fox's phrase), we read that "social organisms always tend to seal the doom of the ultimate destruction in the very act of asserting their vitality and in the effort to avoid the doom of death." (6, my emphasis) This is not an exceptional passage. Rather it typifies the tone of the entire book. On reading this passage, a fourth "d" word leaps to mind: determinism.

In the following I shall confine my remarks to a discussion of the four levels of the narrative structures (Metahistory, emplotment, social theory and narrative proper) in *Reflections*—their interrelated content, and how they manifest the tension and incoherence in
Niebuhr's historical thought:

1. *Metahistory, revolution and the predestined future.* In order to narrate large-scale historical phenomena, Niebuhr embraces the "mythic" dimension of Marxism. Specifically, he affirms the prophetic content of the Marxist "scientific" theory of social revolution. Embedded in the concept of revolution is an eschatological consciousness of "catastrophe"—a belief in the kairotic turning points of history that are invariably profound and violent. Revolution is the only certain route to structural and long-lasting social transformation, and human destiny is foreordained to pass through it.

At the level of the mythic understanding of history—of narrative paradigm—we encounter a conceptual ambiguity. Niebuhr's use of Marxist catastrophism entails a certain demythologization of the biblical symbolism of eschatology. That is to say, Niebuhr attempts to understand ancient apocalyptic, theocentric to its core, in light of the usage of modern secular Marxism. Marxist humanism, in Niebuhr's view, has correctly understood the factor of human participation in history's turning points.

But, ironically, Niebuhr fails to demythologize Marxist "eschatology" in this respect: the element of predestination found in the Marxist belief that mankind *ought to and will necessarily* pass through a series of catastrophic revolutions in order to attain the foreordained telos of social justice still informs Niebuhr's narrative of contemporary history. Even though he is critically aware of that this belief is mythic or Metahistorical, he inadvertently treats it as literal in the interpretation of modern history.

2. *Tragic emplotment and the fate of history.* Niebuhr at this juncture in his intellectual journey has neither the vision nor the literary criteria to distinguish between irony and tragedy that he would later develop in the *Irony of American History.* Irony remains the handmaid to tragedy. In the early 1950s he would develop the ironic mode of historical narrative—as a phase in the comedic process of reconciliation (between, for example, democratic America and
communist Russia). Renewal based upon the reconciliation of history's conflicting forces is offered only parenthetically in the main narrative passages in Reflections. The exceptional treatment accorded to the historical successes of honorable prophets and peaceful reform movements reminds us that the comedic, or reconciliatory, mode of interpretation is negligible indeed.

The distinction between irony and tragedy, conflated within the tragic cycle, however, has limited validity. For the most part, situations of profound political contradiction are described in Reflections as deep moral schisms between the ideal and the real, justice and injustice. Situations of contradiction and forces of conflict are represented, in fact, as virtually unamenable to peaceful reconciliation either by means of prophetic invitations to repentance or statesmanlike searches for common grounds among antagonistic parties. Old orders are quite simply unrenewable; compromises with new forces untenable. The ironic dilemmas of collective self-delusion invariably break down into tragic situations of self-destruction. The practical outworking of a monochromatic tragic realism militates against his expressed goals of making mundane history meaningful without making any segment of it (with the exception of the Christ event) the center of history. The idea that tragedy is the import of all human creativity, whether for the long or short duration, also tends "to rob the historical struggle for the realization of the ideal of its significance."(204-205)

3. Cyclical decline and the explanation of social change. In the four-part cycle of organic social development, the final phase—that of senility and death—most preoccupies Niebuhr's analysis. Schlesinger is right: this is a fixed idea. Niebuhr is absorbed with the revolutionary transitional eras of history and the almost certain possibility of one in his own lifetime. The organic metaphor, analytically refined, gives him a predictive theory of social change, a seemingly bulletproof explanation for the rise and decline of great powers.

If there is evidence of ambivalence in Niebuhr's version of the decline-of-the-West
thesis, it is detectable in shards of the idea of progress as ethical freedom, the fragments of personalism. Here, however, we sense a clash of metaphors. Does civilization possess the biotic vitality of the organism, destined to decline (Spengler)? Or the spiritual vitality of the individual as free personality, infinitely renewable (Troeltsch)?

In *Reflections* the reconstruction of civilization is a matter of the rearrangement of political forces. Power is no longer normed, save for the purely structural procedures of balancing of heterogeneous social forces. But while the redistribution of power is necessary for the task of reconstruction, it is not a sufficient guarantee of the spiritual health of a new or a mature civilization. Social vitality is the one area where the concepts of Spengler and Troeltsch appear to overlap. But Spengler's is an animal vitality, subject to natural processes of finite development. Troeltsch's is a moral vitality, integrally related to a "spirit of justice," both individual and communal, and the product of the pure religious imagination.

4. Contemporary history and the practical implication of the narrative. Niebuhr's reflections run back and forth between "the time of the past" and "the time of action," to use Ricoeur's terminology. The narrative of the time of the past carries with it practical, or ideological, implications for the time of action, the historical present.

In *Moral Man* the time of the past borrows heavily from the progressive historian's critique of the shortcoming of the transatlantic bourgeois revolutions, of liberal democracy under commercial capitalism. The book contained heavy criticism of democratic idealism and its inability to produce a serious transformation of industrial society. The time of action—the historical present—is ripe, according to Niebuhr, for the exercise of a variety of options for the new Social Gospel generation. It is time to form a popular front and to employ extra-parliamentary "coercive" techniques, including civil disobedience and direct action, to complement a parliamentary approach for the achievement of socialist justice.

The ambiguity at the level of the practical implication of the narrative lay in Niebuhr's
ambivalence regarding the competence of religious or parareligious groups to use force for the
good of the kingdom without distorting their authentic sphere of competence (i.e., the sphere of
individual conscience, religious fellowship, charitable service, and family). How can they
successfully wield power?

In Reflections, the narratives of the time of the past and the time of action are different in
one crucial respect. Several Niebuhr scholars have noted the general tone of fatalism in the 1934
volume. I would characterize it this way: the time of action is nearly past. Contemporary
history, as narrated by Niebuhr, has taken an ominous turn, both in the Soviet Union and
Germany. Revolutionary forces inimical to the higher concept of justice, embodied in his new
Social Gospel, have seized the historical initiative. The range of options open to radical
Christians and secular idealists is quickly narrowing to zero. There is almost no suggestion that a
popular front for industrial progress is any longer a viable option for people of good will.

Nevertheless, when Niebuhr narrates the historical present of Britain and America, he
also notes other processes at work—pluralistic, accommodative and ironic—and this is precisely
where the ambiguity surfaces. These processes, involving the instruments of freedom (associated
with the complex of religious personalism, humanitarian, and democracy) can modify the overall
trend. Yet even in the less dire social circumstances of the English-speaking world, these
vehicles of personalism do not qualifying the deterministic direction of contemporary history.

Though he hedges on this prediction elsewhere, Niebuhr's clearest generalizations are
these: "It is idle . . . to hope that modern society will ever make the transition form capitalism to
socialism by purely democratic processes."(156) These forms ought to be used to soften the
conflict. "The longer democratic methods of arbitration hold out the more will society be spared
unnecessary conflict and chaos."(156) Even so, the revolutionary "struggle is bound to be long
and tortuous" and the "hour of crisis" of physical violence is inevitable.(157, my emphasis)
Democratic means will, in all likelihood, fail.(159)
The ambiguity at the level of the practical implications of the narrative in *Reflections* is encountered at this point. Even at the End of an Era, then, Niebuhr still believes that the complex of religious personalism, social reform and democracy can be a constructive force in history. Niebuhr urges its operation *pre-revolution* (to mitigate inter-class "conflict and chaos") and its revival *post-revolution* (to soften revolutionary class "vengeance"), but not its application during the critical revolutionary transition.

His attitude toward democracy, in particular, is quite paradoxical. Niebuhr does not claim that democracy is necessary to the leveraging of the great social change, the making of the new collectivist society. Democracy, one surmises, is neither necessary nor sufficient to cure the structural ills of capitalism. With the perspective of the twentieth century behind us, it is impossible to imagine that it could be cured with out it. Niebuhr's silence in 1934 on the idea of the *sine qua non* of democratic norms and institutions is deafening. The nuanced truth of democracy is, as he would later recognize, that it is the necessary though not sufficient condition of just change in modern, differentiated societies.

This, then, is the narrative structure, or lens, in both its coherence and incoherence, through which Niebuhr reads history. The idea of revolutionary decline can be used instrumentally as an empirical model for understanding the intricate "structure of nations and empires," as he would attempt late in his career. Yet Niebuhr in the 1930s does not use it in an instrumental fashion. The concept controlling it and giving stylistic coherence to the narrative structure, the idea of tragedy, is the very principal of human existence, and it reinforces rather than relativizes the sense of revolutionary inexorability. Similarly, the idea of organic decline, intimately associated with tragedy in the historical imagination, buttresses the idea of the inevitability of violent revolution. Social change is conceived as a relentless cycle, a pattern that once set in motion can be neither reversed nor deflected—only stalled.

In hindsight, I believe that had Niebuhr been less focused on the stormy events of the
1930s, his reading of German, Russian and Anglo-American history may have been quite
different. The exclusive history-of-revolutions perspective may have accommodated a
countervailing evolutionary narrative, one that would have chronicled the unsystematic growth of
a mixed political economy, pluralist power structures and new forms of social mobility in the
West. Such an interpretative possibility is suggested in the sketch of the survival of feudalism
within the framework of British bourgeois democracy.

But given his dominant narrative mode (apocalyptic and tragic) and the leading theory of
social change (organic and revolutionary), Niebuhr could not envision deviation from the cycle,
i.e., the counterrevolutionary return of bourgeois democracy and capitalism to Russia. Instead
the mantle destiny is passed to a rather amorphous new socialism: "disciplined," "statesman­like,"
possessing "religious resources"—yet radical. However, in the end the application of the
dominant narrative to the story of the capitalist West and communist Russia requires a
counterfactual reading of the large-scale events of the recent past.

The key point from the vantage point of the present thesis is the ambivalence of
Niebuhr's attempt to appropriate the insights of Marxism regarding the causes of large-scale
change, the principal stages of western civilization, and the general sense of history's direction.
The ironclad sense of pattern derived in equal parts from tragic drama, the organic metaphor, and
historical materialism overrode the liberal sense of an open, pluralistic, and progressive historical
universe that was Niebuhr's inheritance from William James and Alfred North Whitehead.

In summary, at each level of historical understanding and explanation there is a
discernible resistance to the fatality inherent in the key concepts. The ambiguity results from
Niebuhr's vacillation between a minimum use (instrumental, pragmatic) and a maximum use
(principal, theoretical) of these deterministically conceived ideas. One supposes that although
they had roots in deterministic social theory, these ideas could be rendered "neutral" by some
higher non-deterministic principal of interpretation. Niebuhr is already well aware, for example,
of the power to the Marxist ideas both to illumine and to obscure, and he struggles with their deterministic thrust. He seems less critically aware of how the ideas of apocalypse and tragedy, decline and revolution, stack up one upon the other until the deterministic explanatory effect becomes well nigh overwhelming.

**GENERAL CONCLUSION**

Reinhold Niebuhr was an exemplar of “Progress' discontents” in the 1920s and 1930s. The inter-war years witnessed an explosion of pessimism among young intellectuals, including Niebuhr, on both sides of the Atlantic. Industrial turmoil, the Great War, and the failure the League of Nations, constituted for them adherents the liberal tradition an enormous personal and epistemological crisis. In this context Niebuhr attempted a radical makeover of religious liberalism and the idea of progress, through an engagement with rival communities of discourse, namely, Christian neo-orthodoxy and contemporary Marxism. Both of these alien traditions seemed to render a more coherent account of the reality of social conflict and its role in history than the perfectionist doctrines of Kant, Schweitzer and Troeltsch. The crises of the twentieth-century posed an enormous interpretative challenge for Niebuhr. By 1934, at the age of forty-two, he had written three major interpretations of the dialectics of modernity.

As an inquiry into the nature of narrative and historical interpretation, the study at hand has focused exclusively on one stratum of Niebuhr's thought: the critique of liberal progressivism and his effort to create a new, more truthful narrative of modern and contemporary history. It has examined in detail the narrative structure (Metahistory, emplotment, social change theory, and narrative proper) of Niebuhr's thought and its development within two distinct periods, up to and including the Christian-Marxist synthesis. In the course of this study, we have also tracked various thematic transformations and tensions in the successive texts--ambiguities that are both
internal to the narrative paradigm and external to it. We have submitted a steady frame of questions to the texts, which highlight Niebuhr’s passionate quest for historical revisionism toward an ever more consistent realism. Analytically viewed, how exactly and why did the narrative structure change? Historically regarded, what transpires theoretically between Does Civilization Need Religion? Moral Man and Immoral Society and Reflections on the End of an Era.

Between Book One and Book Two there is a remarkable change in symbolic forms, social content, and narrative line for the sake of what I term tragic and revolutionary realism. On the level of Metahistory, there is the transition from Whitehead’s progressive ontology to a neo-orthodox appreciation of apocalyptic catastrophism. On the level of emplotment, the dramatic form of historical understanding has changed from a generally ironic story configuration to definitively tragic one. On the level of social theory, there is a profound shift in the content of the social field and the explanation of the causes of social change. We witness a secularization of the entities and forces of history. Finally, on the level of narrative proper, where Niebuhr weaves together metahistorical understanding and social explanation, there are evident ambiguities within his compelling story of the times.

What changes between Book Two and Book Three represents, to use Kuhn’s terms, paradigm consolidation and refinement. There is a more explicit development of the argument regarding of the kinship of apocalyptic and Marxist catastrophism. The tragic form of configuration receives authoritative expression in the symbol of the "court drama" and the “imperiled oligarch.” The laws of power are given a cyclical dimension. The historical discourse is more starkly realist, and, as a result, the dominant power narrative all but engulfs the narrative of personalist freedom.

The challenge for the interpreter of Niebuhr is how to explain the ambiguities and tensions manifest in the interpretative transformations described in this inquiry. I have tried to
render a conceptual account of what drives historical revisionism toward realism in Niebuhr. Philosophical analysis and criticism in the case of the present study takes the form of sustained attention to these tensions. The themes of freedom and fate take on successive guises in Niebuhr's early writing about the philosophy of history. "Internally," Niebuhr is in conversation with philosophers and theologians of history. "Externally," he is also in conversation with the events of his time. The pressure for historical revision in the direction of realism comes, I would argue, from both directions.

White's early structuralist approach to narrativity sheds light on the internal problematics of Metahistory in Niebuhr's thought from *Civilization* to *Reflections*—and has influenced my reading of Niebuhr. Using White's conceptual apparatus we can, indeed, see a profound transition in the dramatic modes of emplotment—from irony to tragedy—that leaves its mark upon Niebuhr's historical discourse during the crucial years under examination. The measure of truth, in this theory, is the level of meaning coherence achieved by the interpretative framework.

According to White, there is a certain amount of creative tension in all great works of Metahistory. In fact, thematic tension is a desirable trait of historical texts. There is no mistaking the fact that thematic tension animates Niebuhr's three narratives of the crisis of modernity, beginning with *Civilization*. How else, White asks, can the historian or the philosopher of history represent conflict in the world? If the themes of personalism and political power are posited in antagonistic ways in Niebuhr's works, it is simply a matter of his trying to achieve a more sophisticated coherence, or a more nuanced aesthetic, that will "reveal" discord as well as concord the historical domain. Ricoeur's view that narrative paradigms include a dimension of "discordant concordance" seems to support this idea. The dialectical tension between time and eternity in the historian's story line serves to highlight the complex temporality of historical experience. Through creative mimesis, this complex temporality of collective human action is reproduced in every competent historical interpretation.
But there is a kind of over-determination in this view of emplotment. Historiographical style is simply imposed on the entire narrative structure; form ultimately dictates content. All change described within a narrative paradigm over time is endogenous, following a certain linguistic protocols between, for example, the tropes of tragedy and irony. The transformation of Niebuhr’s historical consciousness doubtless occurs in accordance with certain rules governing the dramatic effects he is trying to achieve. I have tried to spell out the relationship of irony and tragedy as it unfolds in the three books. But apart from these protocols, how are conflicting narrative paradigms resolved in Niebuhr’s mind? Why does he wear one pair of metahistorical lenses for a time, dispose of them, and then try another? White suggests that, aside from the logic of tropes, it is simply a matter of the author’s taste. I believe that it is more accurate to say that Niebuhr is trying to appropriate all of the cultural traditions at his disposal—from religious Kantianism to Marxism, from biblical myth to classical drama—to achieve, in Gadamer’s phrase, an “effective historical consciousness,” a practical or public-historical discourse aimed at social change in an age of profound turmoil.

The neo-Calvinian history of ideas approach to metahistorical themes also offers insight into the internal dynamics of Niebuhr’s historical imagination and the transformations within his narrative structure. The philosophical dilemmas of the Enlightenment, first delineated by Dooyeweerd as the contradictory development of concepts of freedom and nature, reemerge to a significant degree in Niebuhr’s writings between Civilization and Reflection, as he engages the canonical texts of the Western philosophy of history. The Kantian ideal of moral freedom has inherent metaphysical problems, quite apart from but related to the modes of emplotment it underwrites. The “synthesis” of the Marxist vision of material transformation only intensifies the thematic polarity between personality and power in Niebuhr’s thought. Laden with these thematic dualities, the truth claims of each new version of historical interpretation in Niebuhr’s early writings are circumscribed by their presuppositions—whether drawn from his native liberal
tradition or Marxist radicalism. But as Bob Goudzwaard has pointed out in his history of the idea of economic progress, all attempts at Kantian-like syntheses—including Niebuhr’s—of the Western themes of free personality and dominative power have eventually fallen apart. “The neatly established neo-Kantian distinctions, such as the one between the realm of necessity (or facts) and the realm of freedom (or values), are systematically cut to pieces by the incisive critique of these [post-World War II] protest philosophies.” The modernist themes of personality and power so construed simply do not mesh. The post-World War II schism between positivism and existentialism is emblematic of the failure. Indeed, Niebuhr later joined the existential protest and rejected all to philosophical projects—especially the Marxist—that aim to naturalize the concept of human history.

The structuralist and the history of ideas approaches to Niebuhr’s philosophy of history are purely internal. I have gestured throughout the study at certain external sources of tension also impact Niebuhr’s interpretative framework. The urge to re-envision History was in part his authentic response to the irresistible claim of world events.

Ricoeur’s phenomenological approach to narrativity opens up the possibility of external sources of tension within the texts under inquiry. In this regard Ricoeur’s methodology adopts and surpasses White’s approach to narrative structures. He speaks of a "virtuous hermeneutic circle," or "genuine dialectic," between the historian’s narrative and temporal events. In a move toward epistemological realism, he affirms the idea that the experience of history has a shaping effect on the historian’s creative re-employment of history. Ricoeur’s theory warrants the intuitive belief that Niebuhr’s interpretative framework was under constant pressure to change from the exogenous "facts" of contemporary history, for example, the enormity of World War I and the failure of various pacifist ventures. He narrates these social changes in Civilization, but their explanations comport poorly with his metahistorical themes. He searches for alternative symbolic modes of interpretations and theories of explanation in Moral Man and Reflections to better
render anomalous experiences and inexplicable facts of contemporary history into a coherent narrative.

Finally, the transformation of Niebuhr's historical interpretation raises and, perhaps, resolves an issue with respect to his intellectual biography. What at first glance appears to be Niebuhr's definitive break with liberalism during this period is actually shot through with ambivalence. I believe that one can speak with confidence of a paradigm shift in Niebuhr's vision of history as he moves from Nisbet's "progress as freedom" to "progress as power" concepts of human destiny. But the term "paradigm shift" suggests as complete break with Niebuhr's original position of religious liberalism. Niebuhr's announced break with "the illusions and sentimentalities of the Age of Reason" in Moral Man and his talk of a "synthesis" of Christianity and Marxism in Reflection can lead or mislead his readers. Hutchinson's historical analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's place in the liberal tradition is essentially correct. At least in the inter-war period, his break with the core of liberalism was incomplete. Niebuhr's response to the challenge of the crises of modernity was a new theological and philosophical realism. "Neo-orthodox revisionism," according to Hutchinson, also entailed an openness to historical realism, an openness the young Niebuhr energetically exploited. His early efforts at historical interpretation are, in truth, best viewed as an "internal critique" of liberalism. From this vantage point Niebuhr's synthesis is really a grafting of elements of neo-orthodoxy and Marxism into the existing religious-liberal framework, giving these theological and political insights "permanent validity" in the religious liberal canon. Thus "the argument from human progress, had virtually disappeared," even while other themes of liberalism (e.g., personalism and faith in democratic pacifism) did not.92

I would argue that with the inclusion of neo-orthodox and Marxist themes into the new concept of history put enormous stress on Niebuhr's religious liberalism. Once filled with the new wine of prophetic catastrophism and Marxist revolution, the old wine skin composed of
Kantian personalism and progressivism nearly burst. The introduction of Spenglerian metaphors of cyclical determinism only exacerbated the problem. To change the metaphor, the smooth flow of Niebuhr's narrative passages is continually interrupted by crosscurrents of the contradictory themes of idealism and realism.

The synthesis on one level was a failure. In his later Cold War years Niebuhr acknowledged the failure out of political embarrassment for having consorted with Marxists. However, there were philosophical problems which he did largely did not bother to address in retrospect. Alasdair MacIntyre's explanation of the common failure of philosophical traditions in historical encounter with rival traditions to make breakthroughs in the form of successful syntheses would seem to work here. "An ability to recognize when one’s conceptual resources are inadequate in such an encounter . . . is essential to the growth of a tradition." Niebuhr seems to be imperfectly aware that he does not have the theoretical resources at his disposal to effect the growth of religious liberalism by integrating the insights of Marxism.

But on another level the abortive synthesis was a success. I hasten to add that his efforts to elaborate a new philosophy of history in the crucial years between 1927 and 1934 were neither sterile nor predictable. His theoretical response was in my estimation remarkably creative, helping to move his theory of history in what from a later vantage point appears to be a more genuinely Christian philosophical direction. What lies ahead for Niebuhr are his decisive engagements with New Testament and Augustinian sources of Western historical awareness as well as his investigations, inspired by his dialogues with Heidegger and Tillich, into the religious ground of the ontological structure of human nature and history. There are intimations in *Does Civilization Need Religion? Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *Reflections on the End of an Era* of a more profound departure with the tradition of liberalism and the modernist idea of progress, a departure that he would successfully negotiate in the years to come.
ENDNOTES


3. I have taken some liberty with the term “personalism.” Niebuhr was not at this time a self-proclaimed personalist. But his writing in Civilization, the chronological starting point of this analysis, bristles with elements of Kant’s “ethical personalism” and Whitehead’s “panpsychic personalism.” Moreover, the philosophy of Niebuhr’s mentor at Yale, D.C. MacIntosh, who exercised some influence on Niebuhr’s early thought, has been described as a “realistic personalism.” See John H. Lavelle, “Personalism,” in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York and London: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), 6:107-110.


6. Since this study is historical in character, I have tried to apply to Niebuhr judgments that are appropriate to his world, in view of the fact that his thinking was in transition during this period. I refer to Niebuhr’s interpretative strategy circa 1927-1934 as a “creative failure” for reasons that I hope will become clear as my argument unfolds. I have far fewer reservations about the strength of Niebuhr’s mature historical vision, such as that expressed so masterfully in The Irony of American History (1952). It is in this sense that I urge that Niebuhr’s hermeneutical effort in its totality ought to serve as an exemplary case, or a “model,” of historical re-interpretation.


8. William R. Hutchinson describes the three basic characteristics of religious liberalism, or modernism, as adaptationism, cultural immanence, and religiously based progressivism. During the World War I, the latter characteristic was transformed into a general concern for
Western Civilization, and the religious sources of its renewal. See his chapter on "The Great War and the Logic of Modernism," in The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 226-256. The renewal of concern for the philosophy of history and health of West after the war, by both religious and secular thinkers, is documented in Manfred P. Fleischer, ed., The Decline of the West? (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970). Niebuhr seems to have taken his lead from Albert Schweitzer's The Philosophy of Civilization (1923) for his main thesis that the renewal of the West depends upon the success of a personalist theory and praxis. Schweitzer wrote: "Civilization, put quite simply, consists in our giving ourselves, as human beings, to the effort to attain the perfecting of the human race and the actualization of progress of every sort in the circumstances of humanity and the objective world. This mental attitude, however, involves a double predisposition: firstly, we must be prepared to act affirmatively toward the world and life; secondly, we must become ethical." Cited in Fleischer, Decline of the West, 89.


None of these treatments underestimates the importance of ideas in Niebuhr's development. But most stress the causal importance of "experience" in his changes of mind. They do not search the foundations of his thought to explain the profound theoretical reasons for his changes of position. Brown remarks that Niebuhr's "early idealism collided with experience." Ibid., 33. Ronald Stone makes a similar point, writing that "[b]etween 1928 and 1932, Niebuhr experienced a deeper sense of the difficulty confronting all programs of social reform." Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 88. Martin Marty's analysis of the phases of Niebuhr's thought raises experience to the key hermeneutical principal. Niebuhr was a characteristically American thinker who let historical experience into his reflection on the world. He became the "century's foremost interpreter of American religious social behavior." Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," in The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr ed. Nathan A. Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 10. I will build the case that Niebuhr's response to historical experience is, to an important degree, mediated through the categories of historical consciousness.

10. Other philosophers of history make their appearance in Civilization: Treitschke (p.134),
Schweitzer (pp.192-193), Spengler (p.56), Hegel and Marx (p.203) and, of course, Troeltsch (p.225).


12. Richard Reinitz, Irony and Consciousness: American Historiography and Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980). Like Reinitz' study, the methodology of this thesis takes its cue from the discipline of the literary analysis of historical works. In particular I have borrowed from the methodologies of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. Both White's and Ricoeur's studies on the nature of a text are enormously helpful in treating Civilization as a historical text. White's analysis draws attention to the range of literary elements to be found in all works of historical interpretation. These elements are coordinated into three levels of explanation: explanation by emplotment (what I term the "dramatic modes" in Niebuhr); explanation by formal argument (theories of society and social change); and explanation by ideological implication. See Hayden White, "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact." in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), 81-100. White encourages the exegete to search for the mythic theme or poetic trope that unifies the text. It is possible, he writes, "to speak of a historical narrative as an extended metaphor." (p.91) Whereas White directs the interpreter of the text to the internal truth of a work's unifying metaphor, Ricoeur guides the exegete to the external referential thrust of the text, even down to the level of the sentence. "As is well known, this referential function [of the narrative] is supported by the sentence. It is the sentence which intends to say something true or real, at least in declarative discourse." Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 148. Furthermore, he reinforces my conviction of the narrative qualities of what are seemingly piecemeal narrative sketches, or fragments, in Civilization—that even the briefest sketch conveys both a received truth and its interpretation. Ricoeur is critical of the "ideology of the absolute text," to which White is susceptible. Texts refer not only to the "quasi-world of other texts" but to the world itself. Niebuhr studies benefit from an insight of White's theory of historiographical styles: the discovery of a "tension" or "conflict" between various modes of emplotment in great works of historical interpretation. In my view a tension exists between Niebuhr's ironic and tragic sensibilities in Civilization. Below, I describe the tension as a "hiatus" because there is a lack of formal relationship between the two dramatic modes—either a definitional relationship, as found in The Irony of American History, or as phases of a continuous dramatic cycle, as found in Reflections on the End of an Era. The theory of
historiographical styles furthermore asserts that a hierarchy obtains between the various levels of explanation, with emplotment controlling explanation by social laws and explanation by ideological implication. Expressed in traditional terms, historical "understanding" precedes historical "explanation." See Hayden White's now standard work *Metahistory: History and Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century European Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973). Ricoeur, by contrasts, speaks of a "dialectic" that obtains between narrative and temporality and, by implication, between understanding and explanation. It is tempting to interpret Niebuhr in White's terms exclusively, but I believe it is more truthful to say (as Ricoeur would?) that Niebuhr's general theory of society and social change did impact his dramatic consciousness, and vice versa. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 1: 72, 180-81.

13. Reinitz is critical both of Niebuhr's role as Cold War architect and of his narrative of contemporary history in the 1950s. He claims that Niebuhr failed to consistently apply the ironic criterion of interpretation to, for example, American anti-communism and racism. This chapter treats a period during Niebuhr's intellectual tenure when, in 1927, his interpretation of modern events is somewhat muddled by his uncertainty over the nature of tragedy and its relation to the perceived ironic movements of history. I believe that later, in the early thirties, his concept of the tragic cycle is more consistently applied to the events of the remote and near past. In the period under study, Niebuhr's assessment of modern political and economic institutions is driven first by a kind of religious sectarianism and then by a kind of political sectarianism—and by associated modes of dramatic interpretation. Both religio-political impulses derogate what Herbert Butterfield called the Whig interpretation of history, i.e., the historical ascendance of Anglo-American institutions of justice and property. A case can be made that Niebuhr's career involved a lifelong search for an evenhanded normative approach to the democratic and national traditions—together with a related stance toward the dramatic motifs of historical interpretation.


16. My use of the term "dialectics" has as its source two very different continental critiques of the Enlightenment: the Frankfurt school of neo-Marxism and Dutch neo-Calvinism. Despite their profound differences, the two schools share a surprising affinity in their
analyses of the grand themes of Western thought and the impact of ideology of rational autonomy upon the practical affairs of society. Martin Jay characterizes the heart of the Frankfurt analysis of the contradictions of the Enlightenment thus: "Man as the measure of all things inherently meant man as the master of nature. It was the overemphasis on man's autonomy that paradoxically lead to man's submission, as the fate of nature became his own." The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 265-66. Christian philosopher and economist Bob Goudwaard of the Free University of Amsterdam describes the dialectic of progress this way: "The history of western thought since the Renaissance has been marked uninterruptedly by this struggle [between the antinomies of humanism]. In this process the pole of the rational domination motive has tried to annex that of human personality and, vice versa, the pole of human personality has almost continuously revolted against that of the rational domination motive." Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society, trans. and ed. Josina Van Nuis Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 157.

17. I am using Franklin Gamwell's apt analysis of Niebuhr's mature typology. "Authentic theism," in Niebuhr's view, "affirms a source of meaning which is not only transcendent to but also inclusive of history—and, consequently, affirms the meaning of politics." See Franklin I. Gamwell, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theistic Ethic," in Scott, Legacy of RN, 64-65. For a contemporary effort to construct a viable interpretation of history based upon a creative recombining of Whitehead's process ontology and Christian eschatology, see Gilkey, "The God of Process, of Possibility and of Hope," in Reaping the Whirlwind, 300-318.

18. Whitehead himself put it like this: "Thus God is the one systematic, complete fact, which is the antecedent ground conditioning every creative act." Religion in the Making (1926; New York: The New American Library, 1974), 148.


20. Niebuhr's early readers were not privy to his explicit understanding of tragedy, pathos and irony. For this they had to wait for the publication of The Irony of American History. There he offered the following definition. He wrote that if individuals "sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one they make a tragic choice." Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History (New York: Scribner's, 1952), vii. This would seem to
cover Jesus’ ultimate act. The advantage of the present study is that we can trace the development of Niebuhr's definitions of the various dramatic, or narrative, modes. I shall refer to the definitions that appear in *Irony* as "baseline."

21. Both White and Ricoeur treat in some detail the function of general theories of social structure and change in historiography. Both scholars incorporate the generalizations, or laws, of the social scientist into a basically narrativist view of the historian's task. White conceives the historian's political and economic theory (or "mode of argument") as one of three modes of explanation, which give shape to historical narrative. The historian's social theory operates between the mode of emplotment and the mode of ideological implication. *Metahistory*, 11-21. Ricoeur claims that social scientist's theories, or explanation by laws, and the novelist's work of emplotment are two separate cognitive operations. Both operations are incorporated into the historian's task of narration and bound together by his "inquiry," or causal imputation. *Time and Narrative*, 1: 186-187.


23. Niebuhr carries on the Social Gospel critique of utilitarianism from the point of view of a personalist ethic. But one could argue that Niebuhr's dropping the term "Christianization" in *Civilization* already signals his distancing himself from the more "sentimental," triumphalistic forms of the Social Gospel.


25. Niebuhr attempts to transcend the fundamentalist-modernist debate raging in the 1920's. Significantly, the ethics of both parties were viewed as too present-minded, too modern, too a-historical.

26. The Whiggish affirmation of individual liberties, civil society, and the enlightened pursuit of self-interest based on early Enlightenment political philosophy has no place here.

27. See Gamwell, "RN's Theistic Ethic," 69. The radical distinction between a "theistic ethic" and the "ethic of mutual love" is a constant in Niebuhr's mature thought.

28."Justice" scarcely functions as term of social ethics in *Civilization*. He was loath to call the calculated balance of forces of secular society "just." Its rare usage is usually in association with the terms "self-interest" and "prudence" and has little, if any, positive content. The matrix of Niebuhr's early theory of justice appears within his treatment of history. Indeed, one purpose of this study is to understand the moral man-immoral society thesis in its diachronic and dramatic context.

Various studies of Niebuhr's mature theory of justice can shed light on his early theory of history. Gamwell links Niebuhr's theory of justice to his typology of theologies of history and declares that "his ethic is implicitly classical." "RN's Theistic Ethic," 89. Kenneth Thompson faults Niebuhr's theory of justice for the vagueness of its definitions of
"idealism" and "realism," contending that Niebuhr’s reading of contemporary historical developments only adds to the confusion. According to Thompson, the lessons of history demonstrate that collective self-interest "can be overcome only through promoting in concert the interests of a number of groups or nations which through the impact of history may discover new interests that they may eventually come to hold in common." "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Kegley and Bretall, RN: His Thought, 174. Karen Lebacqz’ study focuses on the role of original sin and social conflict "in the historical enactment of justice" in Niebuhr’s thought. Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 89. Robert Benne uses the Niebuhrian ethic and definition of justice as a resource for "democratic capitalism," an intellectual strategy unimaginable in the 1920s and 1930s, given Niebuhr’s prejudice against any system of calculated utilities and satisfactions. The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism: A Moral Reassessment (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 27-48.


30. The young Niebuhr’s contempt for the ethic of calculated mutuality in the ‘twenties became in the early ‘fifties a broadly Burkean appreciation for the norm of prudence in politics. Significantly, this appreciation did not create a commensurate regard for the norm of "utility" in economics.

31. Fox makes the point that in Civilization Niebuhr was practically the first scholar to bring the Weber thesis to North America. "Drawing on Tawney and Weber, and in fact introducing most readers to the untranslated Weber, he explored the historic conjunction between Protestant religion and capitalist enterprise." RN: A Biography, 102. Niebuhr borrows the Weber thesis wholecloth—without benefit of a subsequent generation of critical

32. Stone, *Professor RN*, 48. Troeltsch's influence on Niebuhr was doubtless also felt through his brother Richard who spent a graduate year studying with the great historian-theologian.

33. Robert Fitch describes Niebuhr's native ironic sensibility and demonstrates how it affected his philosophy of history. For Niebuhr, "[h]istory also has a structure of polarities, which are sometimes raised to contradictions." *Leaves* is, in large part, an exploration of these paradoxes and ironic contradictions in life. Fitch gives us a partial list of twenty-two such "polarities" from the early work! Fitch speculates that Niebuhr's use of moral irony in history was derived from exposure to the "Marxian dialectic" in the 1930s. Robert E. Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History" in Kegley and Bretall, *RN: His Thought*, 299-301. I would argue instead that it was borrowed from his reading of Troeltsch's social history of religion.


35. John Patrick Diggins best expresses this constant in Niebuhr's regarding the origins of power and its historical dilemmas. "Power is not necessarily the negation of freedom but possibly its expression. Where there is history, there is freedom; where there is freedom, there is sin; where there is sin there is power." *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 290. This is Niebuhr's corrective to the evolutionary optimism of American pragmatism.

36. Insights such as these await upon Niebuhr's formal analysis of the chasm between historical agents' intentions and outcomes and, more specifically, the relation of morally flawed intentions and undesirable results. See Niebuhr, "The Significance of Irony," in *Irony*, 151-174.


38. Niebuhr suggests that social fragmentation contributes to modern secularism. He does not mention the godfather of Anglo-American liberalism by name, but his negative assessment of the process of social differentiation and interdependence is certainly the exact opposite of Herbert Spencer's. For a good description of Spencer's positive appreciation of "heterogeneity," see Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 229-236. The attack in *Civilization* on "social complexity" was shared by an increasing number of Niebuhr's contemporary social critics. According to Michael Sandel, the fact that "Americans found themselves in a complex scheme of interdependence did not guarantee that they would identify with that scheme..." He cites Jane Adams: "the mere mechanical fact of interdependence amounts to nothing." *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 206. Niebuhr's brand of reconstructed idealism and new monasticism had more in common with the political

39. Niebuhr developed the concept of the paradox of patriotism in an essay written while a graduate student at Yale, and probably borrowed it from William James. Fox, *RN: A Biography*, 35-36. Niebuhr writes: "The patriot identifies his tender emotions toward his nation with the attitude of the nation itself until he becomes incapable of a critical appraisal of its policy; or he frankly condones the selfishness of the nation because he recognizes no ethical value beyond those implicit in group loyalty." *Civilization*, 131-132. He then uses the principal to interpret all kinds of collective behavior. His early impulse toward anti-imperialism may also have been borrowed from James before World War I. See Deborah J. Coon, "'One Moment in the World's Salvation': Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James," *The Journal of American History* (June 1996): 88-89. Arthur Marwick has described the "psychological implications" of the Great War in terms that offer empirical verification of James' (and Niebuhr's) concept. See *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study of Britain, France, Russia and the United States* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 74. Is this not a case of Niebuhr's convictions being shaped by experience—the experience of war—mediated through intellectual discourse?


42. Walter Rauschenbusch, the great Social Gospel advocate on whose shoulders Niebuhr most certainly stood, expressed this view. "There was a crying need for an international and purely human religion. Christianity, as we know, was destined to fulfill this function, and these early Christian thinkers had a prophetic premonition of this destiny." *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 114. It is important to add that Rauschenbusch could be at times as "realistic" as the later Niebuhr. For the pure romanticism of religious liberalism, Niebuhr went after other targets, e.g., Justin Wroe Nixon and William Adams Brown. See *Moral Man*, xxii.

43. Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 114. In a similar vein, Gilkey writes that "the mood of Whitehead is liberal, gradualist, progressivist and providential, rather than radical, even catastrophic and eschatological." Ibid., 111.

44. Niebuhr himself imperfectly sensed this failure and would continue to explore the connection between the apocalypse, the crucifixion and the dramatic mode of tragedy. Modernists, he wrote, "have relegated the eschatological note of the gospel, by which Jesus expressed his sense of the tragic, to the limbo of theological antiquities. The possibilities of a catastrophe seems never to arouse their fears. . . ." *Civilization*, 234.
45. Pose the question to Niebuhr in 1928: Do you believe that human moral and social progress lies ahead? The answer, I believe, would be a firm "yes." He probably would not have been able to conceive of a time just five years later when he would advocate the use of force (if necessary) to achieve social justice. Even less would he be able to contemplate, as he would at the height of the Cold War, the possible extinction of civilization itself through the failure of nuclear deterrence.

46. Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Scribner's, 1932) hereinafter cited as Moral Man. All parenthetical page references in the following chapter refer to this volume. See Fox, RN: A Biography, 138. Even later in life, Niebuhr was evidently proud of his accomplishment in Moral Man. He authorized its republication in 1960. Its insights into the nature of power and justice had permanent value for him. Looking back he would claim that the book "was not uncritically Marxist", though it failed "to recognize the ultimate similarities . . . between liberal and Marxist utopianism." See "Intellectual Biography," in Kegley and Bretall, RN: His Thought, 8.

47. Merkley, RN: Political Account, 85. Another Niebuhr biographer refers to the period as Niebuhr's post-liberal, pre-Christian realist socialist phase. He reminds us that periodization is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. The "phase of his thought are not to be regarded as mutually exclusive. There are elements of Christian realism in his early liberal writings and elements of liberal political philosophy in his most socialist period."


48. Merkley, RN: Political Account, 83. Gilkey, "RN as Political Theologian," 159. Niebuhr's friend and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., suggests that the argument of Moral Man had a finality about it that reflected the conclusiveness of the 1929 stock market collapse. Overcoming "the premonitions and misgivings" of Civilization, the book was a "somber and powerful rejection of the Social Gospel-Dewey amalgam" and that "the balance of power in one form or another remained . . . Niebuhr's answer to the problem of achieving a tolerable society." "RN's Role in American Political Life," in Kegley and Bretall, RN: His Thought, 133-34, 137.

49. As mentioned Niebuhr belongs to a long line of power and conflict theorists, including Hobbes, Machiavelli, Marx and twentieth-century foreign policy realists. His concept of power is of special interest to this study, especially where it verges on the concept of causality. In the words of Russel Hardin: "Power is typically a causal notion: its application produces results." Conflict theorists seek "some one and some group who are thought to have power and to use it for some purpose." See "Power," in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995),
Niebuhr takes this tack and consistently brings history--how power has behaved in the past--to ethical and political theory. According to Karen Lebacqz, "Niebuhr begins [moral theorizing] with the injustices of history." *Six Theories of Justice*, 98.

Niebuhr's definition of power in *Moral Man* also connotes, in the context of the search for justice, what today we term "empowerment."


52. This parallel came to me after reading what Weil wrote about the *Iliad*: "[T]he true subject, the center of the *Iliad*, is force. Force as man's instrument, force as man's master. . . ." Her 1939 reflections on progress also paralleled Niebuhr's in *Moral Man*: "Those who dreamed that force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past have seen the poem as a historic document; those who see that force, today as in the past, is at the center of all human history, find in the *Iliad* its most beautiful, its purest mirror." Cited in Bernard Knox, introduction to the *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 29.

For Niebuhr, as for Homer, tragedy is the natural form of the story of power.


54. The philosophical worldviews of "monism" and "dualism" disappear in the 1932 volume. The effort to establish a normative (i.e., Christian) philosophy antithetical to the deterministic modern philosophies of Hegel and Marx is shelved. The objective in *Moral Man* is to discover a commonality between Christianity and Marxism for the sake of synthesis. The pairing of an ancient religion and a modern ideology conforms to Niebuhr's later practice where both are treated as examples of "myths." I follow Hayden White's lead in terming them "metahistorical" forms.

According to Gilkey the ambiguity of religion is a key concept of *Moral Man*. "Reinhold Niebuhr as a Political Theologian," 161-62. Niebuhr refers to the two facets of religion as "mystical" and "prophetic." *Moral Man*, 64. The tension between the mystical otherworldliness of apocalypticism and worldly prophetism serves to highlight its ambiguity and the need for synthesis, if indeed apocalypticism is to serve as a viable framework for the interpretation of history. Both the Judeo-Christian and Marxist visions of history belong to the common category of "eschatology." The outlook of one is more "ethical," the other "political." Niebuhr seems to have made apocalyptic eschatology (as opposed to, for example, prophetic eschatology) normative for the Christian tradition merely for the sake of defining two examples of the category "catastrophic" myth.

55. To call Niebuhr a "neo-orthodox" theologian is somewhat out of date. His recent, and in my opinion best, biographer to date puts Niebuhr's theological method back into the liberal category. According to Richard Wightman Fox, Niebuhr's starting point is always human experience and the believing subject. See *RN: A Biography*, 217. (In a similar way, John Patrick Diggins puts Niebuhr's political method back into the "pragmatic" mainstream—together with John Dewey. See *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 283-291.) Not that he ever styled himself neo-orthodox. To the best of my knowledge, he did not. But I believe Niebuhr would have difficulty with calling his theology
“liberal.” It seems to me that in his mature period, which coincides with the publishing of his Gifford Lectures between 1942 and 1945, the approach was implicitly pluralistic, relying on revelation as well as experience, church dogma (e.g., St. Augustine) as well a phenomenology of the human conscience. Did Niebuhr often measure revelation by the standard of human "experience"? He certainly did. But just as often he assessed the meaning of experience in terms of biblical "revelation." I am more comfortable to leave him in that grab bag of historical classification of "neo-orthodoxy" that would include a spectrum from Barth to Bultmann, and take at face value that generation's collective attack on the canons of liberalism. In 1957, the American religious historian, Sydney Ahlstrom, claimed that the term had outlived its usefulness. "The usefulness of the term . . . has waned. Whatever value it may have had in the 1930s or early 1940s to designate an existing movement has faded away." "Neo-Orthodoxy De-Mythologized," Christian Century (May 22, 1957): 649-651. But that is exactly its usefulness forty years later—to describe a historical movement.

Neo-orthodoxy was not exclusively devoted to the problem of God's transcendence and fallible human nature. Neo-orthodoxy was, according to historian William R. Hutchinson defined in many ways, but its critique of the Enlightenment view of human nature "was the best known of all neo-orthodox arguments." Many of its representatives—including Niebuhr—spent enormous amounts of intellectual energy on the doctrine of providence, that is God's presence in secular history. These often took as their starting point a new appreciation of the apocalyptic traditions of the Bible. That is, the neo-orthodox critique of modernism and its three components—adaptationism, cultural immanentism, and progressivism—did not preclude a keen interest in human history (although Niebuhr himself leveled this charge at Karl Barth). The Modernist Impulse, 295. By 1937 the theme of God and history had become so prominent that an entire book of essays out of the ecumenical movement's Oxford conference was dedicated to it. See H.G. Wood et al., The Kingdom of God and History (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938). C.T. McIntire documents the renewal of Christian interest in the subject of history in terms of the ecumenical movement of the 1930s and 1960s. The neo-orthodox movement was an influential subset of this group, which included Catholics, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox among others. See God, History and Historians, 15-30. Langdon Gilkey makes the telling observation about Karl Barth's use of eschatology and his approach to human history. Barth launched the original attack on liberal theology. Against the developmental patterning of progress, he affirmed, according to Gilkey the "contingency, relativity of forms of life in history were still affirmed, but not progress—and thus did history manifest an entirely different visage." Reaping the Whirlwind, 217. In crisis theology the world of nature and the world of history move forward according to their own constellation of causes. Making God's action effective "beyond history" allowed Niebuhr to characterize history in more naturalistic, or secular, terms.

56. One measure, according to Niebuhr, of the historical vitality of the Magnificat vision is its ability to inspire "rebellion" on the part of men and women against "the fate which binds [their] collective life to the world of nature" and to prompt them to hope for the appearance of the just society. Moral Man,22. There are tendencies in history which make for the casting of the mighty from their seats, both morally and politically." Ibid., 156. Niebuhr paraphrases the Magnificat to explore the political relatedness of normative Christianity and Marxism.
57. A wide variety of modern Christian thinkers have adhered to the secularization thesis, namely, that Marxist philosophy of history is at bottom a demythologized version of Judeo-Christian salvation history. But within this group of Niebuhr's peers, it is instructive to note the varying evaluations of the secularization concept—from openness in the radical 'thirties to outright hostility in the Cold War 'fifties. Paul Tillich, Niebuhr's friend and colleague, helped pioneer the concept of the early, "prophetic" Marx of the Paris Manuscripts. Tillich made the secularization thesis grounds for taking the ultimate concern of Marxism with profound sympathy. In 1937 he urged ecumenical Christians to "absorb" and "develop" the prophetic discoveries of Marx into "Christian historical categories." See Tillich, "The Kingdom of God and History" in Wood, *The Kingdom of God and History*, 131-132. Niebuhr, perhaps following the example of Tillich, takes a similar tack in *Moral Man*. English historian Herbert Butterfield, on the other hand, writing in 1949 in the early days of the East-West confrontations, found in the secularization phenomenon a counterfeit faith. Communism is the "enemy." "Communism, precisely by reason of its interpretation of history, is one of the most formidable competitors that Christianity ever had to face." *Christianity and History*, 197.


58. The relationship between Niebuhr's incipient Christian realism in its Christian-Marxist incarnation and liberation theology is an interesting issue. Gilkey argues that the basic God-history dialectic (or "time-eternity" dialectic) in *Moral Man* and *Reflections* produces results vastly different from and superior to those of the typical liberation theologian's past-future dialectic influenced by Marx's immanentism and progressivism. See "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History", 36-72; and "Reinhold Niebuhr as Political Theologian", 157-182. John C. Bennet, a fellow architect of Christian realism, expressed later in his career a critical appreciation for liberation theology as a serious response to the "radical imperative" of the Gospel—and a continuation of his (and Niebuhr's) outlook of the 1930s. *The Radical Imperative: From Theology to Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 10. Niebuhr's *Moral Man* is mentioned by Bennet as something of a forerunner to Gustavo Gutierrez' model of theology. Although to my knowledge, the Latin American theologian-activist never referred to Niebuhr's theology in that way. What Christian realism and liberation theology have in common is a suspicion of power. But there is a tragic sense and pessimism in *Moral Man* and *Reflections* that is absent in liberation theology. Dennis McCann, in a perceptive study, writes that: "Marxism at this stage [the 1930s] is criticized as an alternative religious myth: specifically, Niebuhr sees it as a 'bad religion' because it rests upon a myth that distorts the meaning of human nature and destiny." "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional
Models of Practical Theology," The Journal of Religion 58 (April 1978), 145. I tend to think that Niebuhr made an implicit Marxism/communism distinction during this period—and found in the prophetic dimension of Marxism genuine insights that demanded a Christian response of synthesis.


60. Thus the tragic ending differs from the ironic. A social situation of ironic contradiction pauses at the edge of conflict—to the point where it is either made amenable to peaceful resolution or hardens into violent conflict. All the talk of tragedy and catastrophe made Niebuhr susceptible to liberal critics' charge of pessimism. For a sample of this critique, see Fox, RN: A Biography, 152-154.

61. Nowhere in Moral Man is the concept of tragedy subject to lengthy reflection; the book is pervaded with a tragic sense. (Miguel de Unamuno's The Tragic Sense of Life is, not coincidentally, one of the few books cited in both Moral Man and Civilization.) Tragedy lends a compelling narrative form to his newly found political and historical realism. The sense of tragedy in the 1932 volume displays an unmistakable continuity with his later work. In Irony Niebuhr analyzes the formal elements of tragedy and highlights the elements of moral dilemma, the tragic emotions, and the relationship between creativity and moral fault in historical action. "The tragic element in a human situation is constituted of a conscious choice of evil for the sake of good" or the sacrifice of "some high value for the sake of a higher one." Furthermore: "Tragedy elicits admiration as well as pity because it combines nobility and guilt." Irony, pp. vii-viii.

A key issue, explicitly raised in Beyond Tragedy is the place of tragedy in the Christian world-historical view. Is there such a thing as Christian tragedy? In this volume he endorses the idea that the Christian, or normative, view is provisionally tragic but that "the Christian view of history passes through the sense of tragedy [classically defined] to a hope and assurance that is 'beyond tragedy.'" Ibid., p.x. The answer seems to hinge on how much reconciliation of clashing forces—how much deliverance from the human condition—occurs in the immediate aftermath of catastrophe in a tragic sequence to qualify it as a Christian drama. Hayden White associates Christian drama almost exclusively with romance, or the story of a virtuous hero overcoming the world: "a drama of the triumph of good over evil." Tragedy on the other hand celebrates "no festive occasions" in the wake of the defeat of the protagonist. There is only "partial liberation from the conditions of the Fall" in the form of a "gain of consciousness of the spectators," resulting from "an epiphany of the law governing human relations." Metahistory, 9. Paul Ricoeur would seem to agree with White. "The tragic vision, when it remains true to its type, excludes any deliverance other than 'sympathy,' or the spectators' tragic compassion." There is no reconciliation at the end of tragedy—only a welcome cessation of violence. The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 227. The philosopher Walter Kaufmann came a little closer to Niebuhr's position in Moral Man. Kaufmann argues that, although it is rare, there is such a thing as a Christian tragedy, citing the instance of the play The Deputy, the story of a Jesuit priest interned at Auschwitz. It is significant though that there is no redemptive resolution at the play's end. The priest does not die a "triumphant martyr" but in a state of a kind of believing

Ricoeur is of the opinion that a scheme of salvation is foreign to tragic narrative, but can be imported into the dramatic form, as the Greeks did with Dionysian and Apollonian religion. In 1932 Niebuhr seems to be saying that the gain of tragic consciousness is partially redemptive. But like Ricoeur, he believes that deliverance in the form of transformative reconciliation is foreign to tragedy. The "inertia of human nature remains a strong nemesis to the absolute ideal" of social justice. (199) Furthermore, the "human spirit remains under the power of nature," and yet "there is a beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions." (227) Authentic salvation must be added to the Christian's tragic understanding of mundane history, in the guise of a transmundane eschatology.


63. Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 287. Moreover, in the declaration that "we see the ominous tendency throughout history of power destroying its very raison d'être," *(Moral Man, 11)* I hear echoes of Lord Acton's dictum that "power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." What gives Niebuhr critical distance from the Anglo-American liberal and pragmatic tradition is his insistence that this view of power and fate coincides with the eschatological tradition.

64. The paradox of patriotism concept provided Niebuhr with the paradigm for understanding all manner of power conflicts, especially the twin phenomena of nationalism and imperialism. The understanding of nationalism and imperialism in *Moral Man*, despite its radicalism, is decidedly not economic and therefore not strictly orthodox Marxist. It was a model that served to explain equally well ancient as well as modern conflicts. He was acutely aware of the economic circumstances of conflict, but treated economic developments as the immediate causes (or sufficient) to the underlying (or necessary) causes of group egotism and insecurity. His argument was really quite different from the purely economic arguments of a Hobson or a Lenin--of imperialism as under-consumption in the home market and the capitalist's search for profits in foreign markets. In this respect


65. Niebuhr's concept of justice at this stage is not unlike the Rawl's formulation: "justice" equals "fairness" equals "equality of distribution" of primary social goods, including civil rights and basic material goods. In addition, Niebuhr in *Moral Man* is
cognizant of the "difference principal" which Rawls includes in the definition of justice. According to Rawls, society's "basic structure is just throughout when the advantages of the more fortunate promote the well-being of the least fortunate, that is, when a decrease in their advantages would make the least fortunate even worse off than they are." Cited in Robert Benne, The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 59. In 1932 Niebuhr grudgingly acknowledged that the efficient working of the economy— even a socialist economy— requires some differentials of work functions and rewards. But in the mood of the times, he was loath to discuss the principal (or to offer comfort to capitalist economists), except to say that the justification of differentials was always distorted by ideological considerations. The following declaration is fairly typical: "Differences in faculty and function do indeed help to originate inequality of privilege but they never justify the degree of inequality created, and they are frequently not even relevant to the type of inequality perpetuated in the social system." Moral Man, 114.

66. It is Nisbet's opinion that all of the great philosophers of history, including Marx, have utilized "the underlying Augustinian framework formed by contemplation of a single entity—mankind, civilization, society, call it what we will—undergoing over long periods of time a necessary sequence of unfolding, self-realizing stages of development." Social Change, 64. Niebuhr's own relationship to St. Augustine at this point is ambiguous. He praises the "wholesome" realism of St. Augustine's theory of the two cities but castigates its "defeatism." Moral Man, 70. Lowith's interpretation of St. Augustine is much like Niebuhr's in 1932: "To a man like Augustine all our talk about progress, crisis, and world order would have seemed insignificant . . . there is only one progress: the advance toward an ever sharper distinction between faith and unbelief." Meaning in History, 172. Nisbet's interpretation of St. Augustine is less dualistic than Niebuhr's early view or Lowith's. That is to say, Nisbet is more generous in his appraisal of the strain of "progressivism" in the Church Father's thought. See History of the Idea of Progress, chap. 2.

67. Purer Marxists, while making this concession, still argue that the economic is, ultimately, the most important causal factor in history. If not determinative of everything, economic events are determinative of major structural transformations, super-events so to speak. The view of Helmut Fleischer is typical: "In defence of Marxism it must be pointed out that it does not put the 'primacy of economics' as a universal principal or claim the existence of such things as a 'universal economic process' existing as a historical meta-subject with its own inherent trends." Marxism and History, 112. Anti-communist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski is not unsympathetic to this interpretation of Marx' and Engels' thought, but concludes: "As to the reflex action of the superstructure on the mode of production, here, too, we must remember the qualification 'in the last resort.' The state may, for instance, act in such a way as either to help or to hinder the social changes required by the level of productive forces. The effectiveness of its action will vary according to 'accidental' circumstances, but in the fullness of time the economic factor will prevail." The Founders, vol.2 of Main Currents of Marxism (Oxford: Oxford
68. In a perceptive study of Niebuhr's philosophy of history, Robert E. Fitch writes: "As far back as Reflections on the End of an Era (1934) Niebuhr had an intimation that the real dialectic of history is not Marxian but ironical." I would only qualify this observation that Niebuhr's sense of moral dialectic in *Moral Man* had narrative implications that were tragic as well as ironic.


70. Thus Niebuhr misses, in my opinion, certain nuances of history. Or better, he puts them on the margins of the narrative: the actions of progressive, or modernizing, elites as well as the actions of reactionary, or countermodernizing, movements of the dispossessed.

71. In one of the few explicit references made to the Depression, Niebuhr observes: "The breadth and depth of the world depression, moreover, tempted others beside proletarians to express a temper of catastrophism." *Moral Man*, 169.

72. In Reinitz' terms, Niebuhr shifts from irony to tragedy as the dominant "middle range" concept to mediate meaning from theology to history. The tragic sense in *Moral Man* thus goes beyond the simple idea of the conflict between good and evil inherent in mythology. The pall of fate is cast over human history, rendering thereby a more nuanced interpretation of human passage.

73. I understand that Willa Cather, the American novelist and Niebuhr contemporary, once observed that there are only two or three stories in life and that they recur throughout history. Kagan's astute observation appears in "History's Largest Lessons," interview by Frederic Smoler, *American Heritage* (February-March 1997): 67. The phrase "unreasoning from analogies" is borrowed from Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*.


77. The only textual clue in the search for antecedents to Niebuhr's exploration of myth is the reference to the work of C.G. Jung, in which "spirit" and "nature" are defined as "mythological constructions." *Reflections*, 9. Niebuhr's friend and associate Paul Tillich was perhaps the inspiration for the study of the relation of myth and history (but Tillich never exploited his theory to create historical narratives). Tillich's 1938 essay is a wonderful summary of the state of reflection on this subject during
this period. In this piece the German theologian developed Christian historical categories from the symbolizations of the Kingdom of God. Particularly insightful were his delineations of the categories of the "demonic" and the "kairotic." The resulting theological structure was nearly identical with Niebuhr's later formulations. God's will was the ultimate source of history's meaning. It was "beyond" yet "related" to history. Tillich, like Niebuhr, was sure that a reexamination of the concept of myth was critical to an understanding of modernity and modern society. Capitalism, nationalism, and Marxism were secularized mythologies. Tillich's systematic approach to developing Christian categories from religious symbols gave him an advantage over Niebuhr in the task of developing a synthesis between Christianity and Marxism within the tradition of religious liberalism or Christian humanism. See Tillich, "The Kingdom of God and History," 115, 120, 131-36. Tillich's definition of myth, or archetypal story, also dovetails with Niebuhr's mature understanding of "religion" as "the totality of things conceived of a realm of meaning." See Gamwell, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theistic Ethic," 66, n.11. Niebuhr later eschewed the term "myth" because of its connotations of error or untruth.

78. Niebuhr's readings in Marxism, judging from the works he cites in Reflections, are rather limited and hardly orthodox. Cited in Reflections are Max Eastman, Marx and Lenin; Sidney Hook, Toward an Understanding of Karl Marx; Ernst Juenger, Der Arbeiter, Herrschaft und Gestalt, and Leon Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution and My Life. Writings referenced that are critical of Marxism or communism include Maurice Hindus, The Great Offensive and the Joseph Wood Krutch essay "Liberalism and Utopia." As far as I know, Niebuhr never made a systematic inquiry into the writings of Marx himself.

79. Allan Megill's essay on "coherence" in historical interpretation helps us to put into perspective Niebuhr's own effort to define coherence, or meaning, in history. Megill outlines four ideal-typical attitudes toward history. A careful inspection of chapter 10 of Reflections reveals that Niebuhr's stance comes closest to Megill's Attitude 1: "There is a single history and, through faith, we already know what it is." See "Grand Narratives and the Discipline of History" in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., A New Philosophy of History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 155-173. But there are also traces of Megill's Attitude 2 in Reflections: "There is a single history, to be known only after further research has been done." This is the Enlightenment ideal of the growth of a body of historiographical knowledge that will confirm the empirical unity of history. More difficult to find in the earlier Niebuhr, but evidenced in his later writing on history, is something approaching Attitude 3: "There is a single History. However, it can never be told. It exists only ideally. . . ." Niebuhr, it seems to me, would not have had difficulty embracing the thesis that the meaning--or meanings--of history receives expression in the multiplicity of human narratives, including first and foremost the Gospels. What the end of history looks like, however, remains a mystery. Niebuhr seems to share the modernist assumption that the historian's (especially the Christian historian's) viewpoint is privileged, comprehending the confused viewpoints of the history's actors.

80. See Gamwell's analysis of the ultimate kinship between Niebuhr's category of "authentic theism" and "classicism" in his mature thought. The same critique would
apply here to Niebuhr's characterization of the mythological/historical categories of "apocalypticism" and "Hellenism" in Reflections. The following schematic may help clarify Niebuhr's classificatory effort in 1934. Diagram A represents his formal typology of existing alternatives. Diagram B illustrates his proposed synthesis (what I call "tragic realism"), a merger of Christianity and Marxism that would create a normative theory of history, or an ideal metahistorical position.

A. Here are the four "myths" of history as they present themselves to "modern man" at the End of an Era. These positions are compromised either by an unrealistic optimism or by a hyper-realistic pessimism:

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<th>OPTIMISM</th>
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<tr>
<td>Liberalism, Marxism</td>
<td>Apocalypticism, Hellenism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaning in History</td>
<td>Meaning above History</td>
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B. Niebuhr's proposed synthesis of the ancient myth of Apocalypse and contemporary myth of Revolution is a historiographical parallel to his declared purpose in the "Introduction" of Reflections: to wed modern political radicalism and traditional religious belief. Tragic realism, as an approach to history, would provide a middle course between modern liberal progressivism and ancient Greek cyclicism:

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<tr>
<th>OPTIMISM</th>
<th>TRAGIC REALISM</th>
<th>PESSIMISM</th>
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<tr>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Marxism + Apocalypticism</td>
<td>Hellenism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaning in history</td>
<td>Meaning above yet in History</td>
<td>Meaning above history</td>
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81. Ricoeur and White have written at length on the theoretical and historical linkages between paradigmatic myths and the creative work of emplotment in theater and literature. Niebuhr himself would continually stressed the common thread that binds religion, drama, and historical narrative in formulaic phrases such as "the dramatic-historical mode of apprehension which characterizes biblical faith." Christian Realism and Political Problems (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1954), 117. Niebuhr did not explore the idea of emplotment in historical narrative in Reflections. He does refer to history as a "tale" and "spectacle." These terms and the term "drama" (and its surrogates "tragedy," "irony" and the confusing hybrid terms "pathetic irony" and "tragic irony") function synonymously with the concept of plot.


83. My hunch is that Niebuhr's sense of the ironic was enhanced by a fourth source: a lifetime's reading of Jesus' parables. However, the only parable he cites in Reflections is the "parable of the Jungle"! Reflections, 31.
84. Ricoeur has written at length on the theory of mimesis and the problem of redundancy in interpretation, including historical interpretation. See *Truth and Narrative*, 1:52-87. Philosophically, the problem of redundancy and the Niebuhrian conception of the tragic cycle, as outlined above, are two problems—yet I believe they are related. Aristotle, Ricoeur points out, conceives of emplotment exclusively in tragic terms: there is an exclusive relationship between the elements of tragedy and the creative act of plot construction. Ricoeur observes that this relationship tends to set up an interpretative tautology, a circular hermeneutic, between the three stages of mimesis: the prefigured experience of the real; the configuration of the real in emplotment; and the reconfiguration of the real in the new "reading" of historical experience. In other words, one's interpretation of past selects which facts are significant; these facts in turn verify one's interpretation, ad infinitum. Ricoeur then argues that the quality of the dialogue between theory and data—Metahistory and History—can break the vicious hermeneutic circle, leading to a progressive dialectic of interpretation.

In my view, with an eye toward the problematic of interpretation as Niebuhr sets it up in *Reflections*, one way to improve the quality of the dialogue is to un-link irony and tragedy and to introduce other dramatic modes into the historian's repertory. The comedic (or pacific) and the pathetic—as well as the ironic and tragic—could be set into motion in an imaginative free market of interpretative competition for the same ("symbolically mediated" and "readable") factual resources. Kenneth Burke extended the range of paradigmatic options for the historian. To Niebuhr's privileged four types of myth Burke adds: the elegiac, the grotesque, the satiric, and the didactic. See *Attitudes toward History* (1937; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 2.

85. This analysis has benefited from Ricoeur's effort to reconcile the analytic, or epistemological, model of historical explanation—the covering law model—and the narrativist, or configurational, model. In the historian's quest for single causal imputation is found the harmonization of the scholar's search for facts and "empirical rules," or laws and the judge's construction of plausible story of responsibility or culpability. See *Time and Narrative*, 1:182-92. Niebuhr's narrative sketches are constructed with the help of both explanation by emplotment and explanation by laws. Specifically, he relies upon a form of sociological explanation, i.e., invariant social laws that he delineates as the laws of power in *Moral Man* and puts into play in a cyclical social theory in *Reflections*. On the affinity of covering law explanation and sociological explanation see Quentin Skinner, "Social Meaning’ and the Explanation of Social Action,” in *The Philosophy of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 106-126; and Maurice Mandelbaum, “Societal Facts,” in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 476-488. By Ricoeur's yardstick Niebuhr's interpretative enterprise lacks the kernel of genuine historiography: the element of causal "inquiry," featuring probabilistic argumentation, a reasoned search for causal candidates, and the construction of counterfactual narratives. I believe that this is true even though Niebuhr's schemes of emplotment delineate a causal framework, by the broad definition, of necessary (economic) and sufficient (moral) factors.

The epistemic status of law in history is never a subject for theorizing in *Reflections*. As far as I know, Niebuhr never engaged in such reflection until much later with the publication of an essay on the subject of historical knowledge entitled "Ideology and the Scientific Method." See *Christian Realism*, 76-93. On moral law, justice, and interpretation of history see Fitch, “RN's Philosophy of History,” 301-302, 306.

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86. Two studies have helped me to trace the narrative line in *Reflections*. The first is Richard W. Fox's article "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Emergence of the Liberal Realist Faith, 1930-1945," *Review of Politics*, 38 (April 1976): 244-265. Fox perceptive study draws the reader's attention to Niebuhr's representation of the comparative historical experiences of America, Germany, and Russia. Fox highlights Niebuhr's use of the metaphor of the life cycle ("adolescence," "maturity," etc.) to explain the behavior of entire societies in the twentieth century. I have tried to refasten these descriptive terms to the cyclical social theory at work in Niebuhr's narrative. The second study is Richard Reinitz's *Irony and Consciousness*. Reinitz refers to the cyclical theory operating in Niebuhr's most historical works, but—following White's lead—focuses primary on the literary dimension of poetic, or dramatic, tropes which structure his historical explanations. Successfully or not, I have tried to combine these treatments of Niebuhr narrative vision: the sociological and the fictional.

87. Possible non-Marxist interpretation would include the contemporaneous interpretation offered, for example, to the liberal democratic world by Churchill. Others were not blind to the fact that German fascism was a form of socialism—*national socialism*—with a passionate anti-capitalist bias. Surely Niebuhr was aware that the old military elite and the capitalists were doing their utmost to survive. Under the circumstances survival meant capitulation to the Nazis. Scarcely did they direct the revolution.

88. A clarification of terminology is in order here. Niebuhr's use of the term "Marxian" typically refers to non-parliamentary socialism. "Totalitarianism" does not appear, although one is tempted to think that he would have applied that term to fascist and communist theory and practice. See his remarks on fascism in *Reflections*, 166. He does not apply the term "communism" to other "radical" collectivist movements, implying a *sui generis* character to Soviet ideology. A Marxist radicalism, informed by a religious appreciation of transcendence and guided by a program of extra-parliamentary, or direct, action would evidently be the norm. "An adequate radical political policy must be Marxian in the essentials of political strategy." Ibid., 177.

89. Schlesinger, "RN's Role in Political Thought," 138. In his later writings Niebuhr would use the metaphor of a "stage" when referring to cyclical phases: "The two patterns of the cycle and the forward movement [of history] are therefore not so much dramatic patterns as they are the two dimensions of the stage upon which the drama is played. *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 51.

90. See his reflections on revolution and utopianism in *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York: Scribner's, 1959), 217-225. Niebuhr believes that his analysis of the relation of modern revolutionary fanaticism and traditional despotism is factual as opposed to mythological. "The inquiry . . . must confine itself to historically and empirically established patterns and forces. It must eschew metaphysical speculations which seek to discern, in the wide drama of history, ontological essences which merely wait upon history for the actualization of potency into reality." Ibid., 6-7.


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