

Directed Study on the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr  
The Intractability of Racism: Reinhold Niebuhr on Christianity's Explanation of  
Racial Problems and Their Solutions

Presented To

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Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the most vocal Christian advocates of racial justice in the United States in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He spoke out so often on this issue because he believed that the race problem was one of the most difficult issues in human relations in general and democracies in particular. In his words, it is an issue that is “intractable,” very challenging to overcome.

Where did Niebuhr get this idea? He lived in the first and into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where he observed the intractability of race problems especially in the American South but also elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Racism and ethnocentrism have continued to be a problem in spite of modern science and democracy. In addition, in the West, there is a significant “universalist” tradition that values humanity as such. However, as Niebuhr grieved, “Despite all traditions of human universalism inherited from Stoic, Prophetic, and Christian sources, Western man—in common with all men—remains an unregenerate tribalist.”<sup>2</sup>

What accounts for racism’s stubborn persistence? Niebuhr believed that the Christian faith offered a plausible explanation of the source and persistence of racism.

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of the school integration, Niebuhr commented: “This whole chapter in our national history is instructive because it reveals that the group pride of men is one of the most ineradicable of human weaknesses.” (“School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration,” *Christianity and Crisis* [hereafter *C&C*] 16, no. 16 [October 1, 1956], 122).

<sup>2</sup> *Man’s Nature and His Communities: Essays on the dynamics and enigmas of man’s personal and social existence* [hereafter *MNC*] (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 133. As he noted elsewhere, “The common humanity is obvious; but the distinguishing marks which separate man from man are also more obvious, more persistent, and more general than the classical universalists realized” (*Ibid.*, 93). See Niebuhr’s article “Man, the Unregenerate Tribalist,” *C&C* 24, no. 12 (July 6, 1964), 133–134 and *MNC*, 84–105. The title of the chapter in *MNC* is “Man’s Tribalism as One Source of His Inhumanities.” In connection with this point, he writes: “Nor did a common Christian faith save the Negro minority in America because the racial identification was too obvious, and the cultural distinctions due to slavery too obtrusive” (*Ibid.*, 95).

For Niebuhr, racism involved a view of man as created in God's image but fallen in sin which he understood as involving anxiety, pride, and self-deception. Add to this his wise insights on the problems of group dynamics, and you have a helpful theory of the problem of race rooted in a Christian understanding of man.<sup>3</sup> However, Niebuhr was never a man to merely describe problems. He believed in seeking solutions to even the most complicated problems. In this case, he suggested that real yet always imperfect progress on the race issue involved political, educational, and religious solutions. In this paper, I want to lay out Niebuhr's view of the origins of the race problem and then describe his solutions.

## **Part I - The Dynamics of Racism**

### *Creation and Race*

According to Niebuhr, man is not evil because he is finite. Even in our finitude, human beings are created good in the image of God. Thus, sin is the perversion not the destruction or total transmutation of human nature. The biblical view

. . . insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. In its purest form the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual

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<sup>3</sup> The subject of racism is also a good point of entry into Niebuhr's theology in general. As Therese B. DeLisio, remarked, "However, unlike issues of foreign policy, political philosophy or pacifism, where the connection between Niebuhr's theology and its application to particular historical circumstances often seems attenuated or practically invisible, the line of logic that flows from his doctrine of sin to his position on racism is consistent, clear, and direct." Thus, this is a good basis for understanding his doctrine as a whole" ("Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About the Race Problem?", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 61, no. 3-4 (2008), 3).

dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible affirms the created goodness of the body *and* the soul. Race and ethnicity are rooted in bodily connections, though there is no bodily desire that is not affected by human nature's transcendent spirit, though, as Niebuhr would often point and we shall see.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to human beings, they are ethnic creatures.<sup>6</sup> As Niebuhr writes, “We cannot deny the ethnic particularity of all men. We are not universal men and we build communities according to the force of ethnic kinship which are operative in history.”<sup>7</sup> One part of this natural connection is a created impulse to have a particular concern to preserve our own groups.

Racial prejudice, the contempt of the other group, is an inevitable concomitant of racial pride; and racial pride is an inevitable concomitant of the ethnic will to live. . . . There are spiritual elements in every human survival impulse; and the corruption of these elements is pride and the will-to-power.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Nature & Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol. 1: Human Nature* [hereafter *NDM 1*] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: 1964), 151.

<sup>5</sup> As one example, Niebuhr points out that the sexual impulse “has exceeded the necessities of the preservation of the species, from the very beginning; and that even in primitive man sex has never been merely ‘glandular and physiological.’ The sexual, as every other physical impulse in man is subject to and compounded with the freedom of man’s spirit” (*NDM 1*, 236). See his entire discussion of this issue on 235–240 for many helpful ways in which to think about how humans blend the physical appetite for sex with the vision and needs of a transcendent spirit.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, Niebuhr does not discuss this point at great length. We may, however, reinforce his discussion in the sources cited in this paper with a reference to some sort of connection with ethnicity in the new heavens and new earth. “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9, except for quotes within Niebuhr’s quotes and where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.).

<sup>7</sup> “The Race Problem in America,” *C&C* 15, no. 22 (December 26, 1955), 170. To anticipate later discussion, he goes on to say, “But these communities of nature are always subject to the judgment: ‘If you love them which love you, what thanks have you?’” (Ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> *The Children of Light & the Children of Darkness* [hereafter *CLCD*] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 139.

I will discuss the “corruption” of these impulses below, but observe for now that survival is a good and inborn desire, not only for ourselves but also for human beings in general. However, there seems to be a heightened obligation and desire for the care and survival of those human beings for whom we are particularly responsible and are connected to through family. This is probably recognized in a passage like 1 Timothy 5:8: “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” In sum, many of the elements that become racism under the influence of sin are rooted in our created ethnicity and connection to relatives and other affinity groups. The dynamic of racism involves more than sinful elements. Like all sin, it is the perversion of something good.

### *Sin and Racism*

When it comes to sin, Niebuhr’s understanding of the biblical view of sin has direct implications for the issue of race. Niebuhr sees sin as a complex of anxiety, pride, and self-deception.<sup>9</sup> I shall consider each in turn.

For Niebuhr, as for Tillich and Kierkegaard, sin is rooted in anxiety over the relative insecurity and smallness of our position as creatures.<sup>10</sup> Anxiety is rooted in the

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<sup>9</sup> I take this classification from Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See his whole discussion of these matters, 102–123.

<sup>10</sup> For Kierkegaard, Soren Kierkegaard and Alistair Hannay, translator, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation in View of the Dogmatic Problem of Hereditary Sin* (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2014). See Hannay’s introduction to this book for an explanation of the relationship of *The Concept of Anxiety* to Kierkegaard’s other writings. For Tillich, see Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 42–54.

fact that though we have a limited ability to solve problems related to our own existence, we have the ability to see an almost limitless number of them. Langdon

Gilkey summarizes Niebuhr's view of anxiety this way:

We are vulnerable, insecure, and mortal creatures, in constant peril. As self-transcendent, we feel and in fact see this situation and are anxious. And since our self-transcendence and the imagination that springs from it are unlimited, there are no possible limits to our anxiety about our security in either space or time. If we control our own valley, we can picture a new enemy on each neighboring hill—and every succeeding hill. If we have sufficient food for the present winter, we can imagine now our hunger in the next year—and every subsequent year.<sup>11</sup>

This ability to see our own insecure position is what Niebuhr calls “the internal state of temptation.”<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that the ability to see our insecure position itself is not sin. Sin, according to Niebuhr, is inevitable but not necessary.

It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion. The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. That is why Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride. It is significant that Jesus justifies his injunction, “Be not anxious,” with the observation, “For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.” The freedom from anxiety which he enjoins is a possibility only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *On Niebuhr*, 104

<sup>12</sup> *NDM 1*, 182. Earlier in the book, Niebuhr put it this way: “Is it not the fact that man is a finite spirit, lacking identity with the whole, but yet a spirit capable in some sense of envisaging the whole, so that he easily commits the error of imagining himself the whole which he envisages?” (181).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–183.

In other words, human beings can trust in God for their security rather than seeking to secure themselves.

The reality, however, is that all human beings are sinners and that they respond to anxiety with an excessive concern for themselves and a tendency to put themselves as the center (see below on pride). Original sin is, as Niebuhr would later say, the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.<sup>14</sup> How to account for this? In this area, Niebuhr believed that the story of Adam's fall is a good description of what every human being experiences.<sup>15</sup> He did not believe that there is a literal time-space fall into sin by an historic Adam and thus no "inherited" sin. The problem with Niebuhr's viewpoint is that it makes it very difficult to explain how sin is not ontological, as Niebuhr himself recognized.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, I would suggest that Niebuhr's view of the dynamic of sin is independent from his view of the origin of sin and thus profitable for a wide range of perspectives on that issue. Indeed, it is quite helpful. It helps explain how sin could come into the world in that "[a]nxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin."<sup>17</sup> It is also helpful in explaining sin as it occurs in

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<sup>14</sup> While one might question the universality of such a view, original sin is certainly empirically verifiable.

<sup>15</sup> See Niebuhr, *NDM 1*, 241–262.

<sup>16</sup> *NDM 1*, 262. "[I]t must be understood that even in this form the doctrine remains absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for it expresses a relation between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized . . ." In addition, because the biblical authors regard Adam's fall as historical, I think that Niebuhr's view indirectly calls biblical authority into question. See Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 134–136 for some helpful insights on how Niebuhr's view relates to the traditional view of the church.

<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM 1*, 182.

individuals throughout history. Our smallness yet ability to see so many difficulties is a continual temptation to come up with sinful solutions to this problem.

Racial pride is not merely excessive positive evaluation of one's group. It is in significant part an attempt to ensure the survival and prestige of one's group in the face of anxiety over its existence and loss of its privileges. The case of the African British colonies is illustrative. The small white minorities had obtained extensive privileges, including generally the best farm land. As black Africans clamored for more power, the white minority feared the loss of its privileges and control. As journalist Martin Meredith described it, "At any sign that Africans or Asian immigrants might advance at the expense of the white community, the white reaction was invariably hostile."<sup>18</sup> In part because of this hostility, the British imagined a long time-table for independence. Eventually, the strength of voices for independence became so powerful that the British could no longer ignore them. Here, British anxieties met the anxieties of white colonists, and the British anxieties won out. The British were afraid that failure to grant independence would lead to violence and possibly move the colonies toward the communist East.<sup>19</sup> And so, the policy of the

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: A History of the Continent Since Independence* (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 2011), 78. Read the whole chapter on "The Winds of Change" as an example of this phenomenon. 75–92.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* It is also illustrative here that the British granting African independence was no mere act of altruism. It was a response to their anxiety. Thus, motives are always mixed in politics, even the best actions containing corruptions, as Niebuhr would regularly point out.



British became that “[n]o longer would African political progress be held up by the objections of white settlers.”<sup>20</sup>

This leads us to a second element of sin, which is pride. Pride is the human attempt to claim for oneself more than what one deserves. Niebuhr describes what happens this way:

The ego does not feel secure and therefore grasps for more power in order to make itself secure. . . . The will-to-power in short involves the ego in injustice. It seeks a security beyond the limits of human finiteness and this inordinate ambition arouses fears and enmities . . .<sup>21</sup>

This pride includes not only bare survival but also prestige and honor as well.: “Once the effort to gain significance beyond himself has succeeded, man fights for his social eminence and increased significance with the same fervor and with the same sense of justification, with which he fights for his life.”<sup>22</sup> In short, human beings seek to secure

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 89–90.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM 1*, 189 and 192.

<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* [hereafter *MMIS*] (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 42.

their own power, prestige, and security even at the expense of others.<sup>23</sup> This is what Niebuhr calls “pride of power.”<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note that it is hard for an individual to make such an inordinate claim about himself, at least openly. Thus, Niebuhr observes that it is more likely that the individual will exalt the group of which he is a part. As Langdon Gilkey, in his introduction to *Moral Man and Immoral Society* writes:

As Niebuhr once remarked, it was only an unusual individual who could feel his own power or his wisdom to be such that they could claim to be the center of the world. As a consequence, most of us make this claim together, through the community of which we are a part: a tribe, family, religion, nation, race, gender, profession, or church. Serious sins are mostly communal sins.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> One objection that is commonly raised against Niebuhr’s view is that pride of power does not seem to apply to oppressed groups. A similar objection has been raised by feminist theologians. They believe that pride of power is a helpful explanation of male experience, but it is less helpful when it comes to women or oppressed groups. As Therese De Lisio explains:

Niebuhr’s emphasis on the sin of pride necessarily results in a theology which judges the will-to-power and self-love as inherently sinful, if not ontologically, then for all practical purposes. As feminist theologians and some third-world theologians have pointed out, Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin has no application to the powerless, while they are powerless. (“Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About the Race Problem?”, 12).

What is important to note here is that Niebuhr does not believe that pride of power is the only response to anxiety. The other alternative is what Niebuhr calls “sensuality”: “It resides in the inclination of man, either to deny the contingent character of his existence (in pride and self-love) or to escape from his freedom (in sensuality)” (*NDM 1*, 185). Sensuality is “an effort to escape from the freedom and the infinite possibilities of spirit by becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities and interests of existence . . .” (Ibid.). In the case of those who may be in a position of lesser power, that person could be tempted to ignore their oppression, be absorbed in the more powerful person and deny his or her personhood, or accept an oppressed position as their proper state. This would be just as wrong as pride of power. So, Niebuhr does recognize that pride of power is not the only response to anxiety or the only temptation to which we are susceptible. See the much lengthier discussion and defense of these criticisms of Niebuhr in Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology and Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72–86.

<sup>24</sup> Note that Niebuhr describes other forms of pride in *NDM 1*, 194–203. He says that there is also intellectual, moral, and religious pride. His discussion of these forms of pride is very illuminating and convicting. However, they are less in play in the area of race. Though it should be noted that King’s opposition to violence was at least partly pragmatic. “Anyone leading a violent rebellion must be willing to make an honest assessment regarding the possible casualties to a minority population confronting a well-armed, wealthy majority with a fanatical right wing that would delight in exterminating thousands of black men, women, and children” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Carson, Clayborne, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. Clayborne Carson [New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001], 329).

<sup>25</sup> *MMIS*, xxiii.

In addition, as Niebuhr notes, there is a moral plausibility to racial and national pride. One can exalt the self vicariously through the nation but at the same time sacrifice for something greater than one's self, i.e., the nation or race. This "combination of unselfishness and vicarious selfishness in the individual thus gives a tremendous force to national egoism . . ." <sup>26</sup>

This brings us to the final element of sin, which is self-deception. It is depicted in Adam's own explanation of his sin that it was "the woman You gave me." This is rooted in our excessive self-love. "Man loves himself inordinately. Since his determinate existence does not deserve the devotion lavished upon it, it is obviously necessary to practice some deception in order to justify such excessive devotion." <sup>27</sup> As Calvin put it:

The vices with which we abound we both carefully conceal from others, and flatteringly represent to ourselves as minute and trivial, nay, sometimes hug them as virtues. When the same qualities, which we admire in ourselves are seen in others, even though they should be superior, we, in order that we may not be forced to yield to them, maliciously lower and carp at them; in like manner, in the case of vices, not contented with severe and keen animadversion, we studiously exaggerate them. <sup>28</sup>

Calvin's statement is an illustration of our pride and the way it tends to deceive us.

Beyond this, human beings almost never want to admit their own pride. They seek to

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<sup>26</sup> *MMIS*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM 1*, 203.

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 3.7.4.

use moral justifications in order to explain their actions. So, there is always an element of self-deception that seeks to cover up the anxiety and pride that we experience.

Niebuhr illustrates this self-deception about our anxiety and pride from an example in California. He writes, “The Japanese were frequently hated on the West Coast because they are incredibly efficient truck gardeners, and white competitors *veiled their envy and fear* by various accusations.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, “the accusations may be prompted more by the fear of competitive superiority than by any real conviction of their inferiority.”<sup>30</sup>

Niebuhr mocks the racist as someone who sees himself as “the ultimate man” and writes: “This ultimate man has a darkly conscious sense of the fact that he is not as ultimate as he pretends, and that the groups that he pretends to hold in contempt might actually beat him at his own game if he relaxed the restraints that he has placed upon them.”<sup>31</sup> There is a fear that we are not as great as we think we are that manifests itself in oppressive activity. Anxiety, self-deception, and pride work together.

### *Race and Group Dynamics*

A view of the problem of racism as Niebuhr sees it would not be complete without a discussion of his views of group dynamics in relation to race. These are not

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<sup>29</sup> Emphasis added, “Christian Faith and the Race Problem” in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* [hereafter L&J] ed. D.B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 126–127.

specifically Christian insights. They are rather wise observations based on a study of human nature.

Niebuhr's observation about groups is this. Group morality is generally much lower than that of individuals. It tends to sink to the lowest common denominator. As Niebuhr expresses it: "individual limitations have a cumulative effect in human societies."<sup>32</sup> The result is, as Niebuhr says, that the "common members of any national community, while sentimentally desiring peace, nevertheless indulge impulses of envy, jealousy, pride, bigotry, and greed which make for conflict between communities."<sup>33</sup> Thus, Niebuhr concluded (and here history has borne out his prediction):

However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon this one point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.<sup>34</sup>

The limitations of group imagination and morality make the problems of race all the more intractable. When it comes to groups, you have much less room to maneuver that you do with individuals.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *MMIS*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>35</sup> To help the reader understand this, consider an analogy. Imagine you a University of Tennessee fan watching UT play Alabama with your friend who is an Alabama fan. Inevitably, you and your friend disagree about a call that the referee makes. Now, it will probably be hard to convince your friend of your position, but sometimes you may get them to overcome their prejudice and admit that they did not see things correctly or vice versa. But then, imagine that you are watching the game with a room full of Alabama fans. Imagine yourself trying to persuade a room full of Alabama fans. Picture yourself trying to persuade that group that the penalty was a correct call when they disagree. Are you likely to convince them? Chances are much lower. There is much less room to maneuver when group loyalty, anxieties, and pride are in play.

## *Summary of Part 1*

Racism is not some strange aberration from normal humanity (which is not to excuse it). It is rooted in the same worries and fears that we all experience and the same inordinate self-love and attempts to cover over it that is common to all human beings. Man is, as Niebuhr said, “an unregenerate tribalist.” This is important because, as Niebuhr warned, “Whenever these universal tendencies are attributed to the peculiar defects of certain races and groups, the day of their elimination is merely postponed.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, race loyalty is similar in dynamic to other group loyalties such as class, religion, regional, or other affinity groups.<sup>37</sup>

What we have seen is that the Christian faith as explained by Reinhold Niebuhr offers a plausible explanation for the intractable nature of racism. It is rooted in our creation as ethnic groups, our anxiety over their existence, the pride that seeks to overcome it in our own way, and the self-deception that sees only our own virtues and ignores the virtues of others. Add to this the wisdom of the lesser imagination and morality of groups, and you have a rather fulsome explanation of why racism seems so hard to overcome. In fact, the explanation may go too far. Is the race issue really as intractable as Niebuhr pictures it? Is it really as hard to overcome as Niebuhr would

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<sup>36</sup> “The Confession of a Tired Radical” in *LeS*, 123. He said this even while recognizing that the “sins that the white man has committed against the colored man cry to heaven.” Even so, he asked, “But might it not be well for the ultimate peace of society if intelligent white men and colored men studied and analyzed these sins not so much as the peculiarities of a race, but as the universal characteristics of *Homo sapiens*. . . .”? [Ibid., 121].

<sup>37</sup> See Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 83–162 and Niebuhr, *CLCD*, 119–152.

have us believe? To answer that, we move to the second part of the discussion which is Niebuhr's view of the solutions to racism.

## **Part II - The Solution to Racism**

A deep-seated problem will require a lot of resources for its solution. Thus, it is not surprising that Niebuhr believed that the solution to racism would require much effort:

A democratic society must use every stratagem of education and every resource of religion to generate an appreciation of the virtues and good intension of minority groups. . . [it] must, in other words, seek proximate solutions for this problem in indeterminate creative ventures.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, Niebuhr warned, that there is no absolute solution “in the sense that it is not possible to purge man completely of the sinful concomitant of group pride in his collective life.”<sup>39</sup>

In light of the fact that Niebuhr believed that it would require “[a]ll the spiritual resources of our nation . . . to effect even a tolerable minimal solution”<sup>40</sup> to the race problem, it is not surprising that some would criticize Niebuhr for undue pessimism. Therese DeLisio states this objection summarily: “Niebuhr’s realism is as limited today as it was in Niebuhr’s time, in its adequacy to constructively address the

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<sup>38</sup> *CLCD*, 143–144

<sup>39</sup> “The Race Problem” in *L&J*, 131. Consider Mark Peach’s comment in his article “Privileged to Serve”: “While it is right for White Christians to ask, ‘What is my role in seeking justice for all?’ there is a temptation to believe that there is an easy fix. History reveals that there is no simple solution to an embedded racial problem. Instead, we must be willing to humble ourselves before those for whom injustice is an everyday reality” (*Heal Us, Emmanuel: A Call for Racial Reconciliation, Representation, and Unity in the Church*, ed. Doug Serven [Oklahoma City: White Blackbird Books, 2016]), 93.

<sup>40</sup> “The Negro Issue in America” in *L&J*, 143.

problem of racism, because ‘realism’ too easily degrades into defeatism.”<sup>41</sup> It is not too hard, even for friends of Niebuhr, to overstate Niebuhr’s pessimism, which demonstrates that it is probably rooted to some degree in how Niebuhr expressed himself.<sup>42</sup>

However, Niebuhr had a shade of optimism as well as pessimism. In speaking of the possibility of a democratic world state, for example, he adopted the old adage: “If hopes are dupes, fears may be liars.”<sup>43</sup> A careful reading of Niebuhr shows that he puts no limit on what can be achieved collectively or by individuals. In his book *Faith and History* (as one example among many), he criticizes Christian approaches that “betray a defeatist attitude toward the social existence of mankind.”<sup>44</sup> He goes on to say that such views fail “to understand that the moral ambiguity in all social structures and institutions does not destroy *the possibility of indeterminate improvement in them.*”<sup>45</sup> There is “except of course the one limit, that there will be some corruption, as well as deficiency, of virtue and truth on the new level of achievements.”<sup>46</sup> In Niebuhr’s view

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<sup>41</sup> “Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About the Race Problem?”, p. 12

<sup>42</sup> For example, Andrew J. Bacevich criticizes the Bush administration for their unwillingness to be satisfied with “mere equilibrium” (in preface to *The Irony of American History* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952 and 2008], xviii). Whatever one may think of the Bush administration’s strategy (and I think much of Bacevich’s criticism is right), I think it is unwarranted to say that Niebuhr would be satisfied with “mere equilibrium.” See his discussion of world government in Niebuhr, *CLCD*, 153–190.

<sup>43</sup> *CLCD*, 176.

<sup>44</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 199.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol. 2: Human Destiny* [hereafter *NDM 2*] (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943, 1964), 156.



there is plenty of reason for a cautious optimism and plenty of room to dream about how things could be better.

With that in mind, let us consider the necessity and the downsides of the use of politics, education, and religion in overcoming racism.

### *Politics and Race*

As we noted earlier, history has demonstrated that Niebuhr was correct when he said:

However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon this one point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.<sup>47</sup>

It was not primarily education or religion that ended segregation and so many legalized instances of oppression in the South but political coercion. Niebuhr believed that coercion was an inevitable part of justice in this age. Because each group sought its own interests and was unable to use much creativity in a group context, force was always going to be necessary in order to obtain a just society.<sup>48</sup> This was the viewpoint that inspired Martin Luther King's political action: "Ghana has something to say to us. It says to us first that oppressor never voluntary gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it. Freedom is never given to anybody. Privileged classes never

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<sup>47</sup> *MMIS*, 253

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr makes an important qualification on what "interests" means in *MNC*: "This dialectic relation between the values of a culture and the self-regard of the hegemonous nations reveals that the national interest cannot be simply defined. All the elements of prestige, power, and force must be accounted for" (79). This is important to keep in mind because it demonstrates the variety of political aims and ventures that can take place in order to bring various interests together.

give up their privileges without strong resistance.”<sup>49</sup> Coercion and political action are required in order to bring about justice and calibrate interest with interest.<sup>50</sup>

The problem with the use of coercion is that it can produce a backlash and end up producing less justice. As Niebuhr wrote:

Conflict and coercion are manifestly such dangerous instruments. They are so fruitful of the very evils from which society must be saved than an intelligent society will not countenance their indiscriminate use. . . . Moral reason must learn how to make coercion its ally without running the risk of a Pyrrhic victory in which the ally exploits and negates the triumph.<sup>51</sup>

Great caution was needed in making use of these instruments. Niebuhr rejected pacifism relatively early in his career.<sup>52</sup> He did not believe Christianity and coercion were opposed. However, he did believe Christianity could provide insight

. . . not by an effort to abolish coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to a minimum, by counselling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society and by discriminating between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.<sup>53</sup>

Niebuhr no doubt would have commended the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that in the midst of conflict we should always keep in mind: “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle is

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<sup>49</sup> King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 111.

<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr probably disagreed with MLK on the issue of violence. Niebuhr said, “Once we admit the factor of coercion as ethically justified, though we concede that it is always morally dangerous, we cannot draw any absolute line of demarcation between violent and non-violent coercion” (*MMIS*, 172). That did not mean that he believed in its indiscriminate use. “If violence can be justified at all, its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon’s skill and healing must follow quickly upon its wounds” (*Ibid.*, 220).

<sup>51</sup> *MMIS*, 238

<sup>52</sup> On this point, see Colm McKeogh, “Niebuhr’s Critique of Pacifism” in Daniel Rice, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 201–221.

<sup>53</sup> *MMIS*, 234

over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.”<sup>54</sup>

But was Niebuhr overly cautious about the use of coercion? Herbert O. Edwards believed that Niebuhr was overly cautious. He believed that Niebuhr’s “analysis almost always places the white power structure in the foreground as definitive of the ‘real’ situation and then explains why failure is all but inevitable given the nature of that ‘reality.’” He went on to say that Niebuhr would propose an alternative action “that would not rock the boat too much.”<sup>55</sup> Another potential example of Niebuhr’s undue pessimism about order and thus undue caution about coercion is in the case of South Africa. Steven De Gruchy quotes Niebuhr as predicting concerning South Africa that “the situation marches toward what seems now an inevitable catastrophic climax.”<sup>56</sup> De Gruchy comments on this, “That the apocalypse did not come provokes an interesting question about Niebuhr’s analysis of South Africa . . .”<sup>57</sup>

In response, let me suggest that Therese De Lisio is probably right in how she ended her article on Niebuhr. She quoted him as saying, “After almost two centuries of broken promises and pledges our debt to our Negro minority is immense and

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<sup>54</sup> King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 125.

<sup>55</sup> Herbert O. Edwards, “Niebuhr, ‘Realism,’ and Civil Rights in America,” *C&C* 46, no. 1 (February 3, 1986), 14. Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin agrees with this criticism: “The way that this realism about power distorts our estimate of its durability can be seen in Niebuhr’s judgments during these early days of the civil rights movement, when he sometimes focused more on the risk of massive white resistance than on the demand for a higher justice” (“Prophetic Faith and American Democracy” in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 228).

<sup>56</sup> Steve De Gruchy, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Southern Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 80, (Sep. 1992), 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

obvious, and its burden lies heavily upon our consciences.” She then added, “I suspect that it weighted heavily on Niebuhr’s as well.”<sup>58</sup> He could have done more. Perhaps he was too cautious.

Second, though the United States and South Africa did not descend into a full-scale race war, the political battle for racial equality has not always ended so peacefully. I would recommend the reading of Martin Meredith’s *The Fate of Africa: A History of the Continent Since Independence*. Meredith, for example, describes the Algerian march for independence. This process did descend into violence and involved the near total removal of the white population after a bitter civil war. Meredith writes about the culmination of this violence:

In a final paroxysm of violence, the OAS took revenge on the Muslim population, bombing and murdering at random, destroying schools, libraries and hospital facilities, attacking florists’ stalls and grocery shops, determined to leave behind nothing more than “scorched earth.”<sup>59</sup>

Another example is that of Zimbabwe. The white minority led by Ian Smith refused to let go of control and the result was “a state unrecognized by the international community, subjected to trade boycotts, ravaged by civil war that had cost at least 20,000 lives and facing a perilous future.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> DeLisio, “Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About the Race Problem?”, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Meredith, *The Fate of Africa*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

South Africa is a good example on both sides of the ball of how both black Africans and white Africans learned from these debacles. On the one side, the black Africans led by Nelson Mandela did not want to alienate the white population. Mandela believed strongly in multi-racial democracy. As Meredith explains:

No matter what personal hardship he had undergone, he was determined never to lose sight of the goal of non-racial democracy, believing that white fear of it could eventually be overcome. . . . His generosity of spirit also had a profound impact on his white adversaries, earning him measures of trust and confidence that laid the foundations for a political settlement.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, F.W. de Klerk and others believed that with the fall of the Soviet Union and thus a reduction of anxiety over a communist takeover of South Africa, the time was ripe for a settlement. De Klerk did not want to repeat the mistakes of Rhodesia, as he said: “When the opportunity was there for real constructive negotiation, it was not grasped. We must not make that mistake.”<sup>62</sup> There were anxieties on both sides, but they led to different sorts of actions than many of those in similar situations. Thus, it is important to remember Niebuhr’s point about predicting history:

In any event, no scientific investigations of past behavior can become the basis of predictions of future behavior. [The historian] cannot do so, not only because he has insufficient knowledge of the complex causes of the past; but because he can not predict which one of the many tendencies and forces which determine actions, may have a dominant place in the life of individuals and nations.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>63</sup> *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 47. In light of Meredith’s book and my earlier references to it, it is particularly noteworthy that Niebuhr states along similar lines: “One cannot predict how the British community may react to external or internal stresses in the future” (40>

Thus, anxiety can produce a variety of actions in various combinations of creativity and sin that are very hard to predict.

### *Education and Race*

Education can be highly useful in dealing with racism. Niebuhr recommends its use in combatting racial prejudice: “Let the church, in dealing with the race issue, avail itself of every measure of enlightenment that modern science, anthropological and psychological, can contribute to the issue.”<sup>64</sup> In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr commends the “rational resources” available for communal living.<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr was a great believer in science and rationality and spent most of his career as an educator.

The problem, as Niebuhr saw it, was that the proponents of the Enlightenment and their heirs sought to wring too much out of it. They believed that ridding the world of “superstition” would bring about a just society, but Niebuhr noted that it really had not brought about all that they had hoped for. Education had increased “without checking the constant growth of social injustice.”<sup>66</sup> Beyond this, reason and rationality can also be used in the service of egotism: “Reason may not only justify egoism prematurely but actually give it a force which it does not possess in non-

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<sup>64</sup> “Christian Faith and the Race Problem” in *L&J*, 128. See this whole article as a helpful description of Niebuhr’s views of the relationship of education to the race problem, 125–129.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 23–50.

<sup>66</sup> *MMIS*, 24.

rational nature.”<sup>67</sup> The reason is that “human pride is more powerful than any instruments of which it avails itself.”<sup>68</sup>

The important thing to recognize is that man is motivated by much more than reason. Anxieties and egotism run very deep. That does not mean education is useless, just a limited tool. Niebuhr described how it could help this way: “Original sin is something darker and more terrible than mere stupidity and is therefore not eradicated by enlightenment alone, though frequently enlightenment can break some of its power by robbing it of some of its instruments of stupidity.”<sup>69</sup> What is truly needed is something much deeper: “Race bigotry . . . must be broken by repentance and not merely by enlightenment.”<sup>70</sup> And with that, we turn to religion.

### *Religion and Race*

To many people, religion is a panacea on race.<sup>71</sup> If we could get people to become more religious, then the race problem would disappear.<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr would

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>68</sup> *NDM 2*, 128.

<sup>69</sup> “Christian Faith and the Race Problem” in *L&J*, 128. He used the metaphor of armor in *MMIS*: “When power is robbed of the shining armor of political, moral, and philosophical theories, by which it defends itself, it will fight on without armor; but it will be more vulnerable, and the strength of its enemies increased” (33).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> As an example: “I keep hearing people saying we need more conversations about race,” the former Arkansas governor opined. “Actually we don’t need more conversations. What we need is conversions because the reconciliations that changes people is not a racial reconciliation, it’s a spiritual reconciliation when people are reconciled to God” (Mike Huckabee calls for less dialog on race and more ‘conversions’ for Jesus: God already ‘solved’ racism,” Raw Story, <http://www.rawstory.com/2015/06/mike-huckabee-calls-for-less-dialog-on-race-and-more-conversions-for-jesus-god-already-solved-racism/>, June 23, 2015). I don’t necessarily agree with this article’s or site’s perspective. For the purposes of this paper, I thought it would be worthwhile to provide an example of someone saying what Huckabee said.

<sup>72</sup> Bobby Griffith’s article “The Theology of Race in the South” in *Heal Us, Emmanuel* is an example of the same problem in reverse. He blames theology for the racism in America (Serven, ed., *Heal Us, Emmanuel*, 164). Though bad theology may contribute to racism, I would suggest that racist theology is more likely the servant of our anxiety, pride, and self-deception. Griffith’s own article demonstrates this. He points out, “As chattel slavery gave way to segregation after the Civil War, segregationists had a more difficult time biblically defending their practice than slaveholders had. The biblical justifications were thin and rooted more in culture than the text” (ibid., 168). This demonstrates to me that the

warn against such hopes for two reasons. First, every attainment in religion brings a temptation to pride:

The ultimate sin is the religious sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit. This is done when our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim divine sanction. For this reason religion is not simply as is generally supposed an inherently virtuous human quest for God.<sup>73</sup>

Second, religion has not done that well at reducing the pride of nations:

The Christian ideal should make for humility; but the long history of religious self-righteousness reveals that religious experience is more effective in inducing repentance for deviation from common standards than in inducing repentance for the hatred, bigotry, and prejudice involved in the common standards of race and nation, or church.<sup>74</sup>

Too often, religion has done the opposite of produce humility. At the time of Niebuhr's writing, he suggested that the American evangelical church had not done very well at all on the issue of race. He proposed: "We Protestants might begin the new chapter in our national life by contritely confessing that evangelical Christianity

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theology was not the cause but something else (namely, anxiety, pride, and self-deception) searching for theological justification. Perhaps it would be better to say that even Christian theology could not counteract racism and instead often became a tool of human pride.

<sup>73</sup> *NDM 1*, 200.

<sup>74</sup> *MNC*, 111. The American South is a great example of this failure. Whites and African-Americans shared a common evangelical religion, but that did not save African-Americans from the oppression of slavery and then segregation. Besides the ordinary reasons of anxiety, pride, and self-acceptance, Niebuhr suggested that the reason for this was that the South possessed an individualistic religion focused on individual conversion that did not move to social issues. In addition, an intense form of congregationalism kept the individual ministers and churches isolated and from speaking to issues affecting the broader community. The result was, according to Niebuhr, "The difficulty is that the local congregations, and particularly the local ministers, find it difficult to withstand local pressures, particularly when, as is often case, the citizens councils have infiltrated into the local congregation" ("The Race Problem in America," 169). In addition, Niebuhr lamented, "In the South, denominational divisions are still so strong that there is little fellowship even between white pastors and congregations across denominational lines." ["The Negro Issue in America" in *LeJ*, 145].



has failed to contribute significantly to the solution of the gravest social issue and evil that our nation has confronted.”<sup>75</sup>

So, what tools can religion, primarily here the Christian religion, bring to bear on the issue of race? First, it is a religion designed to humble us.

Christianity rightly regards itself as a religion, not so much of man's search for God . . . but as a religion of revelation in which a holy and loving God is revealed to man as the source and end of all finite existence against whom the self-will of man is shattered and his pride abased.<sup>76</sup>

This humility should lead to a more sober evaluation of ourselves and a humility before other human beings. We need only remember Niebuhr's warning: “But as soon as the Christian assumes that he is, by virtue of possessing this revelation, more righteous, because more contrite, than other men, he increases the sin of self-righteousness and makes the forms of a religion of contrition the tool of his pride.”<sup>77</sup>

The second tool of religion in its opposition to racism is its emphasis on the brotherhood of all human beings as created in the image of God, fallen in sin, and potential recipients of the grace of God in Christ. One of Niebuhr's favorite passages was, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” (Matt. 5:46a). He believed that

in the logic of those words the whole genius of Christian religion is revealed. The transcendent perspective of religion makes all men our brothers and

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<sup>75</sup> “The Confession of a Tired Radical” in *LeJ*, 122.

<sup>76</sup> *NDM 1*, 200. The cross itself reveals this most clearly: “The Cross represents a perfection which contradicts the false pretensions of virtue in history and which reveals the contrast between man's sinful self-assertion and the divine *agape*” [Niebuhr, *NDM 2*, 89].

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

nullifies the divisions, by which nature, climate, geography, and the accidents of history divide the human family.<sup>78</sup>

The question in Mt. 5:46a is one that Christian preachers need to ask again and again, “We cannot deny the ethnic particularity of all men. . . . But these communities of nature are always subject to the judgment: ‘If you love them which love you, what thanks have you?’”<sup>79</sup>

The final resource of religion is the Gospel. It is the good news of God’s grace for and in man through the cross of Jesus Christ. The Gospel assures us of God’s care for us. It is faith in the Gospel that enables us to overcome the anxiety in which racism is rooted:

The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. . . . It is significant that Jesus justifies his injunction, “Be not anxious,” with the observation, “For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.” The freedom from anxiety which he enjoins is a possibility only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved.<sup>80</sup>

It is trust in God that ultimately deals properly with the issue of anxiety. Niebuhr later insists that without this security, it is unlikely that someone will turn from anxiety to love: “Without freedom from anxiety man is so enmeshed in the vicious circle of egocentricity, so concerned about himself, that he cannot release himself for the

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<sup>78</sup> *MMIS*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> “The Race Problem in America,” 170.

<sup>80</sup> *NDM 1*, 182.

adventure of love.”<sup>81</sup> In light of such a strong statement about the need for the love of God, it is intriguing that Niebuhr did not pursue it further. It would seem that the Gospel is perfectly suited to turn man from anxiety, pride, and self-deception to confession, trust, and love. These are precisely the elements that are needed in dealing with the race question: honesty about our sin, trust in God’s care of us and those whom we love, and an openness to the blessing of people outside our groups.

### *Summary and Conclusion of Part 2*

The race problem is deep-seated and challenging. As Niebuhr explains, “The ideal of racial brotherhood is the ‘law of God’ in which we delight ‘after the inward man’; but racial arrogance is ‘the law in our members which wars against the law that is in our mind.’”<sup>82</sup> However, we should not give up. One of Niebuhr’s favorite verses is that we are “perplexed, but not in despair” (2 Cor. 4:8). There is no reason to assume that this situation cannot be better. Niebuhr, writing in 1942 said that “there are not half a dozen churches in our whole nation that have transcended race pride in their corporate life to any considerable degree.”<sup>83</sup> and in 1944 that “in the Northern churches there is frequently no fellowship below the level of the general conference of the entire church.”<sup>84</sup> This, we can say, is much less the case, and there seems to be a

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<sup>81</sup> *NDM 1*, 272. A similar statement is made in the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume: “Christ as ‘power’ and as ‘grace’ can be mediated to the individual only if the truth of the Atonement is appropriated inwardly. In that case the alternate moods of despair and false hope are overcome and the individual is actually freed to live a life of serenity and creativity” (*NDM 2*, 57–58).

<sup>82</sup> *CLCD*, 142.

<sup>83</sup> “The Race Problem” in *LeJ*, 130

<sup>84</sup> “The Negro Issue in America” in *LeJ*, 145.

greater desire amongst Christians today to visibly demonstrate the unity we have in Jesus. This should help us not to despair. But we've got a long way to go, and so, as William Castor advised, "Let's keep a sense of urgency in the need to break the grip of the strong racial and ethnic mindset that is our historical burden."<sup>85</sup> With prayer and humility, we should make use of all the elements of politics, education, and religion to overcome the innate tendencies toward racial and other group pride. An understanding of the depths of the problem as analyzed by the Christian faith will commend the use of all the resources that the Christian faith recommends against this problem.

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<sup>85</sup> "Deconstructing the Racialist Framework," in Serven, ed., *Heal Us, Emmanuel: A Call for Reconciliation, Representation, and Unity in the Church*, 208