

THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN

Theologians abroad have been known to express concern at the apparent lack of interest in contemporary American Protestant thought, which Catholics on this side of the ocean display. If there were this lack of interest, the reasons for it would not be hard to find. American Protestants depend so much on German thinkers that one might as well read the Germans, especially since their theological work has a freshness which the Americans never quite seem to achieve. But there are more radical reasons. In the more important works published in America, profound metaphysical speculation is too frequently marred by a pervasive carelessness about the precise definition and meaning of abstract terms. Even fellow Protestant theologians, as one can gather from the reviews of such books, find it necessary to confess that the author's precise meaning in many points escapes them. The prevailing accent upon novelty and originality in speculation does not improve the situation. A cognate difficulty is the immense patience which the Catholic theologian must exercise with the Protestant theologian's misunderstanding and misstatement of Catholic doctrines about which there is no lack of clarity whatsoever. The Catholic knows the great cost, in terms of intellectual discipline, with which the precision and clarity of his theology are achieved and maintained. He finds it difficult to approach with sympathy any work which evades a similar intellectual discipline both in the precision of the author's own thinking and in the meticulous care with which contrary positions are presented.

Both of these difficulties are encountered in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, in which Professor Reinhold Niebuhr publishes his series of Gifford lectures.¹ Even to Protestants who are more familiar with him, Niebuhr makes hard reading. He is much more difficult for a Catholic. Moreover, he not unfrequently, however unwittingly, misstates the Catholic position. Yet it must be recognized that Niebuhr is a man of reputation amongst our Protestant brethren. He is known as the author of a series of books which have stamped him as a thinker "who is going politically to the Left and theologically to the Right." He has been for a number of years professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. These lectures were given at the University of Edinburgh in a chair which has been occupied by Archbishop Temple and Sir Charles Sherrington, discussing the same subject matter. He was chosen, therefore, to represent American Protestant theology in a very distinguished setting. These facts may justify the present attempt to set forth some of the salient ideas of Professor Niebuhr's two volumes. Because of the difficulty alluded to above, there is a not inconsiderable danger that this review may in some instances fail of perfect accuracy in representing Niebuhr's views. To minimize this danger we shall, so far as possible, let the

¹ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. I: *Human Nature*. Vol. II: *Human Destiny*. By Reinhold Niebuhr. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941 and 1943. Pp. xii + 306 and xii + 329. Each \$2.75.

author speak for himself. It is hoped that we shall not misunderstand him as grievously as he himself has misunderstood Catholic doctrines.

Niebuhr's method makes a truly thorough analysis of his work quite impossible. To begin with, this is essay-theology with a vengeance. Order and arrangement are more prominent in the second volume than in the first, but both leave much to be desired in this respect. In addition, there is little progression or development of teaching. It is Emerson's style applied to theological thought. Moreover, the author is a dialectical theologian, a dealer in paradox, who holds that "what is true in the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception." At various points in these lectures, particularly in the second volume, clues to the "provisional deception" are given, but nowhere are enough given to enable the reader to work out the author's epistemology. In addition to, and perhaps because of, these principles, the author's thought is always involved. Summaries are given which often do more than merely summarize. Frequently X is said not to be Y when one feels that the author means rather that it is not merely Y. Words in one collocation mean one thing, and in another something quite different. This may seem to be an ordinary feature of style, but in these volumes it is pushed to the extent that "absurd," for example, is applied to doctrines both as a word of reproach and as a high encomium.

Among philosophers, Niebuhr has words of admiration for Hegel, Marx, and indirectly for Kant. He appears to have been particularly influenced by the philosophical ideas of Kierkegaard as exploited in recent years by Martin Heidigger. Indeed, he affirms that the latter's *Sein und Zeit* is the ablest non-theological analysis of human nature written in modern times (I, 161 f.). This philosophical background means that Niebuhr's thought is conducted in an atmosphere of polemics, that rationalism is slurred and irrationalism is commended. Obviously, the knowledge of truth and its systematization can never be complete in this world. Yet, unless a thinker recognizes some objective order of universal immutable principles as valid in theoretical and practical spheres for all men and for all times and circumstances, his thinking is bound to be like the course of a rudderless ship at sea. This is not to say that there is not a certain amount of room for the interaction of intellectualism and irrationalism in the application of these fundamental principles to individual cases. The Catholic thinker will recall that the *philosophia perennis* has worked out its own way of allowing for such interplay. Just where Niebuhr stands in regard to this problem remains, despite his frequent criticism of reason and rationalism, far from clear. At times he seems to be profoundly anti-intellectual, and yet he states (I, 262) that any defiance of logic must be only provisional. And that, probably, is his ultimate stand.

One of his favorite philosophical ideas points in the same direction. It is the idea of man's transcendence and is expressed in an astonishing number of ways. The basal idea is borrowed from Ritschl, viz., "the contradiction in which man finds himself as both a part of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate

nature." Man, who weighs his rational faculties, is in some sense more than reason. If man must be dissuaded from self-neglect and suicide, this implies a vantage point in him above natural life and history. By transcending natural flux man is enabled to grasp a span of time in his consciousness and thereby know history. He has a "partial simultaneity" and can conceive of God's "total simultaneity." But man can not only transcend nature, life, and the world; he can transcend himself: "The human spirit has the special capacity of standing continually outside itself in terms of indefinite regression." Although the self can thus make itself an object, it must do so in such a way that "the ego is finally always subject and not object" (I, 14). Self-transcendence also means that the self can never find the meaning of life in itself or the world. The human spirit is therefore essentially homeless. It transcends itself sufficiently to know that its center is not within itself, that it can never be the center of its own existence. Involvement in the flux and finiteness of nature is so obvious that nature cannot claim divinity for itself. Man has an environment of eternity, "but cannot know it through the mere logical ordering of his experience" (I, 125). The only principle of comprehension of self and of the world, therefore, inevitably lies beyond his comprehension. But the "soul which reaches the outermost rims of its own consciousness must also come in contact with God, for He impinges upon consciousness" (I, 127).

Niebuhr has accordingly made a great deal of what the Scholastics call the power of perfect reflection. Despite a certain strangeness of terminology, a Catholic philosopher would undoubtedly profit by study of the passages in which this idea recurs. And there are scores of such passages. Moreover, most of the author's insights here seem to be quite valid. Indeed, he approaches at times the developments which Père J. Maréchal uses in his *Point de départ de la métaphysique*, Cahier V, on intellectual dynamism. But Niebuhr does not match Maréchal's carefulness to avoid ontologism. He follows Max Scheler into a modified but indefensible form of that error. Many of his statements also manifest a fideistic tendency. This fideism, and the vicious circle implied in it, the author frankly acknowledges (I, 129). Further reflection upon the power of perfect reflection may yet bring the author to a position nearer to that of the *philosophia perennis*, and far removed from the epistemological chaos in which at present he is lost.

Turning from his philosophical principles to his theological developments, we find that Niebuhr's thesis, in the first volume, is that the Christian view of life is the only one which enables us to understand the nature of man. The argument, as he constructs it, is both negative and positive. In the first four chapters, other estimates of man, ancient and modern, are examined and found wanting. Naturalism, idealism, romanticism are taken as types of the modern viewpoint and are described as a *mélange* of classical, Christian, and distinctively modern elements. And all are seriously defective. During the past few centuries there has been never ending debate between those who interpret man as reason and those who interpret him in terms of his relationship to nature. "Either the rational man or

the natural man is conceived as essentially good, and it is only necessary for man either to rise from the chaos of nature to the harmony of mind or to descend from the chaos of spirit to the harmony of nature in order to be saved" (I, 24). The debate led to the revolt of the romantics, materialists, and psychoanalysts against the errors of rationalism. The author gives particular attention to those currents which issued in Nazism and Communism.

In his critique Professor Niebuhr condemns—and with him condemnation can be merciless—these modern explanations of man. They do not measure man in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice either to his stature or to his creativity and destructiveness. The result has been the failure of Fascism which "exalts" even "destructive fury because it is vital," of liberalism which "imagines a harmony of forces in history which the facts belie," of Marxism which "has an illusory hope for a complete change in the human situation through a revolutionary reorganization of society," and of Freudianism which despairs of any basal solution of the problems of vitality and discipline. In addition, there is the failure, which is recognized as very serious by the author, of modern theories of man to safeguard man's individuality. Although the Renaissance put great stress on it, once separated from its Christian moorings individuality was devoured by Communism and Nazism. Even before these latter movements, stream-of-consciousness philosophies and romanticism had already sacrificed a consistent individuality—the former gladly, the latter much against its own desire.

Professor Niebuhr is certainly right when he asserts that the idea and fact of human individuality reach their highest development in the Christian religion. He fails to see, however, that the Protestant concept of the universal priesthood of believers is an exaggeration of Christian individuality. But perhaps no one who cherishes Protestantism and its principle of universal private judgement as much as Niebuhr does can be expected to see this. Failing to grasp the exaggeration of the Christian concept of individuality which characterizes the Protestant interpretation, Niebuhr himself exaggerates the Renaissance stress on individuality. Specialization in knowledge is but one of many initiatives in the complex fabric of the Renaissance which throws doubt upon his opinion that it exalted individuality unduly. At any rate, the rise of collectivist philosophies and the submergence of rugged individualism have apparently made little impression on religious individualists. With regard to Niebuhr's own exaggeration of Christian individualism, it is significant that in a book which makes so much of Pauline thought the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ (the Christian synthesis of corporatism and individualism) is not utilised.

Undue optimism is the other fundamental error which Niebuhr discerns in the modern estimates of man. Modern philosophers insist on attributing the evil in which man is actually involved to causes outside himself. "There is universal opposition to Christian conceptions of the sinfulness of man" (I, 23). Priestcraft, bad government, or class warfare may be responsible, but never man himself. Mankind has not strayed far from, and may easily return to, the innocence of

nature. Pessimists are few, and few of them are thoroughgoing. For the author this optimism is a fiction: "Under the perpetual smile of modernity there is a grimace of disillusion and cynicism." It must be remembered that these lectures were given in 1939. With the war there has come more than a mere current of doubt, running against this tide of optimism. But the Deweyites are still with us, assuming naively that they are going to teach democracy to Europeans and the Japanese. One of the healthy features of Niebuhr's book is its wholesome impatience with "the incredibly naive Mr. Dewey" (I, 111).

After this historical survey and estimate, the last six chapters of Volume I are devoted to an exposition of the Christian view of man. The historical studies of the author have been severely criticized in many reviews. Although there can be no doubt that he has frequently overstepped the bounds of his competence, the criticism he has met does seem to be just a bit severe. After all, the author is an existential philosopher, and the theology he presents is of the "empirical" type, stemming largely from the intensity of his own inner experience. In his exposition he must have someone to fight with, and his facile generalizations are merely a foil for his own thoughts. In an undocumented book, too much in the way of careful history should not be looked for. The theological discussion is often put in the form of biblical exegesis, particularly of St. Paul's epistles. St. Augustine is frequently invoked. But those who have seen in this work the personal experience of the author rather than borrowed material are certainly nearest to the truth. It is this primary dependence on his personal experience that must explain the undeniable fact that Niebuhr's historical analyses are hastily constructed and of dubious validity. Those in the second volume are somewhat more careful.

In this latter section of his first volume the author frequently selects mysticism as his adversary. Mysticism is conceived to be closest to biblical religion in measuring the depth of reality and the height of human consciousness. Here, however, Niebuhr embraces the not uncommon error of supposing that the Bible, with the exception of a few books, is opposed to mysticism. The result is a very narrow view of mysticism which leaves out of account almost all the Christian mystics and bases itself instead upon a sketchy knowledge of non-Christian mysticism. Meister Eckhardt is the only Christian mystic with whom the author shows any familiarity. St. John of the Cross is cited once and accused of abolishing the second of the great commandments.

In discussing the fact and nature of revelation, the author undoubtedly has in mind the controversies of recent years. Yet the thought of Schleiermacher seems to have influenced him more than that of any contemporary. Other elements are added to "the feeling of dependence," but all come from the Schleiermacherian *locus theologicus*. The concept of a revelation contained in myths and symbols is, needless to say, unacceptable. To a Catholic it cannot but appear as an attempt to pretend to hold Christian dogmas when these dogmas have in reality been abandoned. It is with great regret that this statement is made, but fidelity to logic and to truth seems to demand it.

Professor Niebuhr is most impressive in his analyses of sin. He insists that

the body is not evil and that the basic paradox of human existence, man's involvement in finiteness and his transcendence over it, does not militate against the truth that man *need* not sin. It is rather the case that man, part of nature and at the same time a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature, feels insecure in his position, and, in seeking to overcome this insecurity, overreaches his creatureliness. Limited and finite, man sins by acting as if he himself were the infinite center of his own existence. Sin, for Niebuhr, is never error or ignorance alone but always involves an element of conscious perversity, an effort to obscure blindness by overestimating the degree of sight, an attempt to obscure insecurity by stretching power beyond its finite limits. Thus sin predicates anxiety as the internal precondition of itself. It presupposes also, as an external precondition, the sin of a tempter. Sin therefore is not *eo ipso* involved in the paradoxical nature of man, nor does man ever sin from sheer perversity.

Pride, the author continues, is the more basic sin than sensuality. Among the forms of pride, spiritual pride is the ultimate sin: "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" (I, 200). Israel's sin was its too complete identification of self with the divine will. So, too, the Catholic Church identifies itself too simply with the Kingdom of God. The Pope is, "religiously speaking" and "in a sense," Antichrist. Indeed, according to this reasoning of the author, so are Luther and Calvin, and even, one suspects, Mr. Reinhold Niebuhr. Since spiritual pride is the final battle-ground between God and man's self-esteem, it is not surprising to find that the worst form of class domination is identified as religious class domination. Niebuhr points to India and its castes. The worst form of intolerance is religious intolerance; and he points to Philip of Spain. The worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion.

Dishonesty is presented as the inevitable concomitant of sin. This is never pure ignorance nor always a conscious lie. It is rooted in the tendency of the self, which finds its own self-consciousness at the very center of the world which it beholds, to fancy itself the whole world. This constitutes a willing ignorance, a state of general confusion from which general acts of deception arise. The desperate efforts which sinners make to deceive others must be regarded as an effort to aid the self in accepting a pretension of which it is itself the author.

The explanation of original sin is far from clear. Niebuhr approves the theory of Kierkegaard that "every individual is itself and the race and that the later individual is not significantly differentiated from the first man" (I, 264). This idea is applied in an actualistic way which has little in common with the historical meaning of the dogma. Original sin is regarded not as a fact which took place in history, but as the root from which stems the process of every actual sin. Similarly, original justice seems to mean for Niebuhr merely a consciousness of obligation and a capacity to recognize the sinful action as morally wrong: "Man's uneasy conscience is a phenomenon which can be understood only as the protest of man's essential nature against his present state" (I, 267). Original justice is

identified with that quality of man's essential nature which is the basis and origin of such protest.

This analysis of Niebuhr's treatment of sin does not cover its every feature. It does cover those phases of the author's thought which are most fundamental and characteristic. Several defects in his thought would seem to require comment. While the author does insist that sin is a free act of man and not necessarily inherent in the paradox of his human nature, he is likewise insistent on the inevitableness of sin in every free human act. The result is a representation of human freedom which resembles the thought of Spinoza more than it does the thought of Christ. Man would seem free to know and love the good, but not to do it. The sections on the external precondition of sin (a tempter) are much less penetrating than those on anxiety, the internal precondition. In order to defend Kierkegaard's dictum that sin presupposes itself, Niebuhr introduces from Babylonian and Persian satanology, *via* the Bible, a personal devil. But this is merely a *deus ex machina* (if we may so speak, in such a connection) to fit Adam's sin to Niebuhr's principle. No effort is made to explain the devil's own sin. To be logical, Niebuhr would have to postulate an infinite series, a *parte ante*, of tempters.

Volume II applies to civilizations and to history the principles which its predecessor essayed to apply to individual men. Its purpose is perhaps best expressed in the author's own words: "This ultimate problem is given by the fact that human history stands in contradiction to the divine will on any level of its moral and religious achievements in such a way that in any 'final' judgement the righteous are proved not to be righteous. The final enigma of history is therefore not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome" (II, 43). But before this final enigma another stands, equally poignant and revealing of Niebuhr's thought. This also is best and most clearly stated in his own words: "The people of Israel had been judged by God for their sins, and history had executed His terrible wrath. But when they reflected upon their fate they were overwhelmed by the incongruity of the fact that the jailers and executors of divine judgment were worse than they. The prophets might well insist that the nemesis of each proud nation would come in turn; but that did not change the immediate impression of a very unjust history which obscured the justice of God. . . . Our own generation would have faced this same perplexity in the event of the triumph of tyranny over the forces of democratic civilization. Such a triumph would undoubtedly reveal all the weaknesses and vices of democratic civilization and in that sense would have been justified as a divine judgment upon the sins of civilization. But the question would still remain: Why should the tyrants triumph? Why should those who are more evil than ourselves be the executors of judgment?" (II, 31 f.).

In developing this theme of the evil in all finite attainment of good, Niebuhr achieves some of the most telling and powerful passages in his book. It is in this connection that he comes to grips with the philosophical naiveté of modern

optimism, as it is expressed in the credo of progress which characterized so much pre-war thought. The author demolishes adulation of progress, the superstition that human history is an irresistible march toward perfection, as he demolishes no other of man's fond fallacies. The insights which he here brings to the development of his thought are a true service to Catholic and non-Catholic readers alike.

But even on this plane the Catholic must regret to find unwitting illustration of the author's principle that there is evil in all good. For, in repudiating the exaggerated optimism of modern times, Niebuhr himself has gone to an opposite extreme of undue pessimism. He has thereby greatly reduced the value of his applications of the principle to history and the validity of his final conclusions.

Niebuhr's pessimism is not the utter human despair of Martin Luther. He rejects the latter's theory of a completely corrupt human nature. Yet in defending Luther's cognate theory of justification by faith alone, Niebuhr evolves a pessimism of his own which is just as final. Man's works have no part in justification because man's works, while not necessarily sinful, are nevertheless *inevitably* sinful. Indeed, if his not unambiguous words say what they seem to say, the author is not sure of the sinlessness of Christ (II, 73). "The discovery of sin inevitably leads to the Pharisaic illusion that such a discovery guarantees sinlessness in subsequent actions" (I, 263). This illusion is in itself sinful. Thus, phoenix-like, from the ashes of sin renewed sin rises; and grace can never "remove the final contradiction between man and God" (II, 122). Does Niebuhr really mean that term "inevitably"? Surely he does not mean that all his own elaborate defense of the impossibility of sinlessness in this life is constructed in direct defiance of an illusion to the contrary which his own discovery of sin has wrought in him! It can only be said that Niebuhr's brand of pessimism, while not as black as Luther's, is charged with more vigorous seeds of contradiction.

It is true, however, that Catholic theology recognizes much that is of value in Niebuhr's position. Man can always strike his breast and say, "O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!" The saints, no matter how great their holiness, are prostrate before God in humble penitence. But Niebuhr's explanation of this is too strong. "The saint's awareness of guilt is no illusion. Sin expresses itself most terribly in its most subtle forms" (I, 258). The truth is rather in the distinction between mortal and venial sin which saves Catholics from the author's pessimism, and in the clarity with which the saints, because of their nearness to God, behold the malice of venial sin, essentially different from the evil of mortal sin (which is the only one the author sees), yet so terrible in itself. Sunspots are said to be brighter than any light on earth and yet by comparison with the greater brightness of the surrounding areas they appear dark and in a sense are dark. As Professor Niebuhr sees it, unfortunately, the sunspots put out the light of the sun of God's reflection in human souls. He should reflect on the message of II Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for strength is *made perfect* in weakness."

The pages which apply this teaching to the interpretation of history are filled

with the light and shadow which the nature of the teaching would lead one to expect. Growth in collective human life is admitted, but progress, at least in the sense of an assured advance towards righteousness, is stigmatized as a sheer illusion. Greater good always brings with it the occasion of more abundant evil. God must ever judge and find all human effort deserving of judgment and condemnation. "The idea of a 'last' judgment expresses Christianity's refutation of all conceptions of history, according to which it is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth and development, to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgment" (II, 293). Yet this does not release the Christian from the duty of striving for the realization of Christianity's ideals in this world. It was an error, says Niebuhr, for the Reformation to disavow "intermediate cultural tasks" on the ground that the ultimate wisdom was not to be found in them. He proposes a synthesis of the Renaissance, which stressed these tasks, and the Reformation, through which the latter will now try to bring about the realization of Christian possibilities in the social sphere, set out to comprehend the complexities of life and causal relations, and, in a word, endeavor to arrive at proximate answers and solutions. Catholics will laud the program of action which Niebuhr here sets forth, while utterly repudiating the background of pessimism against which it is built.

There are many interesting pages in Professor Niebuhr's volumes which these comments have not touched. These have been chosen because they seem to contain his fundamental thesis. We have sought to encounter his thought on its main points of issue. To attempt the further task of indicating and explaining his erroneous conceptions of Catholic doctrine—e.g., on the nature of grace, the theological virtues, the nature of Christ's atonement, the meaning of the supernatural, the concept of *societas perfecta*, etc.—would necessitate more space than is at our disposal and would serve no essential purpose. It is most unfortunate that there is no high forum of learning where Protestant theologians could learn, even if only in the interests of mutual understanding, just what the doctrines of Catholic theology are. In the genuine Catholic doctrine of the nature of the supernatural, for instance, Professor Niebuhr would find much to help him clarify his own thought in his attempt to modify the exaggerated intellectualism of our times.

A final word on the author's position among modern religious thinkers. Without impugning his originality, we can seek to understand the theological currents to which he is tributary. That his reading has been mostly of German and American theologians is evident in this as in his other works. His mind has been busy with both conservative and liberal Protestantism as well as with Marxism, and all three have left their impress upon his thought. His reputation has been for radicalism in politics and conservatism in religion. But this book shows that the times have carried Niebuhr with them. His *Nature and Destiny of Man* cannot be regarded as belonging to the neo-orthodoxy movement. He openly repudiates both Barth and Brunner, though he himself has been greatly influenced by their effort to renew Protestant theology. What is his present attitude towards liberal Protes-

tantism? He has been noted in the past for his withering criticisms of both liberalism and orthodoxy as Protestants understand it. He still remains true to this attitude, still stands forth as the *passer solitarius in tecto* of Protestant theology. But underneath he seems now to be moving toward the liberal Protestant fold. He still criticizes the movement and not without vigor. But Galsworthy and Wells criticized and poked fun at the English middle classes when in their hearts they regarded those classes as the salt of the earth—and England, we might add, as the salt mine. So Niebuhr seems to intimate, even in the accents of his criticism, a growing loyalty and a movement toward the liberal school.

Professor Calhoun of Yale has said of these Gifford lectures that they may serve as a rallying point for American Protestantism. This is perhaps to be their destiny. In Europe the collapse of liberal Protestantism was caused by the collapse of liberalism itself. There was no such general collapse in America, and when serene times come again it is doubtful whether the antiliberalism of Barthian theology will retain the position it has held. Such a movement cannot long survive, it would appear, without the special circumstances which contributed to its rise. But it remains to be seen whether a reaction in the direction of a chastened liberalism will be any more religiously vital. At all events, in these days when "all things flow," Catholic philosophers and theologians will do well to watch closely the set and the speed of the currents.

Woodstock College

E. A. RYAN, S.J.
J. BLUETT, S.J.