

H. Richard Niebuhr's
Theological Ethics of God's Goodness

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as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and Religion
In November 2023

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis argues that Niebuhr developed his Christology and understanding of the Trinity to justify his theological ethics of God's goodness in secular American culture. I clarify how Niebuhr sought to reconcile God's goodness, His righteousness and His love, to counter the challenge of moral relativism that accompanied the rise of American secularism. Instead of defending the notion of absolute or universal moral principles, he developed his Christology in the context of his value theory to defend God as the standard of good and the ultimate good. We shall also examine Niebuhr's inseparable Christology and pneumatology because it recognizes divine grace working on the human faculties to enable the believer's knowledge of God's goodness. Lastly, I uncover the Christology and Trinitarian framework that scaffolds Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness because of its implications for the Church in secular culture. As we shall see, Niebuhr called for the Church to defend the credibility of the its witness to secular society through its loving unity and acts of justice.

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CHAPTER 0: THESIS INTRODUCTION

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF GOD'S GOODNESS

0.1 Framing the Question

“How does Niebuhr’s Christology and understanding of the Trinity reveal God as the standard of good and the ultimate good for believers in the Church? Why did the theme of God’s goodness, his righteousness and love; become central in Niebuhr’s theological ethics?¹ Does social science have value for clarifying the Church’s role in secular culture?²

These questions frame my systematic exposition of Niebuhr’s Christology and understanding of the Trinity, culminating in his theological ethics of God’s goodness. Comprising of his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, Niebuhr situated the Church in eschatological history and in secular culture to call for the Church’s participation in the goodness of the Triune God. My thesis examines how Niebuhr dealt with God’s goodness in the context of his value theory, epistemology and ontology to defend God as the absolute being and

¹ By the term ‘ultimate good’, Niebuhr refers to God the transcendent one who is the source and end of all things, such that all that is, is good.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper, 1960), 112.

By the term ‘God’s goodness’, Niebuhr refers to God’s moral character of righteousness and love that judges the self as judge and reveals our human value before God as universal valuer: “Revelation is the moment we find our judging selves to be judged... revelation means the self-disclosure of the judge. Revelation means that we find ourselves to be valued rather than valuing and that all our values are transvaluated by the activity of a universal valuer...”

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 80.

² Niebuhr’s concern with the relationship between Christianity and culture is apparent in *Christ and Culture* (1951) and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960). I posit however, that the earlier development of his Christology and pneumatology formed the basis for his understanding of Christianity’s role and impact on culture.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002) & Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.

good in Scripture, and the ultimate good for the Christian.³ The perennial theme of God's goodness, in terms of His righteousness and love; came to the fore in Niebuhr's context because of developments in modern social science and the rise of American secularism.⁴ Characterizing theology's over-reliance upon the social sciences of sociology and psychology as American empiricism, Niebuhr highlighted its secularizing tendency to deny an otherworldliness in theology.⁵ Although Niebuhr traced the origins of American empiricism to Albrecht Ritschl, he engaged most with the American empiricism of the social gospel movement and D.C. Macintosh.⁶

Niebuhr perceived how American empiricism's incorporation of social science led it to recognize relativism, the view that the individual's standpoint or perspective shape our understanding of historical events and the world.⁷

³ Niebuhr uses the term "absolute" to refer to God-in-himself and as the the fundamental power of all reality. This is supported by his description of God his retrospective publication "Reformation" (1960) as "being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and all being, the ground of its "that-ness" and its "so-ness." Niebuhr, "Reformation", 249.

⁴ By the term "American secularism", Niebuhr refers to theology's denial of an otherworldliness and its the claim that knowledge of God is informed by sensory experience, rather than revelation. Niebuhr drew the link between the American empiricism movement's over-reliance upon social science and the rise of American secularism in his context. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁵ The origins of this movement can be traced to the profound influence that Albrecht Ritschl's empirical theology had on the social gospel movement and its decision to incorporate modern social science for theology. The movement persisted in 20th century American Evangelicalism and is marked by the belief that knowledge is informed by the senses and experience, rather than reason.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127.

⁶ As a successor of the social gospel movement, Niebuhr characterized the social gospel movement as a program of pure activism because it had lost touch with the faith and piety of early leaders like Rauschenbush and Gladden.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other," *Christian Century* 47 (1930), 914–916 & Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 49.

⁷ 'Relativism' is defined by Niebuhr as a report of experience, rather than a theory of experience to emphasize how knowledge is subjective and partisan rather than objective and disinterested.

Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 8.

Arising as a counterreaction to the rationalism of the American Enlightenment, the countermovement rejected the notion of absolute principles in theology.⁸

While my thesis establishes Niebuhr's closer adherence with the American empiricism movement, he disagreed with their beliefs that recognizing relativism entailed denying God as absolute. Stemming from the convictions that knowledge is informed by the senses and experience, Niebuhr criticized American Empiricism for perpetuating a moral relativism in Christian ethics.⁹

To account for Niebuhr's engagement with the American empiricism and German rationalism movements, my thesis identifies his theological starting point as a member of the German evangelical immigrant Church in America.¹⁰ Discontented with his denomination's insular outlook because of its exclusive emphasis on cultivating individual spirituality, Niebuhr sought to

As McFaul and Scoville have identified, Niebuhr's ethics centered upon the individual's perception of what is going on in the events surrounding one's life as well as the complex reality of the natural world.

Judith N. Scoville, "Fitting Ethics to the Land: H. Richard Niebuhr's Ethic of Responsibility and Ecotheology," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2002), 207–229 & Thomas R.

McFaul, "Dilemmas in H. Richard Niebuhr's Ethics," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 1 (1974), 35–50.

⁸ In "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic", Niebuhr associates German rationalism with the absolutism of Christian ethics while identifying moral relativism as the fruit of the American empiricism movement.

Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 4.

⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 3-11.

¹⁰ Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr were raised in the pietistic tradition of the German Evangelical and Reformed Church. By the term "German rationalism", Niebuhr refers to the German Enlightenment associated with Immanuel Kant who imposed a religious a priori as the starting point of theology and whose cognitive psychology identified the rational consciousness as the first fact of knowledge. By the term "American Empiricism", Niebuhr traced the origins of this movement to the profound influence that Albrecht Ritschl's empirical theology had on the social gospel movement and its decision to incorporate modern social science for theology. The movement persisted in 20th century American Evangelicalism and is marked by the belief that knowledge is informed by the senses and experience, rather than reason.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48 & H.

Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127. See also Ed LeRoy Miller and Stanley James Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998), 24.

recover a practical Christianity that applies to all affairs of life.¹¹ Niebuhr's practical emphases was piqued by his involvement with the labour movement that sought to secure fair working conditions for industrial workers.¹² Niebuhr's predecessors, the social gospel movement were supporters of the labour movement given their mission to alleviate injustice and inequality.¹³ His first engagement with the American empiricism movement was through the social gospel movement and its incorporation of a sociology of religion for its theological ethics.¹⁴ This reliance upon social science persisted well into Niebuhr's 20th century American Evangelical context, with the shift from sociology to modern psychology.¹⁵

The religious turn to social science coincided with the rise of American secularism because of its claim that true knowledge of God could only be derived from sensory experience, rather than revelation.¹⁶ Niebuhr perceived

¹¹ The German Evangelical Synod of North America that Niebuhr belonged to had its origins in Luther and was also influenced by the pietist missionaries from Europe who saw religion as a matter of the "heart" than the "head".

Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 2.

¹² Richard alongside his brother Reinhold expressed support for the labour movement and was concerned with alleviating poverty and social inequality.

Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2021), 95.

¹³ Christopher Hodge Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 243.

¹⁴ Niebuhr's engagement with the social gospel movement's theological ethics was his first engagement with the American empiricism movement that undermined the revelatory basis of theology.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University. See also David B. Potts, "Social Ethics at Harvard, 1881-1931: A Study in Academic Activism," in *A Study in Academic Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 91-128.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47-48.

¹⁶ Niebuhr identified relativism as a fruit or by product of the American empiricism. His definition of relativism as a report of experience, rather than a theory of experience left no room for revelation to inform theology.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 4-5.

how their denial of revelation left no room for an otherworldliness in theological ethics because God was no longer considered the moral absolute, or the standard of good.¹⁷ Instead, Niebuhr criticized the American empiricism for purporting an ethical humanism in which moral standards were culturally defined and moral judgments were based on the “idea of progress”.¹⁸ The challenge of American secularism in Niebuhr’s context and his standpoint within the German evangelical immigrant Church in America is pertinent to understanding his Christology on his own terms. When we examine prior receptions of Niebuhr’s Christology, H. Richard Niebuhr scholars appear to neglect the problem of secularism and his intention to reform the insular outlook of his denomination. Predominant H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship has conversely interpreted his theological ethics in the context of 18th and 19th century German liberalism or 19th and 20th century American Evangelicalism.¹⁹ Focusing either on Niebuhr’s complete break from his

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 4-11.

¹⁸ Niebuhr defined progressivism and humanism as an overly optimistic faith in human nature and progress, believing that God’s Kingdom could be established on earth through human striving and action.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Religious Realism*, by Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Arthur Kenyon Rogers (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 426 & H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 114.

¹⁹ By the phrase “18th and 19th century German liberalism”, I refer to the theological movement originating with F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) that “sought to reformulate Christian doctrine in contemporary terms. It emphasized the use of reason, science, freedom, and experience while focusing on human goodness and progress and the continuities between the divine and human.” The successors of Schleiermacher include Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch, Albrecht Ritschl and Wilhelm Hermann.

Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 160.

By the phrase “19th and 20th century American Evangelicalism”, I refer to the Theological Discussion Group associated with the Niebuhr brothers, Henry P Van Dusen and Francis P. Miller that succeeded the social gospel movement.

Heather A. Warren, “The Theological Discussion Group and Its Impact on American and Ecumenical Theology, 1920–1945,” *Church History* 62, no. 4 (December 1993): 528–543.

German liberal upbringing or the American social gospel movement, scholars fail to acknowledge his intention to reconcile religion and social science.²⁰

0.2. Thesis Argument and Research Aims

Thesis Argument:

This thesis argues that Niebuhr developed his Christology and understanding of the Trinity to justify his theological ethics of God's goodness in secular American culture.

I incorporate the theme of God's goodness, His righteousness and love; to convey Niebuhr's aim of affirming God as the standard and source of good, and the ultimate good in Christian ethics. In this regard, Niebuhr's theological ethics while theocentric in orientation also acknowledges the role of Christ, the Spirit and the Trinity in Christian morality.²¹ As we shall see, Niebuhr sought to ground the Christian's moral obligation upon the authoritative text of Scripture and the revelation of God as the absolute power over all reality for

²⁰ Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ By the term 'Christocentric', Niebuhr refers to his starting point in God the Father rather than with the Son when dealing with natural religion and Christian faith. His theological problem is focused on how God's act in Jesus Christ leads to the conversion of faith and a new understanding of God's power, unity and goodness.

Scholars like Hans Frei, James W. Fowler and D. Stephen Long have expounded on Niebuhr's depiction of Christ as double mediator between God and man, as mediator of faith and as the mediator between God the Father and human creatures, between eternity and time respectively. These interpretations appear to hold together in God's righteousness and love that is first manifested through Christ on the cross and is correspondingly mediated to the redeemed sinner through the Spirit.

Hans Frei, "Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper, 1957), 95-108-116, James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 269 & D. Stephen Long, *The Goodness of God: Theology, the Church, and Social Order* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 81.

his context of American secularism.²² American secularism that denied an otherworldly realm raised questions about the binding nature of God's commands, given the challenge it posed to Christianity's claim to absoluteness.²³ In response to American secularism, Niebuhr facilitated the shift from the imperative to the indicative nature of Christian ethics by emphasizing the God-man relation. This culminated in his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology that addressed the interplay between divine goodness and human response.

Thesis Aims:

My thesis that provides a systematic exposition of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity, culminating in his theological ethics of God's goodness, has three main aims:

- (1) To appreciate Niebuhr's context of American secularism and the challenge of moral relativism that compelled him to reconcile the two aspects of God's goodness, His righteousness and love.
- (2) To show that Niebuhr developed his Christology and pneumatology in the context of his value theory and epistemology to reconcile the believer's reality with his knowledge and experience of God's goodness.

²² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 9.

²³ Niebuhr's recognition of the challenge posed to the absoluteness of Christianity was shaped by his engagement with Ernst Troeltsch and his historical relativism, the belief that the Christian religion is subjective to the relativities of time and circumstance. Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1964).

(3) To uncover the Trinitarian framework that scaffolds Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness because of its implications for the Church's credible witness in the form of its unity and acts of justice.

Having set forth the broad overarching aims of my thesis, I further elaborate on how each of these aims work to support my thesis argument. The first research aim serves to emphasize that Niebuhr's theological intentions and convictions were not developed in a vacuum. Focusing on Niebuhr's theological development from 1919-1929, I show that he acknowledged theology's over-reliance on social science that coincided with the rise of American secularism.²⁴ This backdrop situates Niebuhr in his 20th century American Evangelical context and associates him with the Theological Discussion Group that succeeded the social gospel movement.²⁵ Niebuhr and his contemporaries rejected Fundamentalism, a 20th century American Evangelical movement which saw modern developments and scientific methods as incompatible with biblical revelation..²⁶

Niebuhr and his contemporaries refused to completely abandon the achievements of "Biblical and historical criticism" as well as of "natural and social science."²⁷ While recognizing these strides in theology over the past

²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Attack upon the Social Gospel," in *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*, ed. Ronald C. White Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 264.

²⁵ Heather A. Warren, "The Theological Discussion Group and Its Impact on American and Ecumenical Theology, 1920–1945," *Church History* 62, no. 4 (December 1993), 528–543.

²⁶ Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore, Maryland: JHU Press, 2017), 279.

²⁷ Niebuhr uses the phrase "Biblical and historical criticism" to refer to the strides made in modern biblical scholarship to justify the historical reliability of Scripture. He engages mainly with the historical-critical method and the form criticism movement. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 2.

hundred and fifty years, Niebuhr was also aware of how these developments led to rise of American secularism, the move away from an otherworldliness. In my thesis, we shall examine how Niebuhr associates theology's turn to social science with the American empiricism movement and its proposal of a moral relativism in Christian ethics.²⁸ His 1919-1927 publications trace his engagement with the American empiricism movement, namely the social gospel movement and D.C. Macintosh as the main dialogue partners.²⁹ As we shall see, Niebuhr associated these dialogue partners with the American empiricism movement because of their decisions to establish theology upon sociological or psychological foundations.³⁰ Niebuhr also engaged with the German rationalism of Ernst Troeltsch, drawing attention to how Troeltsch incorporated Kant's religious a priori and transcendental psychology.³¹ While criticizing Troeltsch and Macintosh's theologies for their over-reliance upon psychology, Niebuhr acknowledged the value of their Christologies in

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 3-11.

²⁹ Niebuhr associated Troeltsch with the American empiricism movement because he acknowledged how his religious epistemology was profoundly influenced by both mysticism and the American theologian William James' psychology of religion.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47-48.

³⁰ By the term "empiricism", Niebuhr refers to the radical empiricism of William James and Josiah Royce, and its sociological inflection in the thought of George Herbert Mead. While appealing to religious experience as a direct warrant for theological construction, he goes beyond the Kantian subjectivism of the Schleiermacher tradition to acknowledge an independent object to which the knowing/believing parties are accountable and which impinges upon them, "As in the community of the knowing I and the knowing Thou a third reality, the common object, is present, so in the community of faith a third reality besides I and Thou comes into view. We may for the present, with Josiah Royce, call this third reality a cause and note its presence in all the common covenant relations of men.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991), 50-51. See also Christopher Baker, Thomas A. James, and John Reader, *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2016), 14.

³¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (1924), UMI Dissertation Information Service.

supplementing the social gospel movement's pneumatology.³² Although Niebuhr credited Troeltsch and Macintosh for reconciling God's righteousness and love, he disagreed with their decision to ground theology upon rational or empirical foundations respectively. Seeking to supplement rather than to completely abandon their Christologies, Niebuhr from 1930 turned his attention to ground theology on revelation. This would shape the parameters of his value theory that dealt with the problem of Jesus and its implications on historical meaning of the revelation of God in history.³³

The second research aim focuses on examining Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology in the context of his value theory and epistemology to show how he reconciled the believer's reality with the knowledge and experience of God's goodness. Expounding on his value theory in his 1930 publications, Niebuhr depicts God as absolute being and good, center of value, and ultimate good. Niebuhr's value theory deals with the believer's reality, namely how his worldview is informed by God's revelation in Christ and his existence as a sinful man and as a believer living between the now-and-not-yet Kingdom. Having implications for his Christology, we shall see how Niebuhr affirms Christ as mediator of the law and gospel, judgment and salvation, and the Kingdom and the vision of God. Correspondingly, Niebuhr's theological epistemology affirms the Spirit's role in regenerating the sinner's mind and enabling obedience in salvation.³⁴ Niebuhr's inseparable

³² Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1964) & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

³³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 110.

³⁴ Hoedemaker has pointed out that Niebuhr's pneumatology has largely remained silent or underdeveloped, while acknowledging that his conception of the Trinitarian problem tends towards heavy emphasis on pneumatology. My thesis builds upon his contributions by examining Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology through a Trinitarian lens to convey his

Christology and pneumatology emphasized the primacy of divine grace outworking on the human faculties of mind, heart and will to explain how believer comes to the knowledge and experience of God's goodness.³⁵

The third research aim examines the Trinitarian framework that scaffolds Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness and is the basis for the Church's distinctive witness in eschatology and history. Building upon his epistemology that dealt with the knowledge and experience of God's goodness, Niebuhr sought to address the action of God's goodness in history. This concern with the action of God's goodness was forged amidst the human atrocities and innocent suffering in World War II. The war challenged the notion of a Christian democratic America and led Niebuhr to reject the false notion that democracy was divinely ordained.³⁶ Seeking to distinguish the original Christian content from its Western or democratic influences, Niebuhr posed corrective by defending God's sovereign goodness and his moral order in creation.³⁷ Interpreting the war through the motifs of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr balanced the tension between the satisfaction of God's

belief that we cannot think of the Spirit only in terms of Christ for this would undermine the unity of the Trinity.

Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 126.

³⁵ Niebuhr deals with the human condition and agency by taking human existence as the starting point in relation to God. Interpreting the human life in terms of sin and salvation in Christ, he posits that "All life has the character of responsiveness, I maintain."

Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 46.

³⁶ Niebuhr in 1940 questioned the mutually reinforcing relationship between Christianity and democracy: "We tend to become so devoted to Christianity that we do not inquire too diligently into its character; we love democracy so dearly that we do not ask it too many questions about its heredity, its religion, its virtues and its vices."

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," in *Theology, History Culture: Major Unpublished Writing*, ed. William Stacy Johnson, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 143–158.

³⁷ "When the divine absolute is acknowledged, all human absolutes appear as dangerous usurpers of the Kingdom of God."

Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 143-158.

righteous wrath and God's love that redeems creation.³⁸ As we shall see, Niebuhr's perspective on war united Christ's humanity and divinity to affirm the work of the Trinity in redemption.

After the war, Niebuhr directed his efforts towards clarifying the Church's response to God's goodness in eschatological history and secular culture. Appropriating the doctrine of the Trinity as the norm for human relationships and the Church, Niebuhr clarified how the Church's credibility is through its loving unity and witness to God's Kingdom of justice and peace.³⁹ As we shall see, Niebuhr modelled the Church's response of goodness upon the life of the Triune God in its Trinity and its participation in the Triune mission of reconciliation.⁴⁰ Depicting the Church as eschatological society and religious institution, Niebuhr clarified how the Church's witness through acts of justice and peace was an outflow from its relationship to the Triune God.⁴¹

³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942): 630–633 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943), 513–15.

³⁹ Niebuhr perceived how the Church that is made up of believers that are reconciled to God and with fellow believers is called to demonstrate its ecumenical unity as a countercultural community in secular society.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 1946), 371–384. See also Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2011), 143.

⁴⁰ Although Niebuhr modelled the Church's unity after the unity of the Triune persons, he departed from the anti-institutional attitudes that tended to characterize the American ecumenical movement in his time. He refused to attribute Christian disunity and discord to Church structures alone and identified the real problem in the disobedience and lack of faith of its members.

Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 83.

⁴¹ Niebuhr's conception of the Church as an eschatological community in Christ is inseparable from his reappropriation of the doctrine of the Trinity to human relationships in the Church, grounding it in the life of the Triune God. His corresponding depiction of the Church as social institution in culture calls for the Church to participate in the Triune mission of reconciliation through acts of justice and peace.

Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church", 372 & Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church", 7-8 & Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 507–521.

0.3. Research Context

This section of my thesis helps the reader to understand the research backdrop behind Niebuhr's concern to develop a Christology and understanding of the Trinity that would show how redeemed sinners are able to participate in God's righteous nature and loving will. The broader research context in terms of the key locations, dialogue partners, issues and time periods helps scaffold the thesis aims and objectives set forth in the preceding section.

0.3.1. Niebuhr in his German Immigrant Church within American Evangelicalism

Where do we locate Niebuhr in order to ascertain the extent of his German and American theological influences on his Christology, pneumatology and understanding of the Trinity? My thesis considers Niebuhr's membership in the German Evangelical Synod of North America, reflecting the German immigrant community that had set up base in America.⁴² His father Gustav Niebuhr was the pastor of his denomination, thus profoundly influencing Richard to be aware of the Lutheran and pietist roots of his theological heritage.⁴³ In his upbringing, Niebuhr was also exposed to 18th and 19th century German Liberalism and the likes of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf von Harnack.⁴⁴ While Niebuhr wrote his 1924 PhD

⁴² Richard's father, Gustav Niebuhr was pastor in the German Evangelical Synod of North America and raised his sons Reinhold and Richard in the same faith tradition. Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 2.

⁴³ Diefenthaler, H. Richard Niebuhr, 2.

⁴⁴ L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 7.

dissertation on Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion, he speaks of Troeltsch's "Neo-Kantian epistemology" to associate him with German rationalism.⁴⁵ This early publication however, associates Troeltsch with German rationalism rather than the German liberalism movement because of his incorporation of Kant's religious a priori and transcendental psychology.⁴⁶ While predominant H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship has sought to clarify his German liberal or American evangelical influence, my thesis focuses on his engagement with the German rationalism and American empiricism movement. In contrast, Niebuhr perceived how the American empiricism movement incorporated a psychology of religion to claim that knowledge and truth is relative to a person because it is derived from sensory experience.⁴⁷

Given Niebuhr's intention to reform the insular outlook of his denomination, his critical engagement with the German rationalism and American empiricism movement focused on its implications for Christian ethics. Niebuhr distinguished between the American empiricism movement that purported a moral relativism in Christian ethics and the German rationalism's tendency towards a moral absolutism in Christian ethics.⁴⁸ As we shall see, Niebuhr refused to take either position of a moral relativism or a

⁴⁵ By the term "Neo-Kantian epistemology", Niebuhr refers to Troeltsch's closer adherence with Kant's religious a priori and transcendental psychology despite his recognition that William James' psychology of religion was the entry point to epistemology. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century*, no. 77 (1960), 249 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48. See also Christopher Adair-Toteff, *Ernst Troeltsch and the Spirit of Modern Culture: A Social-Political Investigation* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 64.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr would criticize Troeltsch because his foundations in empirical psychology led him to dissolve the religious object and the human subject in psychological experience. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

⁴⁷ By the phrase "psychology of religion", Niebuhr refers to its origins in William James who deemed the psychological approach as the basis of theology. Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," 47-48.

⁴⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 4.

moral absolutism by coining the term “absolute within the relative” in Christian ethics.⁴⁹ Niebuhr perceived the need to defend God as absolute being and good such that the basis for Church reform is grounded in God’s sovereignty as Creator that has been revealed through Scripture and salvation. In this regard, Niebuhr qualifies that the Christian’s moral obligation rests upon the authority of Scripture and a prior conversion experience that leads God to be recognized as absolute power and ultimate reality.⁵⁰

0.3.2. Niebuhr in the Religion and Social Science Debate

My thesis examines Niebuhr’s corrective to both the German rationalism and American empiricism movements by situating him within the religion and social science debate. This characterization accounts for the main dialogue partners whom Niebuhr engaged with, and the theological challenges that shaped his theological ethics. My association of Niebuhr with the German rationalism and empiricism movements does not negate the contributions of H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who draw attention to his liberal influence.⁵¹ To build upon their contributions, I refer to Niebuhr’s synonymous use of the terms “liberal” and “empirical” to convey his view that the American empiricism

⁴⁹ Niebuhr coined the term “absolute within the relative” to indicate how God as absolute can be found within the relativities of history and religion because it is based upon the highest insights of an individual or society and the revelation of ultimate reality. He states: “The absolute within the relative comes to appearance at two points – in the absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insights, and in the element of revelation of ultimate reality.”

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 9
Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 8.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

⁵¹ Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2011), Thomas James, “Responsibility Ethics and Postliberalism: Rereading H. Richard Niebuhr’s The Meaning of Revelation,” *Political Theology* 13, no. 1 (December 4, 2012), 37–59 & Gerald P. McKenny, “Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 19–33.

movement stemmed from the German liberal tradition.⁵² I posit that Niebuhr saw the American empiricism movement as part of the liberal tradition because of its failure to make credible the normative role of religion.⁵³ This is supported by Niebuhr's assertion that American empiricism movement replaced God with humanism and thus failed "to unite with the strong forces of human need and yearning which alone make a theology capable of directing as well as expressing the religion of the human heart".⁵⁴ Arising from its turn to establish theology upon empirical foundations, the American empiricism movement denied God as the absolute standard of good to reduce God to a relative good for humanity.⁵⁵

Although my thesis focuses on the 19th and 20th century American Empiricism movement that facilitated theology's reliance upon social science, it needs to be framed within the broader American Empiricism movement. There appear to be three key phases of the empiricism movement within American Evangelicalism, of which the latter two are most pertinent for my thesis.⁵⁶ Originating with Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century, the first movement conceived of God as absolute power such that the religious

⁵² Niebuhr, "Reformation", 140.

⁵³ Stephen W. Martin, *Faith Negotiating Loyalties: An Exploration of South African Christianity Through a Reading of the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 151.

⁵⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 111.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr criticized his contemporaries for undermining God as the absolute standard of good and choosing to focus exclusively on God as a relative good that was subject to human valuation: "My fundamental break with the so-called liberal theology was... due to the fact that it defined God primarily in value-terms, as the good, believing that good could be defined apart from God."

Niebuhr, "Reformation", 140.

⁵⁶ American empiricism is distinct in its rejection of both German idealism and 18th century British empiricism, including positivism. Edwards followed John Locke in rejecting innate ideas but departed from Locke's belief that knowledge of the external world is derived exclusively through the five senses.

William Dean, *American Religious Empiricism* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1986), 20.

experience was a form of mysticism that united the soul and God.⁵⁷ The move to affirm God as relative to a person; rather than an absolute being; can be traced to the 19th century work of William James and John Dewey who were empiricists in the tradition of Locke and Hume.⁵⁸ While James and Dewey both affirmed the primacy of perception, James broke away from the sense-experience empiricism of Locke and Hume to emphasize the relationality of experience.⁵⁹ James' divergence from the rationalism of Locke and Hume shaped the third and final phase of the American empiricism movement in the 20th century. Broadly characterized as the Chicago School, it included the likes of Shailer Mathews, leader of the social gospel movement; Shirley Jackson Case, D.C. Macintosh and Henry Nelson Wieman.⁶⁰ Seeking to derive a scientific methodological basis for American theology, the Chicago school sought to counter the subjectivism of its predecessors.⁶¹

My thesis accounts for Niebuhr's closest adherence to American empiricist D.C. Macintosh, his teacher at Yale. Aside from countering subjectivism by establishing theology as an empirical science, Macintosh also made room for supernaturalism in his theology.⁶² By situating Niebuhr within

⁵⁷ Douglas J. Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York, United States: Columbia University Press, 1960), xii, 220pp.

⁵⁸ Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity 1950-2005* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2006), 59.

⁵⁹ The movement that originated with William James argued for the necessity of drawing on subjective experience to rationally account for religion. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James made the testimonies of "religious feelings and religious impulses" the subject of his psychological analysis.

Brian G. Henning, William T. Myers, and Joseph D. John, *Thinking with Whitehead and the American Pragmatists: Experience and Reality* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 198 & Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 59.

⁶⁰ The Chicago school of theology pioneered an especially delimited understanding of theological empiricism.

Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 26.

⁶¹ Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 7.

⁶² Douglas Clyde Macintosh, *Theology as an Empirical Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1919).

the debate between religion and social science, I posit that he drew the link between theology's reliance upon social science and the rise of American secularism, namely the denial of an otherworldliness.⁶³ Tracing the rise of secularism to the social gospel movement, I highlight Niebuhr's criticism against the social gospel movement for undermining a Christian doctrine of immortality and reducing the Kingdom of God to a temporal kingdom on earth.⁶⁴ This identification of Niebuhr's context of American secularism does not downplay the influence of his upbringing in German liberal idealism.⁶⁵ This is consistent with the contributions of scholars like Hans Frei and Terence Owen Sherry who note the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack on Niebuhr.⁶⁶ This association of Niebuhr with these German theologians is likewise acknowledged by L.A. Hoedemaker, Lonnie D. Kliever and James W. Fowler whose receptions situate him in his 20th century American Evangelical context.⁶⁷ Given his context of American secularism, it would appear that

⁶³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁶⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁶⁵ The inter-melding of his German and American theological influences is most apparent in his earlier articles, "Theology and Psychology" (1927) and "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus" (1933).

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–27.

⁶⁶ Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Pr, 2003) & Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper, 1957).

⁶⁷ L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 7, Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 19 & James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 82.

Niebuhr was against German liberalism's attack against Christian supernaturalism.

My thesis that probes further into Niebuhr's efforts to reconcile religion and social science, departs from the receptions of his theology by Douglas F. Ottati, Thomas A. Byrnes and Leo Sandon.⁶⁸ These scholars emphasize his defence of Christianity as a supernatural religion in the American Evangelical tradition and his complete break with a social scientific theological inquiry.⁶⁹ While I agree with these scholars on Niebuhr's continuity with his American Evangelical tradition, I show that he refused to undermine the strides made in historical and biblical criticism, and the social and natural sciences to seek a reprimation of premodern supernaturalism.⁷⁰ Instead I draw attention to Niebuhr's intention to reconcile religion and social science by tracing his critique of theology's over-reliance over sociology and psychology in his 1919-1927 publications.

0.3.3. The 1931 Watershed in Niebuhr's Theological Development

The last research context that my thesis addresses is the defining turning point in Niebuhr's theological development, namely the 1930s watershed identified by H. Richard Niebuhr scholars.⁷¹ Focusing on Niebuhr's theological

⁶⁸ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, Thomas A. Byrnes, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reconstruction of Jonathan Edwards' Moral Theology," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 5 (1985), 33–55 & Leo Sandon, "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," *Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (1976), 101–115

⁶⁹ Scholars associate Niebuhr with the "Great Tradition" of Jonathan Edwards, the Reformers, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Sandon, "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," 101–115 & Byrnes, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reconstruction of Jonathan Edwards' Moral Theology," 33–55.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 2.

⁷¹ Gerald P. McKenny, "Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 19–33 & Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 40.

development from 1919-1948, my thesis identifies the year 1931 as his theological turning point. My thesis departs from predominant H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship who interpret the watershed moment in his career as a complete abandonment of his liberal heritage in the 1930s. I posit instead that the 1930s signified Niebuhr's move away from his critique of American empiricism, seeking to address the problem of moral relativism that it raised through his value theory and theological ethics.⁷²

Although Niebuhr criticized the synonymous "liberal" or "empirical" theology for defining "God primarily in value-terms, as the good, believing that good could be defined apart from God", he did not abandon value theory.⁷³ Instead, Niebuhr incorporated value theory in his depiction of the relation of God and man but avoided subordinating God to human standards of value.⁷⁴ Niebuhr recognized how value theory easily fell into subjectivity because it defined God in terms of prior valuing, thus cause theology to lose its objectivity because of its interest to serve human needs.⁷⁵ Conversely, Niebuhr raises the question on whether value theory can be objective by showing a "disinterested interest" in God as the object of theology. By the phrase "disinterested interest", Niebuhr refers to an interest that loves God "for his own sake rather than for the sake of an value" which he is supposed to "conserve, promote or increase."⁷⁶

⁷² H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 103-109 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁷³ Niebuhr, "Reformation," 249.

⁷⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," 101.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," 102.

Citing how this disinterested theology has been previously pursued by the Hebrew prophets, Niebuhr makes the case for a value theory that is grounded upon historical and biblical revelation.⁷⁷ This shall be evident in his Christology that depicted Christ as Jew, Jewish prophet and strategist of the Kingdom to defend God as absolute being and good as revealed in Scripture. Niebuhr's decision to ground his value theory upon revelation and Scripture constitutes his counter-reaction to the interrelation problems of secularism and moral relativism in his context. To counter the secularism of his context, Niebuhr made room for an otherworldliness and stipulates that moral obligations can only be owed to persons, not to things. This is supported by in his coining of the term "absolute within the relative" to represent two points in Christian ethics, namely "in the absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insights, and in the element of revelation of ultimate reality."⁷⁸ Here Niebuhr reiterates his twofold belief that the Christian's moral obligation is grounded in the authoritative text of Scripture and his faith in God as absolute, ultimate reality.

By defending God as absolute while conceding the relativity of history and religion, Niebuhr qualifies that the correctness of the Christian religion is relative to the perspective and worldview of its adherents.⁷⁹ Drawing the link between his value theory and its implications for epistemology, Niebuhr refuses to solve the problem of moral relativism by simply returning to a moral

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," 101 & James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 168.

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic," 9.

⁷⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 4-16.

absolutism advocated by the German rationalism movement.⁸⁰ This was because moral absolutism's presumption of universal moral values were incompatible with the recognition of historical and religious relativity in modern civilization.⁸¹ My thesis posits that Niebuhr's watershed moment in the 1930s refers to his intention to develop a value theory that was based upon revelation and Scripture such that God remains the object of theology. Making room instead for the religious values of God's righteousness and love, Niebuhr was able to justify his conception of God as absolute being and good for the Christian religion.

0.4 Research Methodology

My thesis incorporates four research methods that facilitate the systematic exposition of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity that culminates in his theological ethics of God's goodness. The four methods that I incorporate comprise of: (1) a chronological close reading of Niebuhr's archival and published essays from 1919-1948, (2) a dialogical engagement with the German rationalism and empiricism movement that influenced Niebuhr's approach to religion and social science; (3) a systematic exposition of Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology; (4) an objective explanation of

⁸⁰ Niebuhr associated absolutism with the rationalism movement and depicted relativism as a fruit of the empiricism movement.

Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic," 4.

⁸¹ Ottati substantiates Niebuhr's rejection of universal moral values because it entailed a complete separation of faith from moral values, this leading to a "religion within the limits of deity" that has few identifiable moral consequences.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in *Religious Realism*, by Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Arthur Kenyon Rogers (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 420-421 as cited in Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 23.

Niebuhr's incorporation of a Trinitarian framework for his theological ethics of God's goodness.

The chronological close reading of Niebuhr's 1919-1948 writings and publications is the main research method that is used over the course of this thesis. In the field of H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship, the predominant trend has been for scholars to frame their receptions of Niebuhr's Christology with reference to specific theological themes or intellectual movements.⁸² While these earlier methods provided a framework for systematic inquiry into Niebuhr's theological ethics, I argue for the need to read Niebuhr on his own terms. By that, I mean giving due attention to Niebuhr's subjective religious commitment and his personal development as a theologian.⁸³ My decision to emphasize Niebuhr's subjective religious commitments draws upon his view of value theory as undergirding theology such that God can only be known through faith, rather than in abstraction.⁸⁴ This recognition of the need to affirm Niebuhr's subjective beliefs alongside his objective claims about God's being has been acknowledged by James W. Fowler.⁸⁵ His monograph is a

⁸² While Ottati and Kliever have used major theological themes e.g. revelation, God, faith to frame their conceptions of Niebuhr's theological ethics, Irish has focused instead on reading Niebuhr's works in light of intellectual movements e.g. historical and psychological relativism arising from developments in modern social science.

Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977) & Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta, Ga.: J. Knox Press, 1983).

⁸³ Niebuhr's retrospective publication "Reformation" (1960) is a comprehensive self-account of how his mind has changed over the course of his theological career from the 1920s to 1960.

Niebuhr, "Reformation", 149-153.

⁸⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 19 & H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper, 1960), 11-16. See also Kenneth Cauthen, "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 10 (1964), 9-10.

⁸⁵ Fowler emphasizes Niebuhr's tendency to confuse the eschatological, ideal kingdom with the present, actual, historical situation. This is evident in his particular insistence on the inseparability of being and value, believing that faith and trust in the eschatological reality can guide ethics even amidst the world's denial of the vision of the Kingdom of God.

close chronological reading of Niebuhr's published and unpublished works that traces his personal development as a theologian.

My thesis models Fowler's chronological close reading of Niebuhr's publications but goes further to note how he progressively develops his Christology, pneumatology and understanding of the Trinity. These three theological loci are held together by the theme of God's goodness, namely His righteousness and love; as revealed in the gospel, Scripture, salvation, and the Church.⁸⁶ By incorporating the theme of God's goodness, my thesis builds upon H. Richard Niebuhr scholars' prior receptions of his Christology as soteriology that we shall examine in the literature review. My chronological reading first identifies that Niebuhr's Christology was developed as a corrective to the social gospel movement's theological ethics which began in pneumatology.⁸⁷

Having acknowledged Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with the social gospel movement's pneumatology, my second research method is a dialogical engagement with the German rationalism and American empiricism movement. Representing 19th and 20th century theology's incorporation of social science, the dialogue partners Niebuhr engaged with are Ernst Troeltsch's rationalism and the empiricism of the social gospel movement and D.C. Macintosh. This research method focuses on the historical backdrop and intellectual developments that shaped Niebuhr's intention to reconcile religion

James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 264.

⁸⁶ In his retrospective article on his theological development in 1960, Niebuhr posits that his knowledge of Christ comes to him in history, rather than through doctrines. Niebuhr, "Reformation", 140.

⁸⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness], Union Theological Seminary, 1919?, 1919 | HOLLIS For" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

and social science. As we shall see, Niebuhr recognized the link between theology's over-reliance upon sociology and psychology, and the rise of American secularism that denied the realm of otherworldliness. The denial of an otherworldly realm by both the German rationalism and American empiricism movement confronted Niebuhr with the choice between a moral absolutism and a moral relativism in Christian ethics.⁸⁸ Refusing to take either position, Niebuhr conceded that the Christian's obligation to act ethically is based upon the moral authority of Scripture and a prior conversion experience or faith commitment to Christ.⁸⁹

The third research method used to examine Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness is a systematic exposition of his Christology and pneumatology. Focusing on his publications from 1931-1943, I examine Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory. As we shall see, Niebuhr's approach to historical and biblical revelation allowed him to defend God as absolute being and good. We shall examine Niebuhr's portrayal of Christ as Jew, Jewish prophet and strategist of the Kingdom to situate the revelation of God in Judeo-Christian history and salvation history.⁹⁰ In addition to addressing the reality of God's revelation in Christ, Niebuhr's value theory also considers believer's reality of their sinful state through a Christological lens. In his threefold doctrine of creation, sin and redemption, Niebuhr depicted Christ as divine-human and God-man mediator to affirm the intrinsic value of God and human creatures.⁹¹ The third aspect of Niebuhr's value

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 8.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

⁹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127.

⁹¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," *The Journal of Religion* 15, no. 3 (1935), 272–280.

theory also adopts a Christological lens to deal with the reality of the now-and-not-yet Kingdom. Niebuhr differentiated between Christ as inaugurator of the Kingdom of God and Christ as mediator of the Spirit who witnesses to the presence of the Kingdom. This distinction between the present reality and the future hope of the Kingdom enabled Niebuhr to balance the tension between God as absolute demand and as ultimate good.⁹² While Niebuhr's value theory concludes by showing how his Christology flows into a pneumatology, the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology is more evident in his theology of God's goodness. Dealing with how the knowledge of God's goodness is good for the knower, Niebuhr affirmed Christ's role as mediator of creation and salvation alongside the Spirit's work in regeneration and enabling obedience.

The last research method is an objective explanation of Niebuhr's incorporation of a Trinitarian framework for his theological ethics of God's goodness. This approach builds upon his theology of God's goodness that affirmed the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology to posit that the knowledge and experience of God's goodness demands a response. It is in Niebuhr's 1940s war publications that he clearly establishes the link between his Christology and understanding of the Trinity.⁹³ Confronted with the human atrocities of evil and the plight of innocent human suffering in World War II, Niebuhr perceived the need to defend God's sovereign goodness and his moral order in creation. Interpreting the war in terms of

⁹² H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 114.

⁹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942): 630–633 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943): 513–515.

Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr's affirmation of the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity formed the basis for his practical doctrine of the Trinity. It is in Niebuhr post-war publications that we see how he appropriates this practical doctrine of the Trinity to the human existential situation and the Church.⁹⁴ Forming the basis for his twofold Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, we shall see how Niebuhr addresses the dynamic interplay between divine goodness and human response.

0.5. Anticipated Conclusions, and the Significance of this Work

My thesis that credits Niebuhr for justifying his theological ethics of God's goodness in a secular age will conclude by examining three significant contributions of this work. These three aspects are (1) advancing receptions on Niebuhr's Christology, (2) the significance of the theme of God's goodness in Niebuhr's value theory and theological ethics and (3) his contribution to the debate between religion and social science.

0.5.1 Advancing Receptions of Niebuhr's Christology

My thesis that interprets Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory has the potential to advance scholarship by making room for a more encompassing reception of his Christology. As my literature review view will show, scholars commonly agree for Niebuhr's Christology to be read as soteriology. The three different receptions credit Niebuhr for addressing the questions on Christ as the source of salvation, how Christ effects the process of salvation and God's purpose of salvation in Christ. My thesis will conclude

⁹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 1946), 371–384,

by proposing modifications to prior receptions of Niebuhr's Christology to show that his value theory is integral to converging the Christological impasse in H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship.

In the first instance, my thesis departs from the receptions of Ottati, Hall and Yoder who credit Niebuhr for identifying Christ as the source of salvation. While I agree with their decision to locate Niebuhr's Christology in the context of revelation, I disagree with their assertions that Niebuhr advocated a return to Christianity as a supernatural religion. By interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory, I convey that while Niebuhr made room for an otherworldliness he did not negate the contributions of modern biblical scholarship. Grounding his value theory upon Scripture to defend God as absolute being and good, Niebuhr dealt with the historicity of Christ in Judeo-Christian history and the historical significance of Christ in salvation history. His portrayal of Christianity as a revealed religion makes room for the strides made by historical and biblical criticism by conceding that revelation is mediated through tradition and Scripture.

Secondly, my thesis also supplements the receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by Sherry, Fowler, Godsey and Hoedemaker who credit him for reconcile the individual experience and the social implications of salvation. While I agree with them on the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology, I propose instead that his chief concern was value-relations rather than the social implications of salvation. Drawing attention to Niebuhr's concern with the God-man relation, we examine his interrelated approach to value relations and epistemology. In his treatment of value-relations, we shall see how Niebuhr depicted Christ as divine-human and God-man mediator to

affirm God's infinite value and the infinite value bestowed upon human creatures.⁹⁵ Niebuhr's value-relations that presuppose the image of God in humanity formed the basis for his theology of God's goodness by having a point of contact through which God can be known. In his theological epistemology, Niebuhr clarifies how the Christ's role as divine-human and God-man mediator is inseparable from the Spirit's work in regeneration and enabling obedience. While Niebuhr maintains the immutability of God's righteousness and love, he highlights how the sinful human nature and the human destiny of death is transformed in the process of salvation.

The third stream of reception of Niebuhr's Christology that my thesis modifies is by Frei, Kliever, Irish and George Hunsinger, who focus on his achievement in clarifying God's purpose of salvation in Christ. Locating Niebuhr's Christology in the context of ethics, they posit that he was chiefly concerned with the believer's responsibilities following salvation. My thesis proposes instead that Niebuhr was concerned with the Church's response to salvation and its social implications in secular culture. The neglect of Niebuhr's view of ecclesiology as ethics can be traced to his publication *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) where he calls for value theory to be reconsidered in both its philosophical and empirical aspects. Drawing upon the biblical metaphor of the Kingdom of God to seek visible signs of the Kingdom on earth, Niebuhr established God as absolute demand and ultimate good. While Niebuhr maintained his view of God as absolute demand and ultimate good, he would justify his view in Trinitarian rather than Kingdom terms. Shaped in the crucible of World War II, Niebuhr's interpretation of the

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 274 & 278.

war through the lens of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection united Christ's humanity and divinity in the Triune work of redemption. As we shall see, Niebuhr established the Trinity as the norm for human relationships and the Church to show how the Church's unity and witness through acts of justice and peace are visible signs of God's goodness.

0.5.2 The Significance of the Theme of God's Goodness

My thesis identifies and seeks also to clarify the significance of the consistent theme of God's goodness, His righteousness and love; that pervades Niebuhr's theological ethics. As we shall see, this culminates in Niebuhr's approach to the dynamic interplay between divine goodness and human response, revealing his belief that sinful human creatures can be transformed within the Church to participate in God's righteous nature and loving will.⁹⁶ Niebuhr's emphasis on the transformation of sinners and the participation of the Church can be attributed to his concern to reconcile the otherworldly and this-worldly aspects of Christianity. Seeking to counteract American secularism and its move away from an otherworldliness, Niebuhr would show how a faith standpoint is necessary to bridge between an otherworldly God and a worldly human existence. Niebuhr's emphasis on a subjective faith standpoint led him to ground the credibility of Christianity upon historical objective revelation, subjective personal knowledge of God and the empirical reality of the Church.

⁹⁶ While Niebuhr depicted God as the primary agent in history, he framed the relationship of divine and human agency in the understanding that the sovereign God is always engaging within history as well as beyond history, realizing God's will even through the most immoral and sinful human agents." Douglas A. Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131.

In seeking first to ground the Christian faith upon historical objective revelation, I credit Niebuhr for justifying how the historical events of Christ's life, death and resurrection make our propositions about the nature and reality of God's goodness objective. While Niebuhr dealt with God's righteous nature in terms of Christ's life and death, he grounded God's loving will upon the historical and continuing reality of Christ's resurrection. Niebuhr's secondary effort to prove the credibility of the Christianity focuses on how a personal subjective knowledge of God leads to a knowledge that is good for the knower. Seeking to first show that knowledge of God's righteousness transforms man's sinful nature, Niebuhr depicted Christ as divine-human mediator to affirm the truth of God as personal Creator and Lord. Defining faith as cognitive assent to truth, Niebuhr acknowledges the Spirit's role in regeneration that leads to repentance from sin and faith in Christ for justification and to stand righteous before God. Correspondingly, Niebuhr qualifies that knowledge of God's love can only be acquired through faith as personal trust in God as judge and redeemer. This knowledge of God's love that is grounded in Christ's role as God-man mediator transforms human destiny from death to life, and affirms the Spirit's role in ensuring obedience following salvation.

The third and last dimension in which Niebuhr deals with the credibility of the Christian faith has to do with the empirical reality of the Church and its participation in God's goodness. According to Niebuhr, the credibility of the Christian faith is not just internally based on Christian doctrine and experience but should also allow for an external evaluation by its non-Christian or secular counterparts. While he sought to defend the metaphysical claims of God as

ultimate reality, he sought for empirical evidence of ultimate reality through the Church. This apologetic concern led Niebuhr to address the empirical reality of the Church in eschatological history and in secular culture. Asserting that the Church's being and mission stems from the life and mission of the Triune God, he will expound on how the Church participates in God's goodness through its loving unity and acts of justice in secular society.

0.5.3 Reconciling Religion and Social Science

The third and final anticipated conclusion of my thesis examines Niebuhr's contribution in his efforts to reconcile religion and social science for his context of American secularism. As we shall see, Niebuhr would come to the conclusion that religion and social science are compatible partners because they share similar concerns to affirm the sociality of the self and address questions about human relationships and society. While Niebuhr acknowledged these areas of overlap, he would still see religion and social science as distinct disciplines that draw upon a unique knowledge base to derive answers to these concerns. Niebuhr as such, was exclusively concerned with how the Trinity informs the social self, the nature of human relationships in the Church and the Church's mission in society. In the conclusion to my thesis, we shall also examine how Niebuhr's view of religion and social science as compatible but having different knowledge bases has implications for reading his *Christ and Culture* publication. I conclude my thesis by setting forth some guidelines for reading Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) as part of his broader theological corpus.

0.6 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Literature Review - H. Richard Niebuhr's Christology as Soteriology

This literature review examines the receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship, conveying their common agreement that he was primarily concerned with Christ's work, rather than his person. Diverging into three distinct strands, scholars remain divided over Niebuhr's key concern with identifying Christ as the source of salvation, how Christ and the Spirit effect the process of salvation and God's purpose of salvation in Christ. As we shall see, the Christological divide in H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship can be attributed to their disagreement over Niebuhr's theological context and his corresponding theological intentions.

Chapter 2: God's Goodness and The Problems of Secularism and Moral Relativism (1919-1929)

This chapter identifies the theological context that shaped Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness beginning with the problems of secularism and moral relativism in Christian ethics. I first account for Niebuhr's concern with the theme of God's goodness by examining his critique of the social gospel movement's theological ethics for reducing God's goodness to his love and undermining God's righteousness. In his early years, we shall also see how Niebuhr engaged with the German rationalism and empiricism movements, with the social gospel movement Ernst Troeltsch and D.C. Macintosh serving as his main dialogue partners. Niebuhr

associated both these movements with the rise of American secularism because their theologies revealed an over-reliance upon social science. Given his intention to supplement the social gospel movement's theological ethics, Niebuhr was more concerned with the American empiricism movement that raised the problem of moral relativism in Christian ethics.

Chapter 3: The Religious Motives of Conduct in Niebuhr's Theological Ethics (1929-1932)

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Niebuhr's quest to recover the religious motives of conduct as a corrective to the moral relativism that was a fruit of the American Empiricism movement. Countering the naturalistic and individualistic motives of conduct that were grounded in sociology and psychology, Niebuhr sought to show that good cannot be defined apart from God or be imposed from within a human community. To re-establish God as the divine standard of good in his context of American secularism, Niebuhr from 1929 to 1932 focused his efforts on delineating the contours of his value theory and theological ethics. As we shall see, Niebuhr affirmed an objective relativism in his value theory that reconciled the objective reality of God with the subjective activity of faith to justify God as an external source of value.

Chapter 4: Niebuhr's Value Theory and Theology of God's Goodness (1933-1941)

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Niebuhr's value theory undergirds his theology of God's goodness. I first show that Niebuhr's value theory is key to understanding his Christology which was developed to

address the value and goodness of God from the standpoint of the Christian faith. Grounding his value theory upon God's revelation in Christ as mediated through tradition, Scripture, and the Church, we shall see how Niebuhr defends God as absolute being and good, infinite value and the ultimate good for humanity. Niebuhr's value theory that dealt with historical and objective revelation formed the basis for his theology of God's goodness that focused on the believer's subjective personal knowledge of God's goodness. As we shall see, Niebuhr's epistemology differentiated between the cognitive assent to truth of God as personal Creator and Lord and faith as personal trust in God as judge and redeemer.

Chapter 5: God's Goodness in Niebuhr's Trinitarian Ontology and Ecclesiology (1941-1946)

This chapter examines Niebuhr's efforts to develop a Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology that would clarify the interrelation between divine goodness and human response.⁹⁷ We shall first examine how the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity was forged in the crucible of World War II (1939-1945). Interpreting the war through the lens of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr defended God's sovereign goodness and moral order in creation. Niebuhr's theory of war that unity Christ's humanity and divinity in the Triune work of redemption formed the basis for his

⁹⁷ According to Gustafson, Niebuhr envisioned Trinitarian theology as a critical discipline for man's practical life to defend the educational authority of Scripture for Christian theology. Drawing upon the Church's shared knowledge on God's action, Niebuhr proposes a way for the Church to respond to God's moral goodness, "Responsibility affirms – God is acting in action actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action." James Gustafson, "Introduction" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 23 & 126. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View," *Motive* 4 (1943), 46.

Trinitarian norm for human relationships and the Church. Taking the form of his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, Niebuhr clarified how the Church participates in God's goodness through its loving unity and acts of justice in secular society.

Chapter 6: Conclusion – Christian Ethics as Participation in Divine

Goodness

In the concluding chapter, I expound on Niebuhr's view of Christian ethics as participation in divine goodness to convey how the Church witnesses to God's love and righteousness. Taking the form of his twofold Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, Niebuhr clarified how the Church's mission in secular society stems from its relationship to the Triune God. I conclude by examining his three main contributions, namely advancing receptions of Niebuhr's Christology, the significance of the theme of God's goodness in Niebuhr's value theory and theological ethics and his contribution to the debate between religion and social science. Related to this last aspect, I set forth some guidelines for a new reading of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) publication.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S CHRISTOLOGY AS SOTERIOLOGY

This chapter examines prior receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship to highlight scholars' common agreement that his Christology should be read as soteriology. The understanding that Niebuhr's Christology was primarily concerned with the study of salvation has diverged into three different receptions by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship. The scope of my literature review begins with Hans Frei's 1957 interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology, and extends to examining 21st century scholarly readings of his Christology.⁹⁸ The three distinctive receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology can be broadly classified as such: (1) Christ as the source of salvation, (2) how Christ effects salvation in the believer and the Church and (3) God's purpose of salvation through Christ.⁹⁹ This classification accounts for the Christological divide in H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship by drawing attention to the different aspects of Christ's work that each reception emphasizes.

⁹⁸ Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr" in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper, 1957), 65-116 & Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Pr, 2003).

⁹⁹ Scholars have debated over the promises and shortfalls of Niebuhr's Christology. See Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 105-116, Glen H. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation" in Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 164-167 & John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 42-55, 71-76.

These receptions are a starting point for an inquiry into Niebuhr's Christology because they reveal his threefold interest in where salvation comes from, how sinners are saved and the purpose we have been saved for. This literature review is thus the starting point for my thesis that provides a systematic exposition of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity culminating in his theological ethics. When we examine why receptions of Niebuhr's Christology have diverged into three distinct strands, it will be apparent that their interpretations differ because scholars disagree on Niebuhr's theological influences and the challenges pertinent to his context.

1.1. The Three Distinct Receptions of Niebuhr's Christology

In the following preliminary sections, specifically placed ahead of the literature review proper, I briefly expound on the three distinct receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology. Beginning with Hans Frei's 1957 reception and including the works of Lonnie D. Kliever, Jerry A. Irish, and George Hunsinger. I credit these scholars for addressing the soteriological basis of his ethics. These receptions focus on Niebuhr's clarification of God's purpose of salvation in Christ, particular with the believer's responsibilities following salvation. H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who propose this interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology locate him within 20th century German and American neo-orthodoxy.¹⁰⁰ The movement that gained popularity in Germany and

¹⁰⁰ By the term "German neo-orthodoxy," I refer to the movement associated with Karl Barth that made rapid progress in continental theology during the 1920s and 1930s, having a strong influence particularly in Britain and America. Barth and his colleagues rejected the 19th century anthropological, immanentist, optimistic theology and called for a renewed attention to God's transcendence such that there was no 'point of contact' between human nature and God's revelation.

Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 133.

America is associated with the likes of Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner.

These scholars account for Niebuhr's concern with God's purpose of salvation with Christ by establishing his closer adherence with the American neo-orthodox movement. Unlike their German contemporaries, the American movement affirmed divine transcendence without depicting God as wholly other or negating the role of human capacities.¹⁰¹ According to Frei, Kliever, Irish, and Hunsinger, Niebuhr adopted American neo-orthodoxy's biblical doctrine of immortality because it made room for the believer to exercise his responsibility to God in the material realm. The movement made the case for a genuinely "Christian Biblical and Christological concept of immortality" based upon "God's creative Word".¹⁰² Having its origins in Emil Brunner's anthropology, the American neo-orthodox theologians affirmed the continuation between the material and spiritual existence.¹⁰³

This strand of reception of Niebuhr's Christology that credit him for developing an individual anthropology that undergirds his ethics have influenced other readings of Niebuhr's ethics by Donald E. Fadner and David C. Grant. This is first supported by Fadner's exposition on how Niebuhr's

By the term "American neo-orthodoxy," I refer specifically to Emil Brunner's influence on American theology that launched a sharp attack on both fundamentalism and theological liberalism during the postwar period following World War II. The Neo-orthodox movement within postwar 20th century American Evangelicalism united biblical scholars in their efforts to merge theological and biblical scholarship.

Gary J. Dorrien, *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 128.

¹⁰¹ Robert Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York, United States: Columbia University Press, 2012), 189.

¹⁰² Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics III* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co., 2002), 391.

¹⁰³ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Cambridge: United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co., 2002).

ethics holds together God's sovereignty in salvation, with the Christian's freedom and responsibility in Christ.¹⁰⁴ Grant's publication in contrast, focuses on how Niebuhr's agential ethics establishes the continuity between the material and spiritual by claiming that all human judgments of value are finite in relation to an infinite God.¹⁰⁵

The review also delves into the second stream of receptions proposed by Douglas F. Ottati, Douglas Hall, and John H. Yoder. According to these scholars, Niebuhr's Christology should be read as soteriology in order to expound on Christ as the source of salvation. Locating Niebuhr in his 20th century American Evangelical context, these scholars establish his continuity with the "Great tradition" stemming from Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Reformers, Pascal, and Edwards.¹⁰⁶ These scholars credit Niebuhr for drawing upon his tradition to pose corrective to German liberalism's denial of Christ as the only means of salvation.¹⁰⁷ Ottati, Yoder and Hall interpret Niebuhr's Christology through the lens of the supernatural inspiration of Scripture and New Testament Christology to affirm Christ's humanity and divinity.¹⁰⁸ Their interpretations of Niebuhr's Christology posit that he affirmed

¹⁰⁴ Donald Edward Fadner, *The Responsible God: A Study of the Christian Philosophy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Missoula, Mont: Scholars Pr, 1975).

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 47-48 as cited in C. Grant, *God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 68.

¹⁰⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative [1960]," in *The Responsibility of the Church for Society and Other Essays*, by H. Richard Niebuhr (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 141.

¹⁰⁷ This aspect is particularly strong in Ottati's foreword to a reissued publication of Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁸ John Howard Yoder, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture', in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yaeger and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 31-89.

how God's plan of salvation was revealed through Christ's death on the cross.¹⁰⁹

The common agreement by these scholars that Niebuhr saw Christ as central to God's salvific plan is a view also held by Leo Sandon and Gerald P. McKenny.¹¹⁰ Both Sandon and McKenny attribute Niebuhr's belief in Christ as the only means of salvation to the profound influence of Jonathan Edwards. Sandon denotes how Niebuhr incorporated Edwards' view of God's sovereignty as transcendent Creator alongside His immanence through Christ's death.¹¹¹ In comparison, McKenny focuses on how Niebuhr incorporated Edwards' conception of God as Creator and judge on the earth to show how Christ's death enabled God's salvific will to be known through human experience and reason.¹¹²

This review also covers the third and final strand of reception of Niebuhr's Christology that has been proposed by T.O. Sherry, J.W. Fowler, J.D.

¹⁰⁹ Hall, for example highlights Niebuhr's rejection of "metaphysical speculations about Christ's "nature" not only because they were abstract but because they did not advance beyond mere declaration and spurious authoritarianism.

Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy,"* 1st edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 101.

¹¹⁰ Leo Sandon, "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," *Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (1976), 101–115 & Gerald P. McKenny, "Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 19–33.

¹¹¹ "Richard Niebuhr once described the change in his theological convictions which took place in the 1930s as the gift of the certainty of the sovereignty of God. Certainly Jonathan Edwards could say, as Niebuhr then said, 'the old theological phrase, "the sovereignty of God," indicates what is for me fundamental.'" According to Sandon, Niebuhr adhered with Edwards in presuming the predominance of the Protestant Church in America in order to affirm God's absolute sovereignty over heaven and earth.

Sandon, "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," 106.

¹¹² McKenny emphasizes Niebuhr's divergence from Barth's over-corrective to empirical theology by completely abandoning the role of human experience in theology. While McKenny posits that Niebuhr sympathized with Barth's intentions to establish theology upon objective foundations, he qualifies that Niebuhr made room for a 'point of contact' between God's revelation and human nature. McKenny attributes Niebuhr's divergence from Barth to the influence of Jonathan Edwards, enabling Niebuhr to "affirm empiricism and objectivism at the same time".

McKenny, "Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology," 30.

Godsey, and L.A. Hoedemaker. These scholars posit that Niebuhr's Christology addressed how salvation is effected by clarifying the interrelated work of Christ and the Spirit in the salvation of the believer and the Church. Sherry, Fowler, Godsey, and Hoedemaker's receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology form the basis for my thesis that affirms the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology. These scholars posit that Niebuhr distinguished between the Spirit's incorporation of believers into the body of Christ and the Spirit's continuing work to unify the Church in Christ.

Sherry, Fowler, Godsey and Hoedemaker situate Niebuhr in his 20th century American Evangelical context and focus on his corrective to the nationalization of the Christian religion. Characterizing Niebuhr as successor of the social gospel movement, they convey his recognition of the decline of Christian democratic America. These scholars' reception of Niebuhr's Christology that credit him for reconciling the individual experience and social implications of salvation have influenced the readings of Niebuhr by D.A. Carson and Diane Yeager. Yeager indicates how Niebuhr's Christ and Culture typology countered the nationalization of the Christian religion by insisting upon the salvific conversion as pre-requisite for membership into the redeemed body of Christ.¹¹³ Carson in contrast, focuses on highlighting Niebuhr's belief in Christ as the paradigm for Church life, thus bearing witness to the continuing reality of Christ's redemption, rather than his completed work.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ D. M Yeager, "The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, by Glen H. Stassen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 91-125.

¹¹⁴ Carson's exposition on Niebuhr's view of the Bible presupposes the predominance of the Protestant Church in America in order to insist upon a direct relation between Christian doctrine and the practical life of the Church: "Niebuhr's view...is that the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, provides us with a number of discrete paradigms. We are

This brief overview of scholars' receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology scaffolds the subsequent three sections of this chapter where I examine the literature of works from 1957 to 2009.

1.2. Christology as Soteriological Ethics

In this section, I examine the receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by Hans Frei, Lonnie D. Kliever, Jerry Irish, and George Hunsinger. According to these scholars, Niebuhr developed his Christology to clarify God's purpose of salvation in Christ. These scholars justify their claim by asserting that Niebuhr drew upon a biblical doctrine of immortality to articulate the believer's responsibilities following salvation. As we shall see, aside from Frei, Kliever, Irish, and Hunsinger trace the origins of Niebuhr's Christology and Christian ethics to the American neo-orthodox influence of Emil Brunner.¹¹⁵

1.2.1. Hans Frei: Between Karl Barth and Friedrich

Schleiermacher's Ethics

I begin with Hans Frei's claim that Niebuhr developed his Christology as soteriological ethics to mediate between the ethics of Karl Barth and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Frei's early exposition on Niebuhr's Christology in *Faith and*

being faithful to Scripture so long as we align our choices with any one of these paradigms." Carson credits Niebuhr for establishing Christ as the paradigm of the Christian common life in order to affirm the work of the Trinity in justifying sinners and sanctifying saints. D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 41.

¹¹⁵ Miller expounds on the reception of Barth and Brunner in 20th century American Evangelicalism: "In general, Barth became known to Americans very slowly, while Emil Brunner quickly captured the American theological imagination. Although Barth was perhaps the most significant Christian thinker of the twentieth century, he longed remained an enigma to American theologians".

Glenn Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870-1970* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 520.

Ethics (1957) laid the foundations for subsequent receptions proposed by Kliever, Irish and Hunsinger. Frei posits that Niebuhr's Christology was influenced by shifts in Christian theology to address Christ's "two natures" to Christ's "two histories".¹¹⁶ Instead of addressing the supernatural existence of God's revelatory actions in Christ as a 'surd' in our history, Frei indicates how Niebuhr interpreted God's revelatory actions in Christ as a 'surd' in our comprehension.¹¹⁷

By associating Niebuhr with the Christological shift in theology, Frei distinguishes Niebuhr's conception of the revelatory Christ-event from that of Karl Barth: "The miracle of God in Christ thus takes place in history, but apprehending this fact demands a particular method of understanding history... We see first of all through the eyes of faith in the mind's response to the revelation of God... secondly, we apprehend the same Jesus Christ as an inescapable figure of a special and limited past, a figure that demands the same critical and loyal understanding as does any person past or present."¹¹⁸ Expounding on Christ's "two histories", Frei credits Niebuhr for affirming the historical event of God's incarnation in Christ that was recorded in Scripture as salvation history, and the resurrected Christ that demands man's loyalty in

¹¹⁶ The receptions of Niebuhr's Christocentric ethics by Frei, Kliever, Irish and Hunsinger associate him with the Christological shift away from Christ's divine and human natures to Christ's divine and human histories. Instead of dealing with the supernatural existence of God's redemptive action, the new movement focused on the personal meaning of God's redemptive action: The emphasis on miracle gives way to that on personal faith. To use Richard Niebuhr's terms in *The Meaning of Revelation*, in Jesus Christ outer and objective history has come together with inner and personal history which is known by faith". Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking* (New York: Harper, 1967), 102-103.

¹¹⁷ Frei uses the word 'surd' to refer to the miraculous apprehension of God's self-disclosure in Christ that takes place in human history. According to Frei, the 'surd' in our history is a disruption to our human reasoning and knowledge rather than a disruptive event that changes the course of human history.

Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper, 1957), 105.

¹¹⁸ Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 104-106.

redemptive history. Frei expounds on Niebuhr's twofold belief that God's plan of salvation can be understood through reasoning on Scripture and through faith as loyalty to the risen Christ.¹¹⁹

Frei's exposition on Niebuhr's Christology reveals how he viewed God's revelation in Christ as an event that effects an ingression into time through the resurrected Christ who is eternal. Frei emphasizes Niebuhr's characterization of the divine risen Christ to demarcate his departure from Barth who focused on Christ's humanity in his resurrection.¹²⁰ Frei accounts for Niebuhr's departure by attributing his Christology to a doctrine of immortality: "For Niebuhr, the problem of divine love in our existential, historical situation and apprehension lies in the fact that divine power is apparently hostile towards us. In a sense, therefore, Christ's being and historical thereness are simply taken to be an answer to or explained by the need for a concrete historical focus of the unity of divine love and power."¹²¹ Here Frei credits Niebuhr for holding the paradox between God's power that is demonstrated in His wrath against sin and God's love in sending Christ as Saviour and Lord. This unity of divine love and power that is based upon Christ's incarnation and resurrection reveals how Niebuhr affirmed man as both spiritual and historical being.

¹¹⁹ While Frei acknowledges Tillich's influence on Niebuhr, he credits Niebuhr for rejecting Tillich's notion of God as 'being-itself' and developing a faith or relational method for understanding history and theology.

Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 77-87.

¹²⁰ Barth expounds on his doctrine of reconciliation that insisted upon a dialectical relation between Christ as incarnate Son of God and Christ as incarnate Son of Man: "He Himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, was justified by God in His resurrection from the dead. He was justified as man, and in Him as the Representative of all men all were justified." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Volume 4, Part 1: The Subject-Matter and Problems of the Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: A&C Black, 2004), 305-306.

¹²¹ Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 107.

Frei attributes Niebuhr's doctrine of immortality that united the material body with the spiritual soul to the profound influence of Schleiermacher and Barth.¹²² On one hand, Frei acknowledged how Niebuhr's Christology was influenced by Schleiermacher's affirmation of Christ's prophetic activity i.e. his reconciling life, to affirm man's ethical conduct in his historical existence.¹²³ While considering Schleiermacher's case for the believer's ethical responsibility following salvation, Frei also notes that Niebuhr sought to mediate this with Barth's emphasis on God's transcendence as wholly other.¹²⁴

According to Frei, Niebuhr refused to adopt Barth's emphasis on the metaphysical or ontological oneness of Chalcedonian Christology.¹²⁵ Instead, Niebuhr's intention to reconcile divine transcendence and human responsibility shaped his moral Christology that affirmed a moral and volitional oneness. Frei suggests that Niebuhr's Christology led him to replace theology with ethics because of his concern with clarifying the believer's responsibility following salvation. Frei posits that Niebuhr's soteriological ethics recognizes how the believer's spiritual faith and material freedom is guided by God's moral authority as revealed in Scripture.¹²⁶ Frei's interpretation of Niebuhr's

¹²² Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 9-64.

¹²³ Schleiermacher's philosophical ethics subsumed eschatology under ethics, and can be traced to his doctrine of the reign of God on earth that emphasized the prophetic activity of Christ: "The prophetic activity of Christ exists in His self-presentation and His invitation to enter the Reign of God..."

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R Mackintosh and James S Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 590.

¹²⁴ Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 65-116.

¹²⁵ Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 104-116.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr was insistent that readers of Scripture do not come to the sacred Scriptures from a position of neutrality for revelation comes to faith, rather than to humankind in general. Frei notes how Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship between Jesus and history was profoundly impacted by Troeltsch's belief that each culture had its own religious core that revealed itself in its most sacred records.

Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 89-90.

Christology as soteriological ethics that focuses solely on his German theological background can be supplemented by Lonnie D. Kliever's reception of his Christology.

1.2.2. Lonnie D. Kliever: Synthesizing German and American Realism

Lonnie D. Kliever's interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology is a further development from Frei's reception because it acknowledges Niebuhr's attempt to synthesize German and American realism.¹²⁷ Kliever expounds on Niebuhr's consideration of the merits of both German and American realism: "Indeed, Niebuhr was convinced that German realism needed American theology's moral earnestness as much as American realism needed German theology's metaphysical otherness... Niebuhr was left with the problem of how to combine the empirical and anthropocentric interests of the American realists with the transcendental and theocentric commitments of the German realists."¹²⁸ Kliever differentiates between the theocentric and anthropocentric emphases in 20th century German and American realism, affirming the reality of God's transcendence and human experience. He substantiates by noting Niebuhr's concern to balance the "metaphysical otherness" of German realism with the "moral earnestness" of American realism.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Kliever associates Niebuhr with the 20th century Protestant theological movement in Germany and America that sought to re-establish God as the subject rather than the object of our human life in order to distinguish between religion and religious reality.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in *Religious Realism*, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 413-428

¹²⁸ Lonnie D Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *The Journal of Religion* 50, no. 1 (1970): 34-35.

¹²⁹ Kliever acknowledges that his interpretation of Niebuhr's distinctive Christology draws upon the contributions of Frei and Hoedemaker and builds upon his earlier dissertation on Niebuhr's Christology and theological method. See Hans W. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in *Faith and Ethics*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957),

Kliever's reception differs from Frei in that he also considers Niebuhr's appeal to religious experience in his American Evangelical context in addition to Schleiermacher's German influence. By the "metaphysical otherness" of German realism, Kliever highlights Niebuhr's engagement with Schleiermacher's affirmation of God as subject of moral theology to affirm His sovereignty in history.¹³⁰ In contrast, Kliever attributes to the "moral earnestness" of American realism to D.C. Macintosh's recognition of the historicity of the human individual as subject of moral theology.¹³¹ Kliever posits that Niebuhr's soteriological ethics was shaped by the realistic interests of both Schleiermacher and Macintosh:

"His entire theological program pivots on a Christology which holds together God's radical sovereignty and graciousness with man's radical historicity and sinfulness... Formally, he argues that Jesus Christ discloses God to faith by being an event in "internal history" as well as "external history." Materially, Niebuhr shows that Jesus Christ restores faith in God by transforming "natural faith" into "radical faith".¹³²

104-116; Lonnie D. Kliever, "Methodology and Christology in H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1963); Libertus Arend Hoedemaker, "Faith in Total Life: Style and Direction of H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology" (Doctoral Diss., University of Utrecht, 1966), 179-226.

¹³⁰ Kliever attributes Niebuhr's affirmation of a triadic relationship between self, Jesus Christ and God to Schleiermacher's influence. Schleiermacher's depiction of God as subject of moral theology shaped Niebuhr's belief that Christ's own faith allows the self to gain a direct relation to Christ through and with fellow believers.

Lonnie D Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *The Journal of Religion* 50, no. 1 (1970), 33-57.

¹³¹ Kliever's assertion of Niebuhr's reliance upon Macintosh's American realism is based upon two of Niebuhr's publications in the 1930s where he accounts for his divergence from Macintosh.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in *Religious Realism*, 413-428 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience; Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh*, by Eugene Garrett Bewkes, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, and Julius Seelye Bixler (New York; London: Harper & Bros., 1937), 93-116.

¹³² Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 33.

Kliever first credits Niebuhr for developing a moral Christology that balanced between God as object of faith and the human subject's response of faith and freewill to God's sovereign grace in salvation. Distinguishing between a formal and material level in Niebuhr's Christology, Kliever credits him for upholding divine transcendence while affirming the human capacities of reason, faith and freewill.

Kliever claims that Niebuhr made a formal argument for "two histories" in his Christology, using the terms "internal history" and "external history" to describe the revelatory Christ-event.¹³³ Here Kliever posits that Niebuhr distinguished between the event of Christ's incarnation in salvation history that is externally observed by the sinner, and the believer as internal participant of the reality of Christ's resurrection in redemptive history. According to Kliever, Niebuhr's Christology distinguished between the role of objective and subjective in the apprehension of God's revelation in Christ. While an objective apprehension results in the sinner's change of mind, Kliever also highlights Niebuhr's belief that a subjective apprehension leads to a material change within the sinner to place faith in God for salvation. Kliever substantiates by drawing attention to Niebuhr's undergirding doctrine of immortality that entails a from "natural faith" in God as Creator to a "radical faith" in God for salvation.

¹³³ Kliever cites and attributes Niebuhr's use of the terms "internal history" and "external history" in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941) to his intention to slacken Kant's dualism between "pure" and "practical" reasoning. Kliever credits Niebuhr for "reconceiving them as distinctive features of an integral rational imagination." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 55 as cited in Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 75.

In his exposition on the link between Niebuhr's Christology and his doctrine of immortality, Kliever reveals how he affirmed the unity between the spiritual and material by situating the believer in the Church:

"Niebuhr uses the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as *the* great parable or metaphor for interpreting the whole of historical and natural experience. He also insists that verbal and liturgical expressions of Jesus Christ preserve the social and religious identity of the Christian community through changing times and places."¹³⁴

Kliever clarifies how Niebuhr emphasized the eschatological character of the Church in redemptive history by using Christ's life, death and resurrection as the metaphor for interpreting human experience. This is substantiated by Kliever's assertion that Niebuhr perceived the "verbal and liturgical expressions of Jesus Christ" as integral for preserving "the social and religious identity of the Christian community".¹³⁵ Kliever's reception of Niebuhr's Christology focuses on how the historical Christ-events that have been interpreted and transmitted by the Church has implications for the believer: "Revelation is that occasion in communal and personal history which transforms our natural sense of deity and duty, of meaning and purpose."¹³⁶ Kliever expounds on Niebuhr's belief that God's revelation in Christ mediated through Scripture and tradition transforms the believer's sense of God and responsibility following salvation.

¹³⁴ Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 40.

¹³⁵ Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 40.

¹³⁶ Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1977), 43.

1.2.3. Jerry Irish: From Christian Social Ethic to Soteriological Ethics

Irish's reception of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological ethics differs from Frei and Kliever in that he focuses solely on his American evangelical context rather than his German theological background. Irish's reception situates Niebuhr firmly within his 20th century American Evangelical context and positions him as a successor of the social gospel movement. As such, Irish sees Niebuhr's soteriological ethics as constituting his corrective to his predecessors' Christian social ethic.¹³⁷ Irish posits that Niebuhr's Christology was shaped by his recognition of the incorporation of modern psychology into theology: "Niebuhr's recognition of psychological relativism is not a denial of the reality of what is seen and understood under the particular limits of sensitivity, perspective and reason."¹³⁸ Irish emphasizes how Niebuhr's definition of psychological relativism makes room for faith, experience and reason because it concedes that "all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower".¹³⁹

Irish uses the term "psychological relativism" to describe how Niebuhr approached theology from two standpoints, namely from a normative and experiential standpoint. This is substantiated by Irish's citation of Niebuhr's description of revelation as an "organizing principle and a transforming power".¹⁴⁰ Here Irish indicates how Niebuhr's Christology differentiated

¹³⁷ Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta, GA.: J. Knox Press, 1983).

¹³⁸ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* 32.

¹³⁹ Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta, GA.: J. Knox Press, 1983), 31.

¹³⁹ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 31.

¹⁴⁰ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 39.

between the events of Christ's incarnation and death, and the reality of Christ's resurrection. Irish substantiates by first revealing how Niebuhr affirmed Christ's historical presence in salvation history: "It is the presence of a person, an active intelligence and will, as opposed to a list of propositions or a conceptual statement."¹⁴¹ Irish clarifies how Niebuhr affirmed Christ's mind that foreknew God's salvific plan for mankind and Christ's freewill obedience in his death. According to Irish's interpretation, Niebuhr saw Christ's incarnation and death as an organizing principle because it is used as a norm to direct the Christian community.

Correspondingly, Irish also supports his assertion that Niebuhr saw the reality of Christ's resurrection as a transforming power: "Through this special occasion the reasoning self seeks to discover a pattern of dramatic unity whereby it can come to an understanding of its relational selfhood."¹⁴² According to Irish, Niebuhr's understanding of the conversion experience united the spiritual and the material through Christ's reconciliation of the sinner to God and to fellow believers:

"What was for Jesus a response to God became for his successors a revelation of God. The event that elicits faith as confidence and loyalty is demonstration of loyalty and the disclosure of a cause. The Jesus in whom faith was elicited himself becomes the elicitor, the Christ, the transforming power."¹⁴³

Irish substantiates by clarifying how Christ's death and resurrection as a response to God elicits the believer's faith as confidence and loyalty

¹⁴¹ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 41.

¹⁴² Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 39.

¹⁴³ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 51.

to God.¹⁴⁴ By asserting that Niebuhr modelled the believer's faith in God upon Christ's obedient response to God, Irish conveys his implied proposition of the believer's responsibility to obey God's commands following salvation. This is supported by Irish's assertion that Niebuhr conceived of Christ as "the transforming power" who turns the believer away from sin and to God.

1.2.4. George Hunsinger: Between Barth and Troeltsch's Theologies of Revelation

George Hunsinger's 21st century treatment of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological ethics is based upon his evaluation of the theologies proposed by Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. In terms of his approach, Hunsinger critiques Richard and his brother's theology for not being fully satisfactory from the standpoint of Nicene Christianity.¹⁴⁵ Attributing this inadequacy to their roles as social ethicists rather than theologians, Hunsinger saw Richard Niebuhr's soteriological ethics as his attempt to mediate between Karl Barth and Ernst Troeltsch's theologies of revelation.¹⁴⁶ Hunsinger's interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology focuses on Niebuhr's German theological background, bringing careful examination to the corrective he poses to Troeltsch's theology of revelation: "He thought that the simple transfer [of miracle] from nature to spirit was the common core of the

¹⁴⁴ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ George Hunsinger, "What Is the Meaning of Revelation? H. Richard Niebuhr, Modernity and Nicene Christianity," in *Theology As Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology: A Festschrift for Daniel L. Migliore*, ed. Bruce McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 142.

¹⁴⁶ Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 142.

nineteenth-century Christian historical tradition. Niebuhr's Christology and doctrine of grace in *The Meaning of Revelation*, and other writings of that period, indicate how close he is to the position Troeltsch rejected."¹⁴⁷

Hunsinger references Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation* to convey his departure from Troeltsch's Christocentric portrayal of Christ as the content of God's self-revelation: "In the revelation book, as elsewhere, Niebuhr often spoke about "the God of Jesus Christ," but never about Jesus Christ as God. For him, Jesus was the instrument, though not the content, of divine "self-revelation..." The content of revelation was finally something other than Christ himself."¹⁴⁸ Hunsinger posits, that Niebuhr in distinction from Troeltsch adopted a theocentric view of Christ as mediator of God's revelation because he is the exact representative of God.

Hunsinger also distinguishes Niebuhr's theocentric Christology from Barth's portrayal of Christ as incarnate Son of God: "For Niebuhr (as noted), while Jesus was the object of loyalty and devotion, he was not the incarnate Son. He was the source but not the content of revelation. Accordingly, from a Nicene point of view, what we find is a relatively weak view of the incarnation, of the atonement, and of Christ's bodily resurrection. All this is rather far from Barth."¹⁴⁹ While Hunsinger credits Niebuhr for affirming Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection, he clarifies that Niebuhr replaced Barth's metaphysical Christology with a historical Christology.¹⁵⁰ By drawing this

¹⁴⁷ Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 157.

¹⁴⁸ Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 147.

¹⁴⁹ Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 151.

¹⁵⁰ "[Whether] it was a matter of the incarnation, the atonement, or the resurrection, the meaning of revelation, for Niebuhr, did not seem to include anything like the full deity of Jesus Christ, his atoning sacrifice, or his transfigured bodily identity in and through his resurrection. On these grounds a Nicene doctrine of the Trinity would hardly be possible. The meaning of revelation, for Niebuhr, had little to do with God's Triune identity." Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 149.

distinction, Hunsinger is able to show how Niebuhr affirmed instead Christ's faith in God's salvific plan and his willing obedience upon the cross.¹⁵¹

Drawing upon the example of Christ's "unswerving faith in God" to inspire the same faith and obedience in sinners, Hunsinger accounts for Niebuhr's claim that Christ is the object of the redeemed sinner's loyalty and devotion.¹⁵²

According to Hunsinger, Niebuhr's soteriological ethics modelled the believer's responsibility after Christ's faith and obedience to God.¹⁵³

1.3. Christology as Soteriological Revelation

The second section of my review examines the reception of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological revelation by Douglas F. Ottati, Douglas John Hall, and John Howard Yoder. According to these scholars, Niebuhr sought to establish Christ as the source of salvation by affirming God's absolute sovereignty alongside a historically conditioned faith.¹⁵⁴ These scholars situate Niebuhr firmly within his 20th century American Evangelical context and associate him with the Great Tradition stemming from Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, the Reformers and Jonathan Edwards.¹⁵⁵ According to these

¹⁵¹ Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 155.

¹⁵² Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 155-156.

¹⁵³ Hunsinger credits Niebuhr for affirming how Christ was materially decisive in revealing "that God was to be trusted no matter what, and he inspired in us the same faith as was in him. He thus became the object of our loyalty and devotion."

Hunsinger, "What is the Meaning of Revelation?," 156.

¹⁵⁴ Their receptions draw largely upon Niebuhr's endeavor to combine the main interests of Troeltsch and Barth because he believed "that the critical thought of the former and the constructive work of the latter belong together".

H. Richard Niebuhr. *The Meaning of Revelation*. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), x.

¹⁵⁵ In his retrospective publication on his theological development from the 1930s to 1950s, Niebuhr firmly establishes his continuity with the "Great Tradition" of Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Pascal, the Reformers and Jonathan Edwards.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative" (*The Christian Century*, 70, 1960), 248– 251

scholars, Niebuhr was part of the American neo-orthodox movement that emerged as a by-product of the theological renewal sparked by German neo-orthodoxy.¹⁵⁶

1.3.1. Douglas F. Ottati: Against Religious Exclusivism and Cultural Overaccommodation

I begin by examining Douglas F. Ottati's 1982 reception of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological revelation that was based on his reading of *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). In his publication *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, Ottati claims that Niebuhr developed his Christology to counter both fronts of a religious exclusivism and a cultural overaccommodation in Christianity.¹⁵⁷

"For Niebuhr, there is room for intermediate possibilities between the Barthian insistence that theology is credible only to believers and liberal claims that it persuades unbelievers of the validity of Christianity by demonstrating the agreement of Christian faith with cultural norms and standards."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Hall cites Suzanne de Dietrich's characterization of the neo-orthodox movement as developed in Germany and America associating it with the likes of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Emil Brunner, "A theological revelation swept over Europe which was soon to mark deeply the life of the [World Student Christian] Federation. Barth and Brunner were its early sponsors; the Confessing Church in Germany became a living embodiment of this theological renewal, often called neo-orthodoxy." Suzanne de Dietrich, "The Biblical Foundation", as cited in Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy,"* 1st edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 109-110.

¹⁵⁷ Douglas F Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 68.

¹⁵⁸ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 68.

Ottati attributes Niebuhr's intermediary position to his German theological background, engaging with Barth's exclusive Christianity and the cultural compromise of German liberals. This includes 18th and 19th century German liberal theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack.¹⁵⁹ According to Ottati, Niebuhr sought to establish Christ as the source of salvation to address the interplay between divine revelation and human faith.

Ottati first justifies Niebuhr's departure from Barth's religious exclusivism because he undermined the intelligibility of revelation:

"[The neo-Reformation theologies] rightly insist that revelation precipitates a crisis in human life. But they fail to offer an intelligible account of how revelation is received precisely because they refuse to relate revelation to human values in any way. By setting revelation completely apart from human faiths in other objects of value, they fail to describe intelligibly its impact on practical life."¹⁶⁰

Ottati characterizes Barth as a Neo-Reformation theologian to emphasize how his "crisis" theology, focusing on God's absolute sovereignty; upheld God's freedom in revealing Himself through Christ.¹⁶¹ In his bid to defend God's freedom in revelation, Ottati conveys how Barth and his neo-Reformation contemporaries asserted that God is only known through supernatural faith. In

¹⁵⁹ The impact of German liberalism on American Evangelical theology can be traced to Walter Rauschenbusch, whose "views

¹⁶⁰ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 57.

¹⁶¹ Barth in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1919) wrote of the "crisis," that is, God's judgment of humanity, such that "every intrusion into the world or appearance in it of the sovereignty of God" is "a concrete and tangible thing". Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London; United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1933), 107-108.

contrast, Ottati notes how Niebuhr rejected Barth's supernatural faith that separated revelation from human values, and negated its impact on practical life.¹⁶²

Ottati qualifies that while Niebuhr agreed with Barth on revelation being wholly God's initiative and faith a grace gift, he disagreed with his supernatural faith to make room for liberal theological achievements.¹⁶³ Ottati draws attentions to how Niebuhr credited 19th century German liberal theology for recovering "important elements of the biblical heritage and to interpret the work of the Protestant Reformers."¹⁶⁴ According to Ottati, Niebuhr drew upon the liberal achievement of reconciling divine revelation with human reason and faith:

"In the Christian community, revelation in Jesus Christ is the special experience beyond which no further justificatory appeal is possible. It constitutes the believer's first certainty because it elicits a faith commitment to the significance or value of divine reality in light of which the believer applies interpretive images to his experience."¹⁶⁵

Ottati expounds on how Niebuhr interpreted God's revelation in Christ from the standpoint within the Church to justify Christ as the basis of regeneration. Ottati substantiates by first conveying how Niebuhr viewed revelation as a special experience that constitutes "the believer's first certainty" because it leads to a "faith commitment" to God.¹⁶⁶ According to Ottati, Niebuhr saw

¹⁶² Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 57.

¹⁶³ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 67.

¹⁶⁴ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 5.

¹⁶⁵ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 74.

¹⁶⁶ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 79.

regeneration as the basis for the sinner's faith in God as Creator which in turn enabled him to apply the images of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection to his experience.

Having conveyed how Niebuhr's Christology dealt with the images of the historical Christ-events, Ottati goes further to expound on his belief in Christ as the source of salvation:

"For Niebuhr, Jesus Christ is the irreplaceable event in whom Christians encounter the reality of God and a suggestion of what it means to live in relation to that reality. The decisive occasion preserved in confessional recitals elicits an affective sense of divine presence and includes the reflexive value judgment on the part of believers that God is the most important reality with which persons have to deal."¹⁶⁷

Ottati explicates on Niebuhr's belief that appropriating the images of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection leads to a conversion experience and a re-orientation of values. This is supported by Ottati's assertion that that historical Christ-event while preserved in the Church's confessions is able to elicit "an affective sense of divine presence" and the "reflexive value judgment" of believers.¹⁶⁸ Here Ottati credits Niebuhr for depicting God's revelation in Christ as being both preserved in the Church's liturgical confessions and as a salvific encounter.¹⁶⁹ According to Ottati, Niebuhr affirmed the historical and ongoing reality of God's revelation in Christ that

¹⁶⁷ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 79.

¹⁶⁸ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Ottati posits Niebuhr's rejection of a natural knowledge of God: "True knowledge of divine things requires a change in the fundamental love or affection of the self." Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 119.

enables believers to use their reason, affections and value judgments.¹⁷⁰ In this regard, Ottati shows how Niebuhr was able to address Barth's weakness in undermining the intelligibility of revelation.¹⁷¹ Although Ottati credits Niebuhr for defending God's supernatural revelation in Christ, he emphasizes how he was able to reconcile it with human faith and values.¹⁷²

Ottati conversely also positions Niebuhr's Christology as a corrective to German liberalism's overemphasis on the human subject by addressing the interplay between divine sovereignty and human faith:¹⁷³

"For Niebuhr, revelation in Jesus Christ represents the conversion of our natural religion, a redirection of our devotion toward divine reality that cannot be reduced to our stratagems of self-defense. It precipitates a reorientation of our lives toward the true God and it leads to a re-envisioning in relation to this God of ourselves and the many objects and others with which we interact."¹⁷⁴

Here Ottati reveals how Niebuhr conceived of revelation as a transition from natural religion to supernatural religion because it entails the re-orientation of the believer's values. Ottati emphasizes this conversion to credit Niebuhr for showing how revelation turns our human faith away from other objects of

¹⁷⁰ Ottati emphasizes Niebuhr's belief that the believer's "standard of judgment is his response to revelation rather than the pre-condition of revelation".

Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 78.

¹⁷¹ Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 57.

¹⁷² According to Ottati, Niebuhr saw the notion of faith in God as having both theoretical and material dimensions: "Thus, while faith in God cannot be simply equated with our speculative doctrines and moral ideals, neither can it be irretrievably divorced from our ordinary experience".

Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 25.

¹⁷³ Ottati points out how Niebuhr was particularly critical of German liberalism's moralization of faith where "faith becomes subject-centered and is valued as an aid in the struggle for human good...".

Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 24.

¹⁷⁴ Douglas F Ottati, "Reformed Theology, Revelation, and Particularity: John Calvin and H. Richard Niebuhr," *CrossCurrents* 59, no. 2 (2009), 137.

value, and towards God.¹⁷⁵ Having examined Ottati's exposition on the German and American influences on Niebuhr's soteriological revelation, we turn to Hall's reception that focuses on his American Evangelical tradition.

1.3.2. Douglas Hall: Between Conservative Absolutism and Liberal Theism

Douglas Hall's reception of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological revelation emphasizes his mediatory position between a conservative absolutism and a liberal theism. Hall characterizes Niebuhr as a "Christian apologist fully conscious of the pluralistic character of our society, and as a churchman living between the extremes of a conservative absolutism that substitutes the divinization of Jesus for the incarnation of the Word, and an inchoate liberal theism that begs the question, "Why Jesus?"¹⁷⁶ Hall uses the terms "conservative absolutism" and "theocentric liberalism" to refer to the old categories of fundamentalism and liberalism that German and American Neo-orthodoxy cuts across.¹⁷⁷ By the phrase "conservative absolutism", Hall refers to Niebuhr's departure from fundamentalism's tendency to replace the deity of Jesus with Christ the incarnate Word. In contrast, Hall uses the term "liberal theism" to highlight the weakness of liberal theology in undermining Christ as the source of salvation.

¹⁷⁵ Ottati reiterates how Niebuhr sought to counter Barth and the neo-Reformation movement that set "revelation completely apart from human faiths in other objects of value", this failing to describe intelligibly its impact on practical life.

Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 57.

¹⁷⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of "Neo-Orthodoxy,"* 1st edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 94.

¹⁷⁷ Given his interest in the broad neo-orthodox movement that emerged in Europe before taking root in America, he does not situate fundamentalism or liberalism in a German or American context specifically.
Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 94.

Hall sets forth this backdrop to justify Niebuhr's need to defend Christ as the source of salvation and posits that he turned to Jonathan Edwards to develop his apologetic:¹⁷⁸

"H. Richard Niebuhr, in this respect very representative of the Reformed tradition as exemplified by Jonathan Edwards, intended his entire theological and ethical testimony to be *theocentric*. For Christology this means: Jesus Christ is the revealer of God. In other words, the function of Christ's centrality for Christians is that he points beyond himself to an Ultimacy that he reflects and even may be said to embody, but does not wholly contain or exhaust."¹⁷⁹

Establishing Niebuhr's continuity with Edwards and his Reformed tradition, Hall credits him for preserving the deity of Christ through his role in revealing God as Ultimate reality. This is supported by Hall's assertion that Niebuhr's Christology dealt with Christ as the embodiment of an Ultimacy that "does not wholly contain or exhaust".¹⁸⁰

While crediting Niebuhr for upholding Christ's deity, Hall posits that he was simultaneously concerned with the intelligibility of revelation: "The revelation of God is not a possession but an event, which happens over and over again when we remember the illuminating center of our history. What we can possess is the memory of Jesus Christ, but what happens to us through that memory we cannot possess."¹⁸¹ Conceiving of revelation as a recurrent

¹⁷⁸ According to Hall, Niebuhr agreed with the theocentric orientation of liberalism but refused to diminish or undermine Christology. As such, Niebuhr turned to Edwards to show how the centrality of Christ can be held alongside theocentric theology: "It is of a piece with the very Reformed conception of theological method that Niebuhr found in Edwards, and himself represents, that the confession of belief in the sole glory of God relativizes all else, including theology."

Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 100.

¹⁷⁹ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 97.

¹⁸⁰ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 97.

¹⁸¹ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 100.

event, Hall reveals how Niebuhr affirmed Christ as the center of redemptive history such that the believer shares in the Church's memory of Christ's life, death and resurrection.¹⁸² Hall's claim that Niebuhr grounded the deity of Christ upon his Lordship and headship of the Church reveals his belief that revelation is mediated through human reason and faith, rather than a supernatural faith.

By drawing attention to Niebuhr's belief in the compatibility of human reason and faith, Hall highlights his counterreaction to liberalism by justifying Christ as the source of salvation: "Niebuhr speaks of the mediatorial quality of Christ wholly directed as man toward God; and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men."¹⁸³ In addition to defending Christ's deity through his unity with the Father, Hall credits Niebuhr for affirming Christ's humanity as God-man mediator. Having shown how Niebuhr addressed Christ's humanity and divinity in terms of his incarnation and death, Hall proceeds to uncover his view of the relation of Christ's resurrection to the salvation he provides:

"It is of a piece with the very Reformed conception of theological method that Niebuhr found in Edwards, and himself represents, that the confession of belief in the sole glory of God relativizes all else, including theology... Theologians are historically conditioned persons whose attempts to comprehend the eternal are necessarily relative."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Hall expounds on how Niebuhr approached the question about revealed and natural knowledge of God by citing his exposition on the confessional stance of theology. Niebuhr spoke of the need for confessional theology "to restrain its desire to prove the superiority of Christianity to other religions or of a Christology theology to philosophy by pointing to the Church's possession of revelation."

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 68-69 as cited in Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 100.

¹⁸³ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 105.

¹⁸⁴ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 100.

Hall clarifies how Niebuhr drew the link between the reality of Christ's resurrection and the believer's hope in God's glory that was profoundly influenced by Jonathan Edwards.¹⁸⁵ Hall reveals how Niebuhr's soteriological revelation justified Christ as the source of salvation and hope to affirm God's absolute sovereignty and justice in salvation.

1.3.3. John H. Yoder: H. Richard Niebuhr's Christology and Doctrine of the Trinity?

Instead of providing a systematic exposition of Niebuhr's Christology, John H. Yoder evaluates his Christology in relation to a doctrine of the Trinity. Situating Niebuhr in his 20th century American Evangelical context, Yoder affirmed his continuity with the American Reformed tradition associated with Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin.¹⁸⁶ Yoder's reception of Niebuhr's Christology as soteriological revelation is based on his critical reading of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) publication. Yoder's reading of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* differs from stand-alone readings that have focused on appropriating Niebuhr's typology to the question of Christianity's relation to culture.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Hall, *Remembered Voices*, 100.

¹⁸⁶ John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned" in Glen H. Stassen, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 36-37.

¹⁸⁷ See, for example, D.M. Yeager, Darryl M. Trimiew, and Craig, A. Carter. When we examine the receptions of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* by Yeager, Trimiew and Carter, we see distinct ways in which Niebuhr's typology has been interpreted. Yeager focuses on Niebuhr's methodological reliance upon Marxist sociology of religion to address the relation between the Church and culture. Trimiew critiques Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* model through an African American lens to show how Niebuhr's typology can be appropriated to a different cultural context. Carter criticizes Niebuhr for his defense of Christendom in *Christ and Culture* to make his case for a post-Christendom modification of his typology. See D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in 'Christ and Culture,'" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (April 1, 2003): 101–120; Darryl M Trimiew, "Jesus Changes Things: A Critical Evaluation of 'Christ and Culture' from an African

In contrast to these readings, Yoder probes into how Niebuhr first addressed the subject on the Christ of Christianity before seeking to clarify Christianity's relation with culture:

"The main stream of Christian tradition has said concerning Jesus (a) that he was the Son of God incarnate, his teaching authoritative and his person unique; and (b) that his death is the atonement for human sin, following which his resurrection is the guarantee of a new living power in human experience."¹⁸⁸

Comparing Niebuhr's Christology with mainstream of Christian tradition, Yoder indicates his departure from a Trinitarian Christology that affirmed Christ's divinity and humanity.¹⁸⁹ Yoder's description of Christ as "Son of God incarnate" who conquered sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection reveals how he equates Trinitarian Christology with Chalcedonian Christology.¹⁹⁰

Based on this evaluative criteria, Yoder demarcates Niebuhr's departure from Chalcedonian Christology because his Christology begins with Christ's humanity:

Jesus is first of all seen as a *moralist*. He is a teacher of human values who affirms the transcendence of the spiritual and therefore condemns concern for the world.

American Perspective," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 157–65; Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Brazos Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁸ John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, by Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 59.

¹⁸⁹ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," 31-89.

¹⁹⁰ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," 80.

One of the ways he teaches is by being an exemplary human being, but this is true more about his thought (about God) than about his social behavior.”¹⁹¹

Yoder expounds on how Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* (1951) addressed the humanity of Christ in terms of Christ’s life and death.¹⁹² Yoder further substantiates by asserting that Niebuhr conception of Christ as an “exemplary human being” was more about his “thought (about God) than his social behaviour”.¹⁹³ Although Yoder characterizes Niebuhr’s Jesus as a “moralist” or a “teacher of human values”, he posits that Niebuhr maintained Christ’s transcendence alongside his immanence through his condescension.

Having identified Niebuhr’s starting point in Christ’s humanity, Yoder goes further to posit that his Christology rests upon New Testament rather than Chalcedonian Christology:

“If we test this picture of Jesus not in comparison to traditional Christian thought but by the New Testament itself, we find there two additional themes of central importance. One is (a) that Jesus is in his life and death an exemplary human, not only a teacher whose instructions are authoritative but a person whom his disciples are to imitate, not in slavish mimicry but in free discipleship. Christ further (b) is affirmed to be Lord over nature and over all human history by virtue of his resurrection and ascension.”¹⁹⁴

According to Yoder, Niebuhr’s Christology is more akin to a New Testament Christology because it is Christ’s perfect obedience to God’s will in death that

¹⁹¹ Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 59.

¹⁹² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 55-56.

¹⁹³ Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 59.

¹⁹⁴ Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 59-60.

renders him as human exemplar. Yoder also further denotes how Niebuhr defended Christ as the source of atonement and salvation by establishing the unity between Christ's humanity and divinity. This is supported by Yoder's proposal that Niebuhr affirmed the continuity between Christ's humanity in his life and death and Christ's divine Lordship through his resurrection and ascension.¹⁹⁵

1.4. Christology as Individual and Communal Soteriology

The final section of my review focuses on the reception of Niebuhr's Christology as individual and communal soteriology by Godsey, Hoedemaker, Sherry, and Fowler. These scholars highlight Niebuhr's emphasis on Christ and the Spirit's work in effecting salvation in the believer and the Church.¹⁹⁶ Situating Niebuhr in the context of 20th century American evangelicalism, these scholars focus on his corrective to the social gospel movement's exclusive focus on the social implications of salvation.¹⁹⁷ Godsey, Hoedemaker, Sherry, and Fowler credit Niebuhr for developing a Christology that affirmed the Spirit's role in enabling the believer's obedience to God and the unity of the Church.¹⁹⁸ Their receptions of Niebuhr's Christology as

¹⁹⁵ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 59-60.

¹⁹⁶ Fowler accounts for Niebuhr's concern with individual and social salvation by uncovering his view of the Social Gospel vision as primarily a socialized vision of the Harnackian individualistic value-idealism: "For Harnack the Kingdom of God is a state of the soul, for the social gospel it is a state of society; for Harnack the God of Jesus is the kind father of every individual, for the social gospel he is the father of humanity"

James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 82.

¹⁹⁷ Hoedemaker indicates how Niebuhr's engagement with the social gospel movement's theology of salvation led him to wrestle with the tension between sovereignty and pluralism L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 18.

¹⁹⁸ While Godsey reveals Niebuhr's belief that the reconciled relationship between God and man at the point of salvation is the basis of transforming culture, he posits that Niebuhr did

individual and communal soteriology have influenced Diane Yeager and Charles Scriven's interpretations of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* typology. Yeager examines Niebuhr's 'conversionist' position to show that he approached Christ's relation to culture with the presupposition of the Spirit's presence in salvation and creation.¹⁹⁹ Acknowledging Christ's Spirit as the agent who indwells the believer and the Church, Yeager expounds on Niebuhr's portrayal of the Christian as a social self within the Church in space and time.²⁰⁰ Scriven in contrast, revises Niebuhr's typology to address how Christians and the Church should submit to the absolute authority of Scripture and embody the life of Christ through the Spirit in the prevailing culture.²⁰¹

1.4.1. J.D. Godsey: Individual and Communal Soteriology as a Corrective to Anthropocentrism

We begin this section by examining Godsey's 1970 reception of Niebuhr's Christology as individual and communal soteriology in order to pose corrective to "a man-centered faith in Cultural Protestantism".²⁰² Godsey's reading of Niebuhr's Christology notes his alignment with the "great tradition" of Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal and Edwards; and his kinship with "theologians of experience", such as Edwards, Schleiermacher, Coleridge,

not clearly articulate how this individual reality leads to the Church's communal witness in culture.

"The ongoing interaction between God and man provides the basis for transformation, and for Niebuhr it is the Church that is called to lead by the way by living a transformed life"
John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 63.

¹⁹⁹ D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in 'Christ and Culture,'" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003), 101–120.

²⁰⁰ Yeager, "The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church" in Glen H. Stassen, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 91–126.

²⁰¹ Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 20 & 162.

²⁰² John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 21.

Bushnell and Maurice.²⁰³ Godsey also qualifies that his interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology draws extensively from his publications *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) and *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937).²⁰⁴ Comparing both these publications, Godsey identifies Niebuhr's progressive departure from a man-centred faith that is grounded in anthropology and sociology by the late 1930s.

Godsey accounts for Niebuhr's concern with the process of effecting salvation within the believer and the Church by expounding on his presupposition that salvation cannot be apart from the Church:

"I do not see how we can witness to the divine sovereignty without being in the church nor how we can understand what God is doing and declaring to us in our public and private experience without the dictionary of the Scriptures..."²⁰⁵

Quoting from Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self* (1963), Godsey highlights his view that the believer's witness to God's sovereignty cannot be apart from the Church or Scriptures. By emphasizing God's activity and the believer's public

²⁰³ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 21.

²⁰⁴ In his preface to *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), Niebuhr expresses his dissatisfaction with his sociological approach in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Niebuhr states, "In a previous study, 'The Social Sources of Denominationalism', I sought to discover the nature of the relation of religion to culture and to throw light on the complexity of American Christianity by examining the influence of social forces on faith and by tracing the sociological pattern of race, class and sectional interests as it manifested itself in the denominations. The account left me dissatisfied at a number of points."

While Niebuhr in the 1920s to mid-1930s sympathized with the liberal modernist movement that sought to unify the Church through social factors, his 1937 work demarcated a significant turning point in his theological development. Niebuhr rejected the modernist movement's sociological interpretation of the human condition and the Church and sought instead to propose a theological understanding of the human condition and the human responsibility in culture.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1937), ix.

²⁰⁵ Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 143 as cited in Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 21.

and private experience, Godsey draws attention to Niebuhr's belief in the continuity between the individual conversion and the salvation of the Church.

While Godsey credits Niebuhr for affirming how Christ effects salvation in the believer and the Church, he posits that Niebuhr called for a corresponding response of faith to Christ's work:

"Niebuhr believed in the historical Jesus whose history can be observed externally, but only when through faith we participate in that history does he become God's self-revelation to us... Niebuhr points towards the Christian community's affirmation of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, this revelation elicits, compels faith in God. Faith he could interpret only as miraculous gift and not something man could will for himself."²⁰⁶

Godsey first draws attention to Niebuhr's "historical Jesus" that situated Christ's life, death and resurrection in salvation history, and was based upon the eyewitness accounts of the early Church. Highlighting Niebuhr's belief that these Christ-events can be observed externally, Godsey uncovers his view that the authority of Scripture is necessary for salvation. This is supported by Godsey's assertion that Niebuhr called for the personal appropriation of God's self-revelation through participating in salvation history through faith.²⁰⁷

By emphasizing Niebuhr's interpretation of faith in God for salvation as a miraculous gift, Godsey clarifies his conviction of Christ and the Spirit's joint work in effecting salvation within the believer:

²⁰⁶ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 29 & 31.

²⁰⁷ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 29 & 31.

“It was Niebuhr’s conviction that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is an event in our history which revolutionizes our human religion, which is usually polytheistic (faith in many gods) and at best henotheistic (faith in one god among many)... Niebuhr understood the revelation of God in Christ to introduce a permanent revolution in our religious life whereby our religious beliefs and conduct are continually transformed through repentance and new faith.”²⁰⁸

Here Godsey explains Niebuhr’s belief in Christ’s transforming power to transform human faith in many gods to a monotheistic “faith in the One who is beyond the many but who acts in and through all things”.²⁰⁹ According to Godsey, Niebuhr claimed that Christ’s work in enabling faith in God for salvation is inseparable from the Spirit’s work in repentance and obedience. This is evidenced in Godsey’s assertion on how Niebuhr saw revelation as introducing “a permanent revolution in our religious life whereby our religious beliefs and conduct are continually transformed through repentance and new faith.”²¹⁰

When we examine Godsey’s explication on Niebuhr’s Christology, we see that the theme of reconciliation holds together his individual and communal soteriology:

“Niebuhr confessed that he was a follower of Jesus Christ, that his way of thinking had been decisively modified by Christ’s presence in history, and that he identified himself wholeheartedly with Christ’s cause, namely, the reconciliation of man to God.”²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 33.

²⁰⁹ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 33.

²¹⁰ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 33.

²¹¹ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 47.

Godsey substantiates by revealing how Niebuhr saw the believer's personal following of Christ as inseparable from the twofold movement of reconciliation, from God to man and man to God. In this regard, Godsey credits Niebuhr for affirming how Christ and the Spirit work to effect salvation so that the believer's thought and action are reorientated towards Christ's mission of reconciliation.

1.4.2. Libertus A. Hoedemaker: The Significance of Christ and the Spirit for Individual and Communal Salvation

Godsey's 1970 publication coincided with Libertus A. Hoedemaker's reception of Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology in the context of individual and communal salvation. To account for reading Niebuhr's Christology as soteriology, Hoedemaker compares his theological interests with that of Barth:

"Like Barth, Niebuhr would say that the relation of crisis between man's constant search for God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the fundamental theme of theology. Like Barth, Niebuhr would say that God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ confronts us with something qualitatively different from any cultural ideology. But he refuses to structure his theological method according to these insights; for this would imply a weakening of the basic theological concern for the situation of natural man, his faith and experience, and the situation of the church in the midst of its cultural loyalties."²¹²

In his comparison, Hoedemaker first clarifies that Niebuhr developed his Christology to deal with the "problem of meaning in history", namely man's existential search for God. Hoedemaker claims that while Niebuhr shared

²¹² Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 26.

Barth's conviction that God's self-revelation in Christ is "qualitatively different from any cultural ideology, he did not appropriate this insight into his theological method."²¹³ Accounting for Niebuhr's departure from Barth, Hoedemaker highlights his concern with balancing God's transcendence with "natural man, his faith and experience, and the situation of the church in the midst of its cultural loyalties."²¹⁴ As opposed to Barth's emphasis on God's wholly otherness, Hoedemaker credits Niebuhr for addressing God's relation with man:²¹⁵

"The relation of Jesus Christ to the almighty Creator of heaven and earth becomes a fundamental issue not in terms of doctrine but existentially... The problem of God's unity is the problem of the unity of his wrath and mercy... The revelation in Jesus Christ – in him we find an eminent manifestation of this "slayer"! – does not, as if by magic, erase this awareness. It introduces, or strengthens, the faith that God is love and thus assigns the problem of divine unity."²¹⁶

Hoedemaker substantiates by clarifying how Niebuhr addressed the relation of Christ to God the Creator in existential, rather than doctrinal terms. As such, he dealt with the problem of divine unity in terms of God's wrath and mercy towards sinners rather than God's unity as Trinity.

²¹³ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 26.

²¹⁴ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 26.

²¹⁵ "We know also that in grace the supposed unity of mankind meets and is disturbed by a Wholly Other majestic and observable unity, which is the true Oneness". Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London; United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1933), 452.

²¹⁶ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 111.

Having implications for Niebuhr's understanding of Christ and the Spirit's role in effecting salvation in the believer and the Church, Hoedemaker expounds:

"The Christological problem formulated here is a problem of history and hermeneutics, it seeks to relate the significance of Christ to history and eschatology, it asks for the structure of the triad history-God-Christ."²¹⁷

Hoedemaker reveals how Niebuhr characterized the Christological problem of Christ's relation to God as a "problem of history and hermeneutics" to clarify the historical and eschatological meaning of Christ.²¹⁸ This is supported by Hoedemaker's assertion that Niebuhr's theological method took on the "structure of the triad history-God-Christ" to relate "Christ's significance to history and eschatology"²¹⁹ Here Hoedemaker credits Niebuhr for proposing a Christology that affirms the dependent relation between the historical and contemporary meaning of Christ in the Church.

According to Hoedemaker, Niebuhr's treatment of the historical and contemporary significance of Christ's humanity shaped his understanding of Christ and the Spirit's work in individual and communal salvation:

"[I]t is *in* the total human life of Jesus Christ that the word of God is spoken; it is this concrete historical person we – internally- remember as mediator. There are two histories here: the history of God with men *and* the history of men."²²⁰

²¹⁷ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 120.

²¹⁸ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 120.

²¹⁹ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 120.

²²⁰ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 119.

According to Hoedemaker, Niebuhr first clarified how the spoken Word of God is based on the human life of Christ whereas the Church's memory deals with Christ as mediator of the new creation. By clarifying how Niebuhr dealt with the historical and eschatological meaning of Christ as the Word and mediator of the new creation, Hoedemaker reveals how he reconciled individual and communal salvation. This is supported by Hoedemaker's assertion that Niebuhr's Christology dealt with "the history of God with men *and* the history of men".²²¹ Here Hoedemaker indicates how Niebuhr's individual and soteriology dealt with Christ as Word and mediator, and the Spirit's work in granting access to the Father and incorporating believers into the Church.

1.4.3. Terence Owen Sherry: Niebuhr's Individual and Communal Soteriology and the Standpoint of the Human Subject

Terence Owen Sherry's 21st century contemporary reception of Niebuhr's Christology as individual and communal soteriology focuses on his corrective to the standpoint of the human subject in theology.²²² Sherry, in contrast to Godsey and Hoedemaker acknowledges Niebuhr's German rather than American theological influences. According to Sherry, Niebuhr's Christology was shaped by his intention to supplement Schleiermacher's view of the human subject and his values:

²²¹ Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 119.

²²² In his assessment of Niebuhr's theology, Sherry notes his enduring theo-centrism but conveys his own intention to draw out the ways in which Niebuhr's theology was shaped and determined by Christ. Sherry uses the term "Christomorphic" to refer "the attempt to be informed only by Jesus Christ".

Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), iv.

“Between Barth, the great objectivist in theology who proposes to begin and remain with the object of faith and theology, and Schleiermacher, the great subjectivist who undertook to understand the subject with his attitudes and commitments, I cannot judge as to say that the one is right and other wrong... I can only say that Barth’s problem is not mine, while Schleiermacher’s is...”²²³

Citing Niebuhr’s unpublished writings on the theme of faith, Sherry supports his claim that Niebuhr’s theological intentions were more aligned with that of Schleiermacher than Barth. As opposed to Barth’s emphasis on Christ as the object of faith and theology, Sherry posits that Niebuhr approached theology by beginning with the human subject’s attitudes and commitments in religious experience.

While Sherry emphasizes how Niebuhr shared Schleiermacher’s theological standpoint, he also draws attention to Troeltsch’s secondary influence on Niebuhr. Sherry, in particular, indicates how Niebuhr was influenced by Ernst Troeltsch’s “historical relativism” to hold the belief that all ‘knowing’ is historical knowing.²²⁴ According to Sherry, Niebuhr incorporated Troeltsch’s emphasis on the historically conditioned standpoint of the human subject to supplement Schleiermacher’s view of human history with divine history:

²²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, Writings, [Faith Preliminary Materials] "Between Barth and Schleiermacher," n.d., Collection 630, Box 3 (12), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University, as cited in Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Pr, 2003), 3.

²²⁴ Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 6.

“Such a view of history wherein the vicissitudes of historical existence are wedded to the divine life present in history allows Troeltsch to square the bold and often harsh reality of history with the ever-present and ever-working divine love. For Troeltsch, God is finally, in history. For Barth, the issue is whether or not history is in God.”²²⁵

Sherry accounts for Niebuhr’s kinship with Troeltsch rather than Barth by crediting him for addressing God’s activity in history such that the “vicissitudes of historical existence are wedded to the divine life present in history”.²²⁶

By denoting Niebuhr’s closer adherence with Troeltsch and Schleiermacher as opposed to Barth, Sherry conveys his twofold interest in the interplay between divine history and human history. This is supported by Sherry’s claim that Niebuhr rejected Barth’s Christocentric concern as set forth in his *The Epistle to the Romans* because he purported a discontinuity “between divine history and human history”.²²⁷ By the terms “divine history” and “human history”, Sherry refers to Barth’s separation of the history of God’s dealings with humanity in Christ and all human dealings with God in history. Sherry posits that Niebuhr positioned Christ as a primary revelatory symbol that holds together divine history and human history:

²²⁵ Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 6.

²²⁶ Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 6.

²²⁷ Sherry cites from Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans* where he expounds upon the irreconcilable dualism between God’s history and our history. Here Sherry credits Barth for affirming the Creator-creation distinction. Barth states:

“God sends Him – into this temporal, world with which we are only too familiar; into this order which we can finally interpret only in biological categories, and which we call ‘Nature’; into this order which we can finally interpret only from the point of view of economic materialism, and which we call ‘History’...”

Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 277.

According to Sherry, Niebuhr rejected Barth’s over-emphasis on God’s divine-otherness because it purported an irreconcilable dualism between God and the world: “God’s “history” is not our history, and our history is not God’s history. Indeed, our history is “no thing” at all.” Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 9.

“Both the “historical Jesus” and the (biblically-based but not biblically-bound) “Christ of faith” are “facts” that may be incorporated into the life of faith, but they begin as external facts (outer history) and are appropriated as internal reality (inner history).”²²⁸

Here Sherry clarifies how Niebuhr’s Christology addressed the historically and biblically based Christ and the internal reality of Christ in the believer as divine and human history respectively. According to Sherry, Niebuhr called for the “external facts” of Christ’s life, death and resurrection to be internally appropriated by the believer in the conversion experience.

Having expounded on Niebuhr’s belief on how Christ’s historical work needs to be personally appropriated, Sherry reveals his recognition of the Spirit’s work in transforming the mind and heart of the believer in salvation. According to Sherry, Niebuhr’s recognition of Christ and the Spirit’s roles in salvation cannot be apart from the Church: “Niebuhr understands the person and work of Jesus primarily as a two-fold expression of loyalty... It is in his unique loyalty to God that Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God, and it is in his unique loyalty to his fellows that Jesus is revealed to be the Son of Man.”²²⁹ By uncovering Niebuhr’s belief that Christ’s loyalty to God is inseparable from his loyalty to his people, Sherry credits for him for establishing Christ as the norm for human life and relationships. This in turn, would shape his view of the believer within the Church and the social implications of salvation: “Again from an internal viewpoint, human associations are communities of selves bound together by relations to shared

²²⁸ Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 75.

²²⁹ Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 105-106.

memories, experiences, and hopes; from an external perspective, they are made up of atomic individuals related to each other by ordered interests and intricate structures.”²³⁰ Using the term “internal viewpoint” to convey how Niebuhr situates the converted sinner within the Church, Sherry uncovers his conviction that believers are united by their shared memories, experiences, and hopes in Christ. Sherry posits further that Niebuhr saw this internal reality of communal salvation as having social implications because it shapes the organized interest and hierarchical structures of the Church as social organization.

1.4.4. James W. Fowler: H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Historical Jesus” and “Christ of Faith”

James W. Fowler interprets Niebuhr’s Christology in terms of his distinct conception of the relationship between his “historical Jesus” and “Christ of faith”. As we shall see, Fowler uses both of these terms to show how Niebuhr proposed a soteriology that affirmed both Christ and the Spirit’s work in the salvation of the believer. In contrast to the receptions by Godsey, Hoedemaker and Sherry, Fowler’s interpretation of Niebuhr’s Christology focuses more on his defence of Christ and the Spirit’s work in individual salvation, than the salvation involving the Church. Fowler first contends that Niebuhr’s interpretation of the “historical Jesus” grows out of the historical studies that recaptured the eschatological thrust in Jesus’ life and teaching.²³¹ Fowler reveals Niebuhr’s belief that our understanding of the life and

²³⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, xv.

²³¹ James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 90.

teachings of Jesus should be relative to his religious background and to the currents of the religious and political life around him.²³² By drawing attention to Niebuhr's concern with Christ's apocalyptic expectations, Fowler indicates how his Christology has implications for the life that is to come. In contrast, Niebuhr uses the term "Christ of faith" to refer to Christ's contemporary significance for the believer. This is evidenced in Fowler's claim that Niebuhr is concerned with "what has happened in the life of faith, in which just and unjust live, by saying that in this coming of Jesus Christ to us the Son reveals the Father and the Father reveals the Son."²³³

Fowler qualifies that his interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology is based on a close reading of Niebuhr's 1933 publication "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus".²³⁴ According to Fowler, this early publication outlines all the basic elements that would build up towards his mature theological-ethical position.²³⁵ Depicting Niebuhr's Christology as a corrective to the social gospel movement's Christology, Fowler expounds on the implications it had on Niebuhr's doctrine of God:

"It may be argued, rightly, that Niebuhr has transformed Jesus the hero of the moral ideal of liberalism into Jesus the hero of faith and faithful response. Christologically, though there is a continuity in the heroism and in the stress on the humanity of Jesus, it must be granted that a real transformation has occurred and that its major advance is in the new doctrine of God that correlates with it."²³⁶

²³² James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 49.

²³³ James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 231.

²³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127.

²³⁵ James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 95.

²³⁶ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 93.

Fowler posits that Niebuhr posed corrective to the social gospel movement's portrayal of Christ as moral teacher by reconceiving of Christ as "the hero of faith and faithful response".²³⁷ Instead of an exclusive focus on Jesus' humanity as moral ideal, Fowler credits Niebuhr for re-establishing Jesus' deity through his faith and response to God's eschatological history. Fowler reveals how Niebuhr situated Christ's life in his Jewish religious background and went on to affirm the eschatological thrust of his teachings because of the separation between the early Church and the Roman empire.

Fowler credits Niebuhr's Christology for posing corrective to the social gospel movement's moral idealism, while also avoiding a moral absolutism based on transcendental moral rules:

"Because of his radical attention to the discontinuities of the coming eschaton, Jesus the revolutionary was not a moralist but a strategist. The moralist's stance insists either on an ideal end to be striven for, with a determination of means by the end, or on strict obedience to transcendently valid moral rules. Over against both of these moralistic approaches, Jesus adopts the stance of the strategist, alert and expectant, prepared to respond faithfully and creatively to the new possibilities which the divine revolutionary process will bring."²³⁸

Fowler expounds on Niebuhr's portrayal of Christ as strategist in order to show how he avoided the moralistic approaches of both German liberalism and German realism.²³⁹ Fowler clarifies instead how Niebuhr affirmed Christ's

²³⁷ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 93.

²³⁸ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 88.

²³⁹ Fowler references Niebuhr's publication "Religious Realism and the Twentieth Century" (1930) where in his conclusion Niebuhr identifies the liabilities of German realism (especially those of crisis theology) as "dualism, agnosticism, pessimism and dogmatism"

significance for salvation by focusing on his “radical attention to the discontinuities of the coming eschaton”.²⁴⁰ According to Fowler, Niebuhr affirmed Christ’s foreknowledge of God’s plan of salvation and his active will in responding to God’s redemptive process in the world.

Fowler posits that Niebuhr drew upon New Testament Christology to pose corrective to the social gospel movement’s Christology, thus addressing its error in undermining the eschatological trust in Christ’s life and teachings:

“It is as if Niebuhr’s radical faith, developing by way of a secondary, mediated relation to the God of biblical faith, suddenly discovered its ground and depth through identification with the most authentic mediator and incarnator of radical faith in God, the Jesus of the New Testament.”²⁴¹

Here Fowler clarifies how Niebuhr’s incorporation of New Testament Christology enabled him to establish the continuity between individual and communal salvation. Claiming that Niebuhr’s radical faith was modelled after Christ as “mediator and incarnator of radical faith in God”, Fowler shows that he defined faith as both a grace gift and the response of obedience. In this regard, Fowler conveys that Niebuhr recover the eschatological thrust of Christ’s life and teachings by affirming the Spirit’s work in enabling faith and the believer’s obedient witness to God’s sovereignty.

1.5. Conclusion

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Religious Realism.*, by Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Arthur Kenyon Rogers (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 413-428 as cited in Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 87.

²⁴⁰ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 88.

²⁴¹ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 81.

This literature review on the reception of Niebuhr's Christology traced the three predominant interpretations proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship. As we have seen, H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship agrees that his Christology should be read as soteriology but disagree on the loci of his theology. This includes revelation, salvation and the Church, and ethics. To reiterate, the three receptions focused on how Niebuhr addressed (1) Christ as the source of salvation, (2) how Christ and the Spirit effects salvation in the believer and the Church and (3) God's purpose of salvation through Christ.²⁴² To converge these divided receptions of Niebuhr's Christology, my thesis seeks to show the theme of God's goodness holds together his Christology, pneumatology and understanding of the Trinity.

²⁴² Scholars have debated over the promises and shortfalls of Niebuhr's Christology. See Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 105-116, Glen H. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation" in Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 164-167 & John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 42-55, 71-76.

CHAPTER 2

GOD'S GOODNESS AND THE PROBLEMS OF SECULARISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM (1919-1929)

This chapter identifies the theological context that shaped Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness beginning with the problems of secularism and moral relativism in Christian ethics.²⁴³ As set forth in my research aim, I examine the backdrop of American secularism and moral relativism in Niebuhr's context to account for his concern to reconcile God's righteousness and love. As we shall see, Niebuhr first traced the problem of moral relativism to the social gospel movement distortion of God's goodness, affirming God's love to the exclusion of God's righteousness.²⁴⁴

Correspondingly, Niebuhr also attributed the problem of secularism to the social gospel movement's pneumatology that denied a realm of otherworldliness to undermine a Christian doctrine of immortality.²⁴⁵ The

²⁴³ Niebuhr characterizes the term 'moral relativism' as a byproduct of the empiricism movement to deny the notion of universal or absolute moral principles and to claim that moral standards and judgments are historically and socially conditioned.

By the term 'secularism', Niebuhr refers broadly to theology's denial of an otherworldliness to focus solely on the temporal and attributes this trend to theology's incorporation of modern social science.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 4 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

²⁴⁴ Niebuhr identified how social gospel movement's empirical foundations were rooted in the empirical theology of Albrecht Ritschl and its decision to incorporate sociology for theology. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127 & H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 16.

²⁴⁵ In his earlier works from 1919 to the late 1930s, Niebuhr defined secularism as the denial of the otherworldly or spiritual aspects of Christianity to focus solely on the physical and temporal aspects. The term otherworldliness is used in association to refer to the spiritual or eternal dimension of Christianity, used in the context of Niebuhr's belief that the Christian lives in two worlds, the eternal and spiritual and the temporal and physical.

interrelated problems of moral relativism and secularism led Niebuhr to pose corrective by showing that God's otherworldly righteousness and love towards worldly sinners are compatible. Engaging with the Christologies of Ernst Troeltsch and D.C. Macintosh, Niebuhr credited these dialogue partners for reconciling God's righteousness and love towards sinners. Niebuhr however, criticized Troeltsch and Macintosh for secularizing the faith because their theologies revealed an over-reliance upon reason and psychology respectively.²⁴⁶ Niebuhr refused to ground his theology upon rational or psychological foundations because it led to either a moral absolutism or a moral relativism in Christian ethics.²⁴⁷ The problem of moral relativism in Christian ethics, however, proved more pertinent to Niebuhr, given that it was first raised by his predecessors, the social gospel movement.

As we have seen in my literature review, the present Christological impasse in H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship arises from differing interpretations of his Christology as soteriology. Scholars like Ottati, Fowler and Kliever remain divided over the extent to which Niebuhr's theological ethics was shaped by the theological trends in his German background or American context.²⁴⁸ To bring convergence to receptions of his Christology, I aim in this chapter to examine the German and American dialogue partners that shaped

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

²⁴⁶ The origins of this movement can be traced to the social gospel movement and the decision to incorporate modern social science for theology. It is marked by the belief that knowledge is informed by the senses and experience, rather than reason.

²⁴⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 3-11.

²⁴⁸ Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D.C: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001) and Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977).

Niebuhr's Christology. Central to this inquiry is Niebuhr's engagement with the German rationalism and American empiricism movements because it frames his Christology within the broader debate between religion and social science. Revealing also his concern to defend God's goodness, His righteousness and love; I examine his dialogue partners in the social gospel movement, Ernst Troeltsch and D.C. Macintosh.

2.1 The Problem of God's Goodness, His Righteousness and Love

In analysing the theological difficulties occasioned by the social gospel movement, Niebuhr surmised the problem in its approach to God's goodness, in terms of His righteousness and love. This is evident in his oft-quoted critique of the social gospel movement's understanding of God's nature in Christ and God's action in salvation and adoption: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."²⁴⁹ Here Niebuhr first criticizes his predecessors for undermining God's absolute goodness in a Scriptural context by affirming God's Kingdom of love to the exclusion of God's righteousness satisfied on the cross.

In addition to noting how the social gospel movement undermined God's righteousness and love towards sinners, Niebuhr also critiqued it for subordinating God's righteous action in creation under human response: "But divine action was recognized really only in two forms and primarily in the form of religiously motivated human action... primarily he was the one who acted in

²⁴⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan, 1988), 193.

history through those who “did his will” which meant those who had the good purpose.”²⁵⁰ Here Niebuhr reveals how the social gospel movement undermined God’s righteousness as Creator and the obligation due to him by reducing divine action to religiously motivated human action. This was evident in the manner in which the social gospel movement delimited divine action to the human action of believers who had God’s purpose of reconciliation. By identifying how the social gospel movement reduced God’s goodness to the nature and action of love to the exclusion of his righteousness, Niebuhr reveals how his predecessors first raised the problem of moral relativism in Christian ethics. The movement’s belief that good could be defined apart from God as revealed in Scripture and as sovereign Creator revealed its rejection of a moral absolutism based on absolute, universal moral principles:²⁵¹

“In theory it [moral relativism] arises as the complement and antithesis of absolutism and as the fruit of that empiricism which must ever be opposed to an equally necessary rationalism in the polar interaction in which creative thinking moves.”²⁵²

Niebuhr first accounts for the social gospel movement’s tendency towards moral relativism by tracing its empirical foundations in the German liberal theology of Albrecht Ritschl.²⁵³ By characterizing the moral relativism of

²⁵⁰ Niebuhr, “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism”, 118.

²⁵¹ Associated with the rationalism movement, particularly Kant and his belief in moral commands that are binding on all people (categorical imperative). Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 3 & Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 37.

²⁵² Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 3.

²⁵³ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 115–27 & Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 16.

empiricism as a counterreaction to the moral absolutism of rationalism, Niebuhr reveals how the German intellectual and theological currents had relevance for his American Evangelical context. In particular, Niebuhr acknowledged how the social gospel movement was profoundly influenced by 18th and 19th century German liberal theology which was a counterreaction to the rationalism of the Kantian Enlightenment.²⁵⁴ Prompting the move from the objective to the subjective, the American empiricism movement that had its roots in German liberalism relegated morality to the subjective realm of desires and preferences.²⁵⁵

The comparison that Niebuhr draws between these intellectual and moral developments accounts for his concern with the theme of God's goodness and the question it raises for Christian ethics. Chiefly, if God is considered as absolute good or the universal standard of good, does it mean that there is no room for the subjective and the temporal when considering these objective, eternal truths? To answer this question, my thesis renews attention to Niebuhr's early publications from 1919-1929 to convey his refusal to adopt either a moral absolutism or a moral relativism in Christian ethics.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ The 18th and 19th century German liberal movement were associated with the likes of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack and was a counterreaction to the Kantian Enlightenment that marked the rise of modern civilization. Kant emphasized the role of reason over revelation in his moral thought to subject moral commands to the rational will.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–27. See also Niebuhr's criticism on Kant's account of the experience of conscience in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 75.

²⁵⁵ Niebuhr attributed the association of absolutism and rationalism to the German rationalism movement associated with Immanuel Kant.

Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 38 & 70.

²⁵⁶ Niebuhr would coin the term "absolute within the relative" to convey his belief that the objective, eternal truths of moral values can be found within the relativities and subjectivity of human existence.

Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

Niebuhr identified how both positions had been subject to the disintegrating “acid of modernity”, which simply presents competing ethical systems without shedding light on how one may legitimately affirm a specific moral value.²⁵⁷ While Niebuhr sought to defend the objective and eternal truth of moral values, he refused a moral absolutism because it tended to reduce uniquely spiritual and ethical elements to mere rationalizations rather than realities.²⁵⁸ In contrast, Niebuhr also rejected the moral relativism of the empiricism movement because it reduced revelation to religious experience, and God the religious object to a form of group consciousness or wish fulfilment.²⁵⁹

2.1.1. Moving Away from Niebuhr’s Neo-Orthodox Characterization

In seeking to interpret Niebuhr’s Christology in light of his concern with God’s goodness, my thesis moves away from scholars’ neo-orthodox characterization of Niebuhr.²⁶⁰ Neo-orthodoxy was a 20th century theological movement that stressed God’s transcendence, humanity’s creaturely responsibility, sin and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God’s mediator of revelation and grace.²⁶¹ Seeking to counter the prevailing liberal theology with the theological insights of the 16th century Protestant Reformers, it was

²⁵⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 4 as cited in Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr’s Theology* (Washington, D.C: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 22.

²⁵⁸ Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 37.

²⁵⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology,” *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

²⁶⁰ The American neo-orthodox movement questioned the methods and assumptions of the theological liberalism since the late nineteenth century. Associated predominantly with the Niebuhr brothers, neo-orthodox thought also found congenial homes at Yale Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary.

Paul J. Dehart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (New Jersey, United States: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 3.

²⁶¹ Benedetto, Guder, and Mckim, *Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 211.

associated with Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, H. R. Mackintosh and Reinhold Niebuhr.²⁶² This characterization has led H. Richard Niebuhr scholars to focus on his counterreaction to either 18th and 19th century German liberalism or 19th and 20th century American liberalism.²⁶³ While associating Niebuhr with these prevailing movements can uncover the pressing theological issues that confronted him and his contemporaries, it fails to acknowledge Niebuhr as a theologian in his own right with specific theological interests.

I propose that the starting point for challenging the neo-orthodox characterization of Niebuhr is to differentiate his theological concerns from his brother Reinhold's counterreaction to liberal moral or rational suasion.²⁶⁴

While both brothers have been characterized as neo-orthodox, the theological differences between them were apparent in their debate over the nation's response to Japan's invasion of Manchuria in the 1930s.²⁶⁵ This divergence came further to the fore when Richard critiqued his brother for failing to truly break away from the liberal distinction between "justice" and "love" in *Moral*

²⁶² Benedetto, Guder, and Mckim, *Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches*, 211.

²⁶³ The 18th and 19th century German liberalism that H. Richard Niebuhr scholars have associated with him include the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf von Harnack. The 19th and 20th century American liberal movement that H. Richard Niebuhr scholars associate him with include the social gospel movement and the modernist movement.

Stephen W. Martin, *Faith Negotiating Loyalties: An Exploration of South African Christianity Through a Reading of the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 100, L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 77-78, Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Pr, 2003), Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 41 & 47.

²⁶⁴ Reinhold penned *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) to critique the liberal belief that social justice could be resolved through moral or rational suasion.

David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 253.

²⁶⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," *Christian Century* 49 (1932), 378-380 & Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?" *Christian Century* 49 (1932), 415-417.

Man and Immoral Society (1932).²⁶⁶ My thesis challenges the predominant neo-orthodox characterization of Niebuhr by showing that he “remained true to his earlier commitment to social Christianity”.²⁶⁷ By identifying his intention to supplement the social gospel movement’s Christian social ethic, I uncover his intention overcome the liberal distinction by affirming no incompatibility between God’s righteousness and love.

My thesis that accounts for Niebuhr’s concern with God’s goodness as a corrective to the social gospel movement’s Christian social ethic finds support in his retrospective publication “Reformation” (1960). Reflecting on his early theological development, Niebuhr speaks of his “fundamental break with the so-called liberal or empirical theology” because it defined “God in value-terms, as the good.”²⁶⁸ Here Niebuhr demarcates his departure from the social gospel movement because it defined God as the good with respect to what is valuable for humanity. Recognizing how his predecessors undermined God as absolute being and good, Niebuhr refused to reduce God to a relative good, such “that good could be defined apart from God”.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ In his later publication “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, Richard attributes Reinhold’s inadequate corrective to his interpretation of Jesus and his ethical teachings, that was much akin to that of the social gospel movement.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127 as cited in Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 83.

²⁶⁷ Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 45.

²⁶⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative”, *Christian Century* 77 (1960), 248-251 as cited in Gerald P. McKenny, “Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 19. See also Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr’s Theology* (Washington, D.C: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982) & Douglas John Hall, *Remembered Voices: Reclaiming the Legacy of “Neo-Orthodoxy,”* 1st edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

²⁶⁹ Niebuhr, “Reformation, 248-251.

2.1.2 Niebuhr as Church Reformer in 20th Century North America

Instead of a neo-orthodox characterization of Niebuhr, I portray Niebuhr as Church reformer to show that his value theory is rooted in a biblical notion of God as absolute being and good.²⁷⁰ Niebuhr's concern to supplement the social gospel movement's value theory while still sympathizing with its social Christianity arose out of his desire to reform the insular outlook of his denomination.²⁷¹ Niebuhr belonged to an immigrant Church of the German Evangelical Synod of North America which found itself confronted with the challenge of retaining its German Lutheran and Reformed roots in American society.²⁷² While raised in the tenets of their denomination, both Niebuhr brothers began to question its inward-looking strategy because of their political or social activism. Reinhold for example, served in scores of committees in the 1930s-1940s and was instrumental in the formation of the Americans for Democratic Action and New York's liberal party.²⁷³

Richard's social activism in contrast, was nurtured through his engagement with the labour movement that sought to secure the rights of industrial workers. The social gospel movement was at the forefront of this protest movement, taking its stand against the progress of industrialization

²⁷⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93–116 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–127.

²⁷¹ Roger Shinn observes that "Reinhold was called to reform the culture while Richard was called to reform the church".

Roger L. Shin, "Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr (1892-1971)" in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2000), 481-486.

²⁷² Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 842.

²⁷³ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 842.

and the “rugged individualism” it propagated.²⁷⁴ The association of Richard with the social activism of the social gospel movement accounts for the need to interpret Niebuhr’s Christology in the context of his value theory. Niebuhr’s intention to supplement the social gospel movement’s value theory by recovering a Christological starting point has been overlooked because scholars like Diefenthaler and Lacey assumed his complete break from the social gospel movement.²⁷⁵ Diefenthaler for example, makes the case for Niebuhr’s departure from his predecessors because of its human optimism while Lacey focuses on his break from the methodological weakness of its approach.²⁷⁶

This renewed attention to reading Richard’s Christology as his effort to supplement the social gospel movement’s value theory and its understanding of God’s goodness concurs with Hauerwas’ assessment. Comparing the critique of the social gospel movement by the Niebuhr brothers, Hauerwas states: “While Reinhold Niebuhr’s critique of the social gospel arose primarily from difficulties with its way of sustaining the social imperative, H. Richard Niebuhr was preoccupied with the theological difficulties that the social gospel

²⁷⁴ Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, 1st ed. (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 14.

²⁷⁵ Diefenthaler, H. Richard Niebuhr, 48, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 58-62 and Michael James Lacey, *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51.

²⁷⁶ Lacey references Niebuhr’s manuscript “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and Barthianism” to convey his dissatisfaction with the social gospel movement’s “religio-empirical theology” and “teleological ethics” by depicting God as religious object.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and Barthianism” Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 117-122. See also Lacey, *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life*, 52.

had occasioned.”²⁷⁷ In Hauerwas’ assessment, Richard was more concerned with the “social gospelers’ attempt to move directly from their theological convictions to social strategies” and to assume “that God could be used to underwrite humanity’s interests.”²⁷⁸ This is not to say that Niebuhr was not concerned with the movement’s social imperative but rather that he saw how an adequate theology was needed to justify and sustain Christianity’s social task. To address the current scholarship gap, I examine Niebuhr’s 1919 unpublished essay where he critiques the social gospel movement’s Christian social ethics and uncovers the theological difficulties it raised.²⁷⁹

2.2. Niebuhr’s Criticism of the Social Gospel Movement’s Christian Social Ethics

The starting point for understanding the context and theological difficulties that shaped Niebuhr’s Christology is his critique of the social gospel movement’s Christian social ethics.²⁸⁰ Through a close reading of Niebuhr’s 1919 essay on the “Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness”, I clarify his dissatisfaction with its starting point in a pneumatology and its understanding of God’s goodness, his righteousness and love.²⁸¹ This early essay scaffolds a series of critiques

²⁷⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 62.

²⁷⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 62.

²⁷⁹ Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919).

²⁸⁰ Rauschenbusch set aside an entire chapter in *A Theology for the Social Gospel to “Eschatology”* where he addresses the implications of historical criticism on the eschatological Jesus. He states “Historical science and the social gospel together may be able to affect eschatology for good”.

Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 208-239.

²⁸¹ By the term “Kingdom Gospel”, Niebuhr refers to the social gospel movement’s belief that the good news of Christianity is the full realization of the Kingdom of God in Christ.

that Niebuhr penned against the social gospel movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These essays include “From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God” (1929), “The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology” (1931), “Faith, Works, and Social Salvation” (1932), “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus” (1933), “Toward the Emancipation of the Church” (1935) and “The Attack on the Social Gospel” (1936).²⁸²

In this early publication, Niebuhr identifies the first signs of secularism in his predecessors’ theological ethics, in their move away from otherworldliness to focus exclusively on the temporal. Entitling his essay “Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness”, Niebuhr conveys his intention to pose corrective by recovering the eternal and spiritual dimensions of the gospel and the Kingdom of God. Niebuhr states: “[I]s it possible that our age, like that which went before, will cast aside its hope of the coming of the Lord to seek a completion for all present ills not in a Kingdom gospel but in an anticipated realization of heaven? There are signs that such a development is not impossible.”²⁸³ Comparing his context with that of his predecessors, Niebuhr agrees with the social gospel movement’s quest to alleviate social ills

Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919) & Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 211 & Washington Gladden, *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886), 212.

²⁸² H. Richard Niebuhr, “From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God,” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 57 (November 1929): 401–9, H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and Liberal Theology,” *Keryx* 22 (May 1931): 12–13, H. Richard Niebuhr, “Faith, Works, and Social Salvation,” *Religion in Life* 1 (1932): 426–30, H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” (1933) ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988): 115–27, H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Emancipation of the Church,” *Christendom* 1 (1935): 135–45 & H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” *Religion in Life* 5 (1936): 176.

²⁸³ H. Richard Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldiness],” 1919, Collection 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894–1962. Papers, 1919–1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University (hereafter cited as Niebuhr Archives).

as opposed to holding fast to an eschatological hope of Christ's second coming. While Niebuhr refused to abandon the social task of Christianity, he sought to ground it upon an anticipation of the new heavens and new earth rather than the proclamation of Christ's reign over the earth. This is substantiated by his claim that the social gospel movement based its social imperative upon a "Kingdom gospel" rather than "an anticipated realization of heaven".²⁸⁴ In delineating his corrective to the social gospel movement's secularizing tendency, we see that Niebuhr balances the tension between an otherworldly hope and a this-worldly social task.

By using the phrase "Kingdom gospel", Niebuhr draws attention to the social gospel movement's belief that the good news of Christianity is the full realization of the Kingdom of God in Christ. Depicting Christ's reign as King as a present reality of earth, Niebuhr uncovers how his predecessors undermined the Christian doctrine of immortality:

"... [T]he present insistence on a Kingdom gospel deprives the doctrine of immortality of its central place in Christian teaching. Most of those who believe that the whole aim of Christianity is contained in the establishment of the reign of Christ's spirit on earth are also sincere believers in immortality. But those who find themselves unable from the viewpoint of their social philosophy of religion to place any hope in a personal immortality, for which they may long, and satisfy themselves with the assurance that all which is of worth in their life will be conserved in the character of the kingdom of earth are undoubtedly more consistent."²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University (hereafter cited as Niebuhr Archives).

²⁸⁵ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives.

Niebuhr explains how the social gospel movement's theological starting point in the "establishment of the reign of Christ's spirit on earth" left no room for hope in a personal immortality. Here Niebuhr establishes the link between its starting point in pneumatology and the movement's standpoint of a social philosophy of religion" to reveal its tendency towards secularism.²⁸⁶

Relying on social factors to interpret the nature and purpose of Christianity, Niebuhr's predecessors claimed that the nature of reality is limited to our physical world.²⁸⁷ The social gospel movement's emphasis on social factors in turn, also shaped its view of the social world, holding the "conviction that social units of every sort are the primary human realities". The social gospel movement's conception of "the social individual" that downplayed the consideration of the individual, for the sake of the individual; accounts for its denial of a personal hope in immortality.²⁸⁸ Niebuhr expounds upon the secularizing tendency in the social gospel movement's social philosophy of religion by highlighting its conviction that the worth of human life is found in the temporal kingdom of earth.²⁸⁹ Denying God's otherworldly Kingdom as a dynamic force in history, Niebuhr uncovers how his predecessors placed its faith in human goodness and effort as the moving force of history.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives.

²⁸⁷ Niebuhr asserted that the social gospel was guilty of assuming "that religion as such has no direct bearing on social life" Instead, it placed its faith in man rather than in God "as the moving force of history" to purport a "modern humanism".
H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," *Religion in Life* 5 (Spring 1936), 179, 181.

²⁸⁸ Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," 176-177.

²⁸⁹ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives. See also Hans J. Hillerbrand, *Encyclopedia of Protestantism, Vol. 4* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2004), 240.

²⁹⁰ Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," *Religion in Life* 5 (Spring 1936), 179.

2.2.1 Secularism and Theology's Turn to Modern Social Science

In clarifying the secularizing tendencies in the social gospel movement's theology, Niebuhr sought to show that its social philosophy of religion was grounded in modern social science, specifically sociology. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's exposition on the social gospel movement's sociological notion of sin and regeneration.²⁹¹

“Yet the emphasis upon social sin and upon the sociological roots of sin can also have an opposite effect by discouraging feelings of personal responsibility and by encouraging the individual to let his regeneration wait upon the regeneration of the society which compassed his fall from grace.”²⁹²

According to Niebuhr, the social gospel movement's reliance upon sociology to conceive of the social individual as the primary human reality led it to locate sin only in groups and social structures.²⁹³ Niebuhr's critique of the social gospel movement's social sin reveals its error in undermining God's nature of goodness by denying his righteousness towards sinners. He substantiates its denial of God's righteous wrath by criticizing his predecessors downplaying the individual's culpability for sin by leaving no room for “feelings of personal

²⁹¹ Josiah Strong, a leader of the Social Gospel Movement prompted the move to combine theology with sociology, “linking an older tradition that anticipated the dawn of the millennium in America to a modern faith in scientific method for analyzing problems of industrialization, immigration and urban poverty.

Amanda Porterfield, *The Protestant Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), xxv. See also Josiah Strong, *The New Era: Or, The Coming Kingdom* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Baker & Taylor Company, 1893).

²⁹² Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 3-4.

²⁹³ In “Man the Sinner” (1935), Niebuhr expounds on how the social gospel movement delimited sin to groups and societal structures.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” *The Journal of Religion* 15, no. 3 (1935), 272–280.

responsibility”.²⁹⁴ Niebuhr instead reveals how his predecessors replaced individual regeneration with the “regeneration of society which compassed his fall from grace”.²⁹⁵

Niebuhr posits that the social gospel movement equated God’s goodness with his love that was demonstrated in the regeneration of society following man’s fall into sin. Niebuhr drew the link between the social gospel movement’s distortion of God’s nature of goodness and the problem of moral relativism that it raised in Christian ethics. In the first instance, Niebuhr criticized the social gospel movement for interpreting the fall of man through a sociological rather than a biblical lens. This is supported by Niebuhr’s assertion that his predecessors traced the sociological roots of sin, thus attributing sin and evil to social forces, rather than to Adam’s disobedience.²⁹⁶ Niebuhr draws the link between the social gospel movement’s incorporation of modern sociology and its secular tendency to negate the otherworldly dimension of salvation. He substantiates by hypothesizing that the social gospel movement incorporated sociology’s notion of the social individual because of its desire to counter American individualism²⁹⁷:

²⁹⁴ Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 3-4.

²⁹⁵ Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 3-4.

²⁹⁶ Drawing upon sociology, the social gospel movement purported the notion of corporate sin and the cultural transmission of sin.

Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York, United States: NYU Press, 2017), 285.

²⁹⁷ In his engagement with the social gospel movement and its association with the labour movement that advocated for fair working conditions for workers, Niebuhr positioned the church and labor as natural allies in a society in which “rugged individualism” had become rampant and the profit motive was undercutting human values. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 14.

“In all these respects the social gospel is inadequate simply because it is social, just as individualism is inadequate qua individualism. We cannot eat our cake and have it too, nor foster social values and expect to conserve individual worth as well. But to those who see in life no single trend but the constant interplay of communistic and individualistic forces it seems potent that the latter will not be lightly eradicated.”²⁹⁸

While Niebuhr credits the social gospel movement’s efforts to counter an individualistic and spiritual salvation, he perceived how its view of the social individual as the primary human reality undermined individual human worth.²⁹⁹ Although Niebuhr sympathised with his predecessors’ concern with the social impact of salvation, he sought to recover a biblical understanding of sin and salvation, and its implications for individual human worth.³⁰⁰ As we shall see, Niebuhr would turned his attention to counter the secularism of the social gospel movement in order to re-establish the centrality of the Christian doctrine of immortality.

2.2.2 The Need to Defend God’s Absolute Goodness in An Age of Secularism

In his bid to recover the importance of a Christian doctrine of immortality, Niebuhr perceived the need to defend God’s absolute goodness in an age of secularism. Niebuhr makes the case for his apologetic by criticizing the social

²⁹⁸ Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 4.

²⁹⁹ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 176-177.

³⁰⁰ Ronald Cedric White, Charles Howard Hopkins, and John Coleman Bennett, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Pennsylvania, United State: Temple University Press, 1976), 289.

gospel movement for reducing God to a relative good based upon the judgment of a human community. He states:

“In its meliorism it solves the problem of evil by cutting the Gordian knot – denying all relativity between good and evil; denying as well the validity of any generalizations about sin and admitting only the presence of separate, unrelated evils which may be progressively overcome; and saving love for the character of God in the face of a world filled with suffering by the elimination of omnipotence from his attributes.”³⁰¹

Niebuhr first justifies the need to defend God’s absolute goodness by criticizing the social gospel movement for “denying all relativity between good and evil” and “any generalizations about sin”.³⁰² Here Niebuhr first conveys his view that the concept of good can only be understood because there is evil, and that the Christian notion of good and evil shape our thinking about sin and its effects.

To pose corrective, Niebuhr advocates a return to the biblical notion of good and evil which is defined based on God who is essentially good in his nature. This is supported by Niebuhr’s criticism against the social gospel movement for negating God’s omnipotence as righteous Creator over “a world filled with suffering.”³⁰³ Instead, Niebuhr reveals how the social gospel movement reduced God’s goodness to his saving love for sinful humanity and thus claimed that God can only do good for humanity’s benefit. Niebuhr attributes the social gospel movement’s weakness in instrumentalizing God

³⁰¹ Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

³⁰² Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

³⁰³ Niebuhr, Essay, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness],” 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

for human good to its over-reliance upon a sociology of religion. Reducing God to a relative good based upon human interests, Niebuhr identifies how this in turn shaped the social gospel movement's "meliorism", seeking to progressively overcome social ills through human effort.³⁰⁴ Disagreeing with the social gospel movement definition of God as relative good to replace divine grace with human striving, Niebuhr sought to recover God as absolute good in Scripture.³⁰⁵

2.2.3 The Problem of God's Action of Goodness in the Social Gospel Movement's Kingdom Theology

In addition to showing how the social gospel movement undermined God's nature of goodness, Niebuhr also disagreed with the way in which it approached God's action of goodness in its Kingdom theology:

"A final inadequacy of the Kingdom-religion is less due to its social character than to its practical nature. In its anxiety to achieve results in the realm of ethical living, it leaves out of consideration the aesthetical values which form as large a part of religious worship and answer to so deep a need of man."³⁰⁶

Niebuhr reveals how the problem is rooted in the social gospel movement's appropriation of the of the Kingdom of God in terms of teleology and as an

³⁰⁴ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

³⁰⁵ Niebuhr in the 1930s came to think that "the Social Gospel, with its focus on human striving, was insufficiently centred on God." Douglas F Ottati, "God and Ourselves: The Witness of H. Richard Niebuhr," *The Christian Century*. 114, no. 11 (1997), 346.

³⁰⁶ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

end to which human actions are directed. He indicates how this overemphasis on applied ethics undermined the primacy of God's action towards humanity through His revelation in Christ.³⁰⁷ Niebuhr attributes the social gospel movement's overemphasis on the realm of ethical living to its incorporation of Durkheim and Weber's sociology of action.³⁰⁸ Claiming that the Kingdom of God was fully realized in Christ's human personality, the social gospel movement appropriated the practical implications of Christ's divine life on human society.³⁰⁹ This move from a sociology of religion to a sociology of action in its Kingdom theology led the social gospel movement to negate the aesthetical dimension of religion, particularly the role of the senses and affections in salvation and worship.³¹⁰ Leaving no room for an otherworldliness in attaching meaning to social actions, Niebuhr clarifies how

³⁰⁷ In this publication, Niebuhr establishes his closer adherence with Barth in affirming the primacy of God's action towards humanity through God's revelation in Jesus Christ, H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and Barthianism," in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 117–122.

³⁰⁸ Weber defined sociology of action as "science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences".

Durkheim and Weber purported that religion is always embedded in the interests, the power struggles, and the ideologies of particular societies. Rauschenbusch believed that the new social perspectives had potential for deepening Christian understanding of sin from which the Kingdom of God promises deliverance and alerting would-be citizens of the Kingdom to the promise of liberation from social determinism.

Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth, 1st edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1946), 4 & Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, xvi.

³⁰⁹ Rauschenbusch conveys that the Social Gospel replaced an individual piety with a communal piety by its claim that Jesus "by virtue of his personality...became the initiator of the Kingdom." It was less concerned with Christological and trinitarian ideas and more concerned with "how the divine life of Christ can get control of human society".

Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 148 & 151.

³¹⁰ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

his predecessors reduced God's good action to his love in establishing a kingdom on earth.³¹¹

To substantiate Niebuhr's claim that the social gospel movement affirmed God's loving action at the expense of God's righteous action in Christ, I cite Rauschenbusch's exposition on the movement's understanding of the Kingdom:

"The Kingdom of God contains the teleology of the Christian religion. It translates theology from the static to the dynamic. It sees, not doctrines or rites to be preserved and perpetuated, but resistance to be overcome and great ends to be achieved. Since the Kingdom of God is the supreme purpose of God, we shall understand the Kingdom so far as we understand God, and we shall understand God as far as we understand his Kingdom."³¹²

The social gospel movement's conviction that "the Kingdom of God contains the teleology of the Christian religion" accounts for its neglect of God's righteous action in Christ. Here Niebuhr points out how his predecessors disregarded the gospel as a chief purpose of God and the duty of God's law which is God's claim upon man. Niebuhr attributes the movement's decision to equate God with the Kingdom to its exclusive focus on the dynamic aspect of theology, namely the implications for practical living. According to Niebuhr, the social gospel movement understood this practical demand as "resistance

³¹¹ Throughout the 1920s, Niebuhr maintained a deep sympathy for the social gospel movement's emphasis on human effort to realize God's kingdom on earth because it broadened the insular outlook of his denominational synod on the social issues of the day. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 93.

³¹² Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 140.

to be overcome and great ends to be achieved.³¹³ The social gospel movement's identification of the Kingdom of God as the sole purpose of the Christian religion led it to undermine the otherworldly demand for justice through the Church's proclamation of God's righteous action in Christ. As evidenced in Niebuhr's criticism against the social gospel movement for failing to preserve the Church's doctrines and rites, he reveals its belief that God is known solely from his loving action to establish his Kingdom on earth.³¹⁴

2.3. The Christologies of Troeltsch and Macintosh: Theology's Turn to Psychology

In seeking to recover the nature and action of God's goodness, Niebuhr from 1924-1929 would engage with the Christologies of Ernst Troeltsch and D.C. Macintosh. Building upon the social gospel movement's efforts to reconcile religion and social science, Niebuhr perceived how Troeltsch and Macintosh continued this endeavour by facilitating theology's turn to psychology. Niebuhr engaged with their approaches to God's revelation in Christ to show that there is no incompatibility between God's righteousness and love towards sinners.³¹⁵ Niebuhr acknowledged how both Troeltsch and Macintosh dealt with God's revelation in Christ through a theory of religious knowledge that was based upon empirical or rational foundations.³¹⁶ He states:

³¹³ Niebuhr, Essay, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]," 1919, Collection BMS 630, Box 4 (17), Niebuhr Archives, 5.

³¹⁴ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 140.

³¹⁵ Niebuhr's choice of engaging with the Christologies of Troeltsch and Macintosh can be traced to his formative years at Yale Divinity School as a doctoral candidate. It is highly probable that D.C. Macintosh guided Niebuhr towards the writings of Ernst Troeltsch, particularly his theory of religious knowledge. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 17.

³¹⁶ In his explanation of the theological significance of Enlightenment rationalism, Niebuhr does not distinguish between the German and American movements associated with Kant,

“In America and eventually also in England the revolution was introduced by William James and his followers as well as predecessors in the psychology of religion. They made the psychological approach the orthodox introduction to theology while in Germany the theory of knowledge was regarded as the necessary pre-requisite to all thought upon the nature of God and religion.”³¹⁷

Surmising on theology’s turn to psychology in America and Germany, Niebuhr first associates Macintosh’s American empiricism with William James and his psychology of religion. By claiming that his contemporaries “made the psychological approach the orthodox introduction to theology”, Niebuhr reveals how Macintosh dealt with God’s revelation in Christ in the context of religious experience.³¹⁸ In contrast, Niebuhr describes how Troeltsch’s German rationalism was grounded in Kant’s transcendental psychology and its concern with the subjective origins of knowledge.³¹⁹ Niebuhr substantiates

Locke and Jefferson. He merely expresses how “heresy became the new orthodoxy” in the midst of these 18th and 19th century cultural developments as its proponents sought to make the Christian faith a matter of perfect rationality and plausibility. In the same manner, Niebuhr also acknowledges the German and American origins of religious empiricism or empirical theology. He states that “the enduring contribution of empirical theology, from Schleiermacher to Macintosh, lies in its insistence on the fact that knowledge of God is available only in religious relation to him.”

Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 86 & 91 & H. Richard Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 112.

³¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union,” *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

³¹⁸ William James is associated with the empirical theologians who appealed to “religious experience understood as special states of the total self.” Such approaches “tend to reduce God to a tissue of human experience and make unnecessary an appeal to a disclosure from beyond human consciousness.”

Eugene Thomas Long, *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900-2000* (Berlin, Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2003), 195.

³¹⁹ Kant’s transcendental psychology was a form of cognitive psychology that identified the rational consciousness as the first fact of knowledge. While acknowledging Troeltsch’s engagement with James’ psychology of religion, Niebuhr ascertained that Troeltsch remained closer to Kant’s rationalist foundations in maintaining that the synthesis of psychology and the theory of knowledge can be found only in Kantian doctrine. Even in his retrospective publication “Reformation” (1960), he characterizes Troeltsch’s religious epistemology as “historicism” and a “Neo-Kantian epistemology”.

by asserting that in Germany, “the theory of knowledge” was regarded as the first principle to understand the “nature of God and religion.”³²⁰

The differing approaches can be attributed to the different expressions of institutionalization and secularization that arose in Germany and America respectively.³²¹ Troeltsch’s theory of religious knowledge for example, was shaped by an institutionalization in Germany that entailed a process of rationalization unfolding within the Christian religion itself.³²² In contrast, the secularization in America that influenced Macintosh’s theory of religious knowledge was a blending of the goals of religion and dominant culture to prompt the move away from an otherworldliness.³²³ Despite these different phenomena, Niebuhr recognized how both Troeltsch and Macintosh secularized the Christian faith because of an over-reliance upon social science. Niebuhr’s initial engagement with Troeltsch was profoundly influenced by D.C. Macintosh, his teacher at Yale. Niebuhr was aware of Macintosh’s critique of Troeltsch’s theory of religious knowledge for its rationalistic tendencies.³²⁴ According to Macintosh, Troeltsch developed his

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Ernst Troeltsch’s Philosophy of Religion” (1924), UMI Dissertation Information Service & Niebuhr, “Reformation”, 249.

See also Christopher Adair-Toteff, *The Anthem Companion to Ernst Troeltsch* (London, United Kingdom: Anthem Press, 2017), 11.

³²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union,” *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

³²¹ The term ‘institutionalization’ is used by Niebuhr to describe how the concept of the Kingdom of God became embedded within the Christian religion. Niebuhr attributed this form of institutionalization to German rationalism that replaced tradition, values and conduct with reason.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937), 232.

³²² This religious rationalization was first recognized by Weber in his study of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and would find expression in Troeltsch’s Church-sect theory.

³²³ Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow, *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), 464.

³²⁴ Niebuhr was introduced to Troeltsch’s thought by his teacher at Yale, D.C. Macintosh who published a detailed study of Troeltsch’s Theory of Religious Knowledge. Douglas Clyde Macintosh, “Troeltsch’s Theory of Religious Knowledge,” *The American Journal of Theology* 23, no. 3 (1919), 274.

religious epistemology to supplement the subjectivism “of the Ritschlians, but within the limits of an essentially Kantian point of view.”³²⁵ Troeltsch’s religious epistemology as such, was an attempt to mediate between the intellectual movements of German rationalism and empiricism. According to Macintosh, Troeltsch incorporated Kant’s transcendental psychology, a form of cognitive psychology; to posit that the rational consciousness is the first fact of knowledge.³²⁶ As a result, Troeltsch proposed a rationalist epistemology in which reason substituted empirical experience rather than occupying “the merely supplementary position to which it is entitled”.³²⁷

Macintosh’s initial assessment of Troeltsch’s rationalistic foundations in Kant’s transcendental psychology is important because it accounts for his own turn to incorporate William James’ psychology of religion. While both Troeltsch and Macintosh can be credited for facilitating the shift from sociology to psychology, Macintosh’s theory of religious knowledge sought to surmount Troeltsch’s rationalism. To pose corrective, Macintosh’s psychological approach to theology sought to recover the central position of empirical experience and the supplemental position of reason. Niebuhr’s interest in the debate between religion and social science led him to examine Troeltsch and Macintosh’s contributions to re-establish the nature and action of God’s goodness.

³²⁵ Macintosh, “Troeltsch’s Theory of Religious Knowledge,” 274.

³²⁶ Christopher Adair-Toteff, *The Anthem Companion to Ernst Troeltsch* (London, United Kingdom: Anthem Press, 2017), 11.

³²⁷ Macintosh, “Troeltsch’s Theory of Religious Knowledge,” 286.

2.3.1 The Value of Ernst Troeltsch's Christology for Defending God's Nature of Goodness

To supplement the social gospel movement's starting point in pneumatology, Niebuhr turned to Ernst Troeltsch's Christology to defend God's nature of goodness in the gospel. In his 1924 PhD dissertation on Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion, Niebuhr credited Troeltsch for studying the historical phenomenon of Christianity from a neutral, historical perspective.³²⁸ Troeltsch states, "Nowhere is Christianity the absolute religion, an utterly unique species free of the historical conditions that comprise its environment at any given time."³²⁹ Here Troeltsch provides a simple definition of his concept of historical relativism to justify his rejection of the notion of Christianity as an absolute religion in 19th century German theology i.e. from Hegel to Kant.

Niebuhr credits Troeltsch for holding together a "social, traditional religion" with a "personal, more or less mystical religion" to address the interplay of communal and individual forces of religion.³³⁰ While influenced by Kant and German Enlightenment rationalism, Niebuhr depicts Troeltsch as combining "an anti-rationalism, which recognizes the limits of rationalism, with rationalism and so to arrive at a view which incorporates all proved rationalism into a fundamental "irrationalism." He describes this combination as "a reanimated, broad and deep realism, a living intuitive sense for facts, a

³²⁸ As part of the History of Religions School, Troeltsch saw Christianity as a historical phenomenon that arose from social and national conditions and needed to be studied from a neutral, historical perspective

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives* (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009). 96.

³²⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1971), 71.

³³⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (1924), UMI Dissertation Information Service, 17.

complete surrender to the not yet rationally analyzed life...³³¹ Niebuhr's characterization of Troeltsch's religious epistemology accounts for his turn to his Christology to defend God's nature of goodness in the gospel:

"It brought the concept of reason into connection with the idea of law and the concept of revelation with that of the gospel, united them in its doctrine of repentance, and so gained a rational basis for its dogma."³³²

In expounding on Troeltsch's Christology in the form of his doctrine of repentance, Niebuhr first acknowledges his contribution in affirming the intelligibility of revelation. Drawing upon the Protestant law-gospel distinction, Troeltsch united the concepts of reason and revelation to obtain a "rational basis for its dogma".³³³ According to Niebuhr's exposition, Troeltsch depicted Christ as the mediator of the covenant of grace by fulfilling the law and granting the gift of the gospel. As such, Troeltsch's Christology was able to defend God's nature of goodness through God's righteousness as moral lawgiver and God's love as saviour.

Although Niebuhr credited Troeltsch for reconciling God's righteousness and love in the gospel, he also acknowledged his weakness in secularizing the Christian faith. As evidenced in his assertion that Troeltsch sought to justify a rational basis for his dogma, Niebuhr indicates how

³³¹ Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion: By H. Richard Niebuhr* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1964), 214.

³³² H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion [1924]" (UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1987), 13 & 24.

³³³ Troeltsch's approach to reason and revelation was influenced by his comparisons of the arguments on the relationship of reason and revelation posed by Melancthon and Johann Gerhard. While Melancthon's approach aligned with Lutheran orthodoxy, Gerhard was more focused on the impact of the Enlightenment. Robert von Friedeburg, *Luther's Legacy* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 96.

Troeltsch replaced the Spirit's role in revelation with reason.³³⁴ In his PhD dissertation, Niebuhr attributes Troeltsch's decision to prioritize reason over revelation to his conservative Erlangen Lutheranism background and his quest to defend Lutheran orthodoxy.³³⁵ The Erlangen Lutheran theologians furthered Schleiermacher's work on religious consciousness but failed to adequately distance themselves from Schleiermacher and rationalist biblical criticism.³³⁶ Schleiermacher had sought earlier to combine the pietism of his youth with rationalism's rejection of the supernatural thus leading him to position the collective consciousness of the Christian community as the source of religious truth.³³⁷ Troeltsch alongside his Erlangen Lutheran theologians replaced Schleiermacher's collective consciousness with a religious a priori to posit that religious truth is informed by religious intuition and reason.³³⁸ The notion of a 'religious a priori' was associated with the revived interest in Kantian thought in the early 20th century, serving as an apologetic defence against philosophical reductionism.³³⁹

³³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (1924), UMI Dissertation Information Service, 17.

³³⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" (1924), UMI Dissertation Information Service, 18-51.

³³⁶ The term "rationalist biblical criticism" refers to a movement that emerged in 18th and 19th century Germany which elevated reason above Scripture as its judge and critic, thus undermining the authority of God in Scripture and the belief that the biblical Word originates in God.

Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 114-115 and Mark Mattes, *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 20.

³³⁷ Schleiermacher criticized rationalist biblical criticism "as holding a simplistic view of its subject" while continuing to respect "the historical critical approach of his time".

Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (New Jersey, United States: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 106. See also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol.2* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 267 and Mattes, *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, 20.

³³⁸ Douglas Clyde Macintosh, "Troeltsch's Theory of Religious Knowledge," *The American Journal of Theology* 23, no. 3 (1919), 274.

³³⁹ Mark Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford, United Kingdom: OUP Oxford, 2001), 111.

By tracing the background that led Troeltsch to secularize the Christian faith, Niebuhr uncovers his denial of the Spirit's supernatural work of regeneration. This is supported by Niebuhr's use of the term "biographers" to describe how Troeltsch dealt with God's revelation in Christ: "[T]he biographers have undertaken to show that there are no exceptions to the new generalization, as it is written, "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth; there is none that doeth good, no, not so much as one" [Psalm 14:3]."³⁴⁰ Niebuhr clarifies that while Troeltsch saw the gospel as God's righteousness revealed, he maintained that man could realise his sinful state and need for salvation through his intuition and reason. Although Niebuhr credited Troeltsch's Christology for defending God's nature of goodness in the gospel, he disagreed that the truth of the gospel could be gleaned without the Spirit's regeneration.

2.3.2 D.C. Macintosh's Christology and God's Action of Goodness in Salvation

While Niebuhr turned to Troeltsch's Christology to defend God's nature of goodness in the gospel, he subsequently engaged with Macintosh's Christology to recover God's action of goodness in salvation. Macintosh developed his Christology as a corrective to Troeltsch's rationalist theory of religious knowledge, seeking to recover the centrality of empirical experience in informing theology as opposed to reason.³⁴¹ Dealing with God's revelation

³⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 105.

³⁴¹ In his study of Troeltsch's theory of religious knowledge, Macintosh highlights the duality of the Kantian-rational and William James' empirical thrusts in Troeltsch's modification of Ritschlian value-judgment theory and his insistence "that is value judgment is the foundation and strength of all human knowledge".

in Christ in the context of religious experience, Niebuhr credits Macintosh for recovering the divine initiative in revelation. Niebuhr substantiates by associating Macintosh's empiricism with the "psychologists", who "generalized the findings of the novelists to show statistically that the Main Street-mind is the mind of the race and not an exception."³⁴² In his explanation of Macintosh's theology, Niebuhr credits him for drawing upon William James' psychology of religion to convey that the religious mind is the mind of the human race rather than an exception.³⁴³

Niebuhr positions Macintosh's theory of religious knowledge as a corrective to German liberalism, which he describes as the "novelists" to highlight how his hermeneutics dealt with subjective human consciousness. He draws attention to how Schleiermacher considered the religious mind an exception because he made subjective religious feeling the object of theological concern.³⁴⁴ In contrast, while Niebuhr establishes Macintosh's continuity with the German liberal theology of Schleiermacher, he credits his teacher for recovering the objective content of religious experience:

"Such a theology, as it has been set forth by Professor D.C. Macintosh of Yale, is truly an empirical science and not an empiricist philosophy in which object and subject are dissolved in psychological experience."³⁴⁵

Douglas Clyde Macintosh, "Troeltsch's Theory of Religious Knowledge," *The American Journal of Theology* 23, no. 3 (1919), 274 & 283.

³⁴² Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 105.

³⁴³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47-48.

³⁴⁴ Niebuhr criticized Schleiermacher for making subjective religious feeling the object of theological concern, thus directing Christian thought toward itself rather than God.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 27.

³⁴⁵ Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology," 47-48.

Niebuhr substantiates by characterizing Schleiermacher's theology as an "empiricist philosophy" that dissolved the distinction between God as religious object and the human subject in psychological experience.³⁴⁶ In contrast, Niebuhr characterizes Macintosh's theology as an "empirical science" to convey his corrective by distinguishing between the independent reality of the religious object and human subject in religious experience.

This backdrop of the psychological foundations underpinning Macintosh's theology is integral in examining Niebuhr's exposition on his Christology in the publication "Jesus Christ Intercessor" (1927). Niebuhr posits that Macintosh drew upon the New Testament metaphor of Christ as intercessor high priest to affirm the completed and ongoing work of Christ's redemption.³⁴⁷ Niebuhr's exposition of Macintosh's Christology finds support in Macintosh's emphasis on Jesus' divine personality: "Jesus may be said to have been divine in the quality or value of his personality," and "God must have been in Christ," who represents the acme of divine immanence."³⁴⁸ From Macintosh's exposition, we see that his Christology grounds Christ's divinity in his resurrected glory and reveals Christ as mediator of God's presence in the Church. As opposed to Troeltsch's concern to defend God's nature of goodness in the gospel, Niebuhr posits that Macintosh sought to validate God's action of goodness in salvation. He expounds:

"Prayer is meditation and reflection and suggestion and also communion with God. In that communion the heart of man may be changed; may not the heart of God be also

³⁴⁶ Macintosh, *Theology as an Empirical Science*, 278.

³⁴⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Jesus Christ Intercessor," *International Journal of Religious Education* 3 (1927). 6–8.

³⁴⁸ Douglas Clyde Macintosh, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1925), 150 & 152.

affected? In such a social community as the Kingdom of God, as it exists at any time, the relationship of all members may and must be changed through the activity of one.”³⁴⁹

By using the illustration of prayer, Niebuhr expounds on Macintosh’s conception of revelation as direct communication with God. According to Niebuhr, Macintosh’s understanding of revelation led him to emphasize how salvation transforms the sinner’s faculties and relationships within the Kingdom of God. By depicting Christ as high priest intercessor, Niebuhr reveals how Macintosh was able to affirm God’s righteousness imputed to the believer and God’s reconciling love towards sinners and the Church.³⁵⁰ As opposed to Troeltsch’s weakness in prioritizing reason over revelation, Macintosh clarified how God initiates revelation and completes salvation in Christ. Niebuhr however, criticized Macintosh for secularizing the Christian faith by focusing on the moral aspects while undermining the spiritual aspects of salvation. This weakness arose because Macintosh equated “‘God the Father,’ the God of moral optimism” with “‘God the Holy Spirit,’ the God of the religious experience of moral salvation.”³⁵¹ Although Niebuhr first turned to Macintosh’s Christology to affirm God’s righteous and loving action in salvation, he perceived how his exclusive focus on the moral aspects of salvation failed to surmount American secularism.

2.3.3 Empiricism and the Problem of Moral Relativism

³⁴⁹ Niebuhr, “Jesus Christ Intercessor,” 7.

³⁵⁰ Niebuhr, “Jesus Christ Intercessor,” 7.

³⁵¹ Macintosh, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 150, 152.

While Niebuhr initially turned to Troeltsch and Macintosh to defend God's nature and action of goodness, he remained dissatisfied with their respective rational and empirical foundations. Given his context in 20th century Evangelical America, Niebuhr was particularly concerned with how the empiricism movement raised the problem of moral relativism: "In theory it [relativism] arises as the complement and antithesis of absolutism and as the fruit of that empiricism which must ever be opposed to an equally necessary rationalism in the polar interaction in which creative thinking moves."³⁵² In contrast to the moral absolutism that accompanied rationalism, Niebuhr indicates how moral relativism was a by-product of empiricism because moral judgments are embedded within specific contexts.³⁵³ By the "empiricism" movement, Niebuhr refers to the American empiricism movement associated with the social gospel movement and D.C. Macintosh. Having its roots in the German liberalism of Albrecht Ritschl and Schleiermacher, the movement prompted the rise of secularism through theology's over-reliance upon sociology and psychology.³⁵⁴ In contrast, Niebuhr describes Troeltsch's theory of religious knowledge as "historicism" and a "neo-Kantian epistemology" to highlight his twofold empirical and rationalistic foundations.³⁵⁵

³⁵² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, ed. American Association of Theological Schools (New York: Conference of Theological Seminaries, 1929), 3.

³⁵² Niebuhr, "Reformation", 139.

³⁵³ According to Paul Ramsey, Niebuhr affirmed "relationally objective norms" such that his theological commitments do not fall into moral relativism. While Niebuhr rejected one universal view of morality, he maintained that there are objective, situated "views of the universal."

William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 43.

³⁵⁴ Niebuhr, "Theology and Psychology", 47-48 & Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", 115-117.

³⁵⁵ "Historicism" for Niebuhr was a worldview that entailed the historicizing of the subject: "But our historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object; man, it points out, is not only in time but time is in man." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 7. & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century*, no. 77 (1960), 249.

Niebuhr's distinct definition of moral relativism can be attributed to Macintosh's empirical foundations in a psychology of religion that constituted its corrective to Schleiermacher's empiricist philosophy:³⁵⁶

“Relativism is really not so much a theory as a report of experience. It is strongly entrenched in modern times not only because of the justification it supplies to the strongly individualistic and naturalistic motives of conduct newly released from the bonds of Catholic and Puritan discipline, and not only because of the casual experience of varying systems of morality which the new communication has brought to the masses, but also because of the descriptive accounts of morality offered by the social science.”³⁵⁷

Niebuhr first attributes moral relativism to origins of the American empiricism movement, namely Schleiermacher's theory of experience that profoundly influenced Ritschl and the social gospel movement.³⁵⁸ In contrast, Niebuhr credits Macintosh for re-defining moral relativism as a “report of experience” because he re-established the independent reality of God as religious object to deal with the objective content of experience. Attributing Macintosh's form of moral relativism to his efforts to justify the naturalistic and individualistic motives of conduct, Niebuhr highlights his over-reliance upon psychology. Despite Macintosh's achievement in upholding the divine initiative in salvation, Niebuhr perceived that his exclusive focus on the moral aspect of salvation failed to affirm the religious motives of conduct.

³⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology”, 6.

³⁵⁷ Niebuhr, “Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic”, 4. g

³⁵⁸ Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology,” 47-48 & Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 115-117.

Recognizing how the problem of moral relativism in Christian ethics was an expression of American secularism's denial of an otherworldliness, Niebuhr expressed his intention to pose corrective:

"The absolute within the relative comes to appearance at two points – in the absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insights, and in the element of revelation of ultimate reality."³⁵⁹

Niebuhr coins the term "absolute within the relative" to convey his belief that God as absolute needs to be considered within the changing relations of religion and history.³⁶⁰ In seeking to defend God as absolute in the authoritative text of Scripture, Niebuhr first qualifies that Scripture represents the highest insights of a particular religious community. As such, the absolute personal God of Scripture is only acknowledged by those who identify themselves as adherents of the faith or members of the Christian community. Secondly, Niebuhr's consideration of God as the absolute power over all reality is limited to those who align with the Biblical-Christian view of God as ultimate reality.

As a counterreaction to a moral relativism in Christian ethics, Niebuhr conveys his intention to show that Christian moral values are derived from an external source:

"The obligation of the Christian to follow the Christian ethics does not arise, first of all, from the fact that Christianity is the universally valid religion but from the fact that

³⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

³⁶⁰ By the term "absolute within the relative", Niebuhr refers to the "real within the apparent, of the permanent character in changing relations".
Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 10.

he is a Christian, whether as the result of religious experience or as a result of his commitment to Christianity by an act of faith.”³⁶¹

Niebuhr first justifies the need for Christian rather than universal or absolute moral values by denying that the normative character of Christian ethics rests upon the universal validity of the Christian religion.³⁶² This is supported by Niebuhr’s assertion that the Christian’s ethical obligations are the product of “religious experience” or “commitment to Christianity by an act of faith”.³⁶³ Here Niebuhr expresses his intention to counter Macintosh’s secularizing of the Christian faith by defending a spiritual conversion in salvation and a saving faith in Christ. Niebuhr claims that the principles or standards that govern the individual’s conduct and choices are shaped by the Christian religion and the personal experience of salvation.

2.4 Christology, and God’s Nature and Action of Goodness

In this chapter, I have identified Niebuhr’s 1919 critique of the social gospel movement’s Christian social ethics as the starting point for understanding Niebuhr’s Christology. As we have seen, Niebuhr acknowledged the traces of secularism in his predecessors’ theology and ethics that caused it to undermine God’s nature and action of goodness, namely his righteousness

³⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

³⁶² In his preface to Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self* (1961), Schweiker credits Niebuhr for developing a responsibility ethics that engages with ideas about pluralism and moral realism. He addresses the status of moral claims by seeking to “validate” an ethics based on “the capacity of one’s own community discourse to illuminate and guide our lives as moral beings”. William Schweiker, “Preface” in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), xiv.

³⁶³ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9.

and love.³⁶⁴ Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with his predecessors' starting point in pneumatology led him to engage with the Christologies of Troeltsch and Macintosh to develop his corrective. While Niebuhr credited them for affirming no incompatibility between God's righteousness and love, he disagreed with their rationalist and empirical foundations for secularizing the Christian faith. This backdrop of the problems of secularism and moral relativism in Niebuhr's context frames the next chapter where we examine his intention to recover the religious motives of conduct by delineating the contours of his value theory and theological ethics.

³⁶⁴ Hauerwas differentiates between the theological intentions of the Niebuhr brothers: "While Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of the social gospel arose primarily from difficulties with its way of sustaining the social imperative, H. Richard Niebuhr was preoccupied with the theological difficulties that the social gospel had occasioned." Stanley Hauerwas, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theological Critique of the Social Gospel" in Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 62.

CHAPTER 3

THE RELIGIOUS MOTIVES OF CONDUCT IN NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL ETHICS (1929-1932)

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Niebuhr's quest to recover the religious motives of conduct as a corrective to the moral relativism that was a fruit of the American Empiricism movement. Countering the naturalistic and individualistic motives of conduct that were grounded in psychology, Niebuhr sought to show that good cannot be defined apart from God or be imposed from within a human community.³⁶⁵ To re-establish God as the source and standard of good, Niebuhr from 1929-1932 sought to show how faith mediates between an otherworldly God and a this-worldly human existence for his context of American secularism. This chapters set the foundation for my second thesis aim which claims that Niebuhr developed his Christology and pneumatology to reconcile the believer's reality with his knowledge and experience of God's goodness. By examining how Niebuhr accords central importance to religion in an individual's life, it scaffolds the next chapter where he conveys that the believer's reality and meaning are grounded in God.

In delineating the contours of his value theory and theological ethics, Niebuhr sought to show that the Christian must incorporate otherworldly and this-worldly aspects into their lives. Beginning first with his value theory that was modelled after the Hebrew prophets of Scripture, Niebuhr sought to show

³⁶⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," *The World Tomorrow* 13 (November 1930), 443–446.

how an otherworldly God is mediated through faith to a this-worldly community of believers. Niebuhr for his context of American secularism sought to defend the religious motives of conduct by affirming the inseparability of religion and ethics, and the role of faith in ethics. This chapter culminates in showing how Niebuhr countered theology's over-reliance upon social science by re-establishing theology as a pure, disinterested science.³⁶⁶

My inquiry into Niebuhr's theological ethics through the theme of God's goodness builds upon existing scholarship that has recognized the theocentric orientation of his theology. H. Richard Niebuhr scholars like Douglas F. Ottati, William Stacy Johnson and James Gustafson have highlighted Niebuhr's vision of God as ultimate reality, his belief in God's moral perfection and his belief in a radically monotheistic God respectively.³⁶⁷ While these scholars agree on Niebuhr's theocentrism, they disagree on his starting point for understanding God's nature. My thesis seeks to surmount this divide by showing that Niebuhr's starting point is the nature of God's goodness in Christ's gospel and in Scripture. Other scholars like William Russell Murry, Hans Frei and Carl E. Braaten have gone further to identify Niebuhr's theocentrism as a counteraction to Barth's Christocentric Unitarianism of God

³⁶⁶ Niebuhr considered the intellectual discipline of theology to be a "pure science" or a "disinterested science" because it is for the sake of God and for persons-before-God" Ronald F. Thiemann, *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 40.

³⁶⁷ Bangert indicates how Gustafson's view of divine sovereignty was profoundly influenced by Niebuhr's concept of radical monotheism and his belief in God as the center of value. Douglas F. Ottati, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theocentric Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11, no. 4 (1988), 267–278, William Stacy Johnson, "H. Richard Niebuhr" as published in Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2021) & Byron C. Bangert, *Consenting to God and Nature: Toward a Theocentric, Naturalistic, Theological Ethics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 61.

the Son.³⁶⁸ To supplement their receptions, I call for his Christology to be read in the context of his value theory that addressed the goodness and value of God. Revealing how his approach to God's revelation in Christ is both theocentric and Christocentric, this further development scaffolds chapter 5 where I examine Niebuhr's Trinitarian thought.

3.1 Niebuhr's Concern with the God-Man Relation

In order to account for Niebuhr's goal of recovering the religious motives of conduct in his secular context, I show that his theology was shaped by his concern with the God-man relation. As previously raised, H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who have located him in his American Evangelical context have focused on his theocentric counterreaction to the Christocentrism of Karl Barth.³⁶⁹ The use of these two terms needs to be clarified in order to account for Niebuhr's simultaneous theocentric and Christocentric emphases in his treatment of God's revelation in Christ. The term "Christocentrism" refers to Barth's emphasis on the centrality of Christ within the faith of the Church because he sought to recover a biblical transcendence of God as Creator and

³⁶⁸ By the phrase, "Christocentric Unitarianism", Niebuhr refers to Barth's overemphasis on Christ as a singular person of the Trinity. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3, no. 3 (October 1, 1946), 371–84.

William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970), 34, Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 228 & Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative: Nature and Aim of the Church's Mission and Ministry* (Louisville, Kentucky: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 38.

³⁶⁹ Jon. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), 88, Donald W. Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 55, Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative: Nature and Aim of the Church's Mission and Ministry* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 38 & William. Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 138.

Lord.³⁷⁰ The American Evangelical countermovement was known as the Theological Discussion Group and comprised of twenty-five academics, including the Niebuhr brothers.³⁷¹ The Theological Discussion Group had a particular focus on the themes of Christian anthropology, creation and redemption, and the Kingdom of God and history. It arose as a counterreaction to Barth's Christocentrism because his exclusive emphasis on God's transcendence as Creator and Lord left no room for a 'point of contact' between God and humankind.³⁷² Richard alongside his contemporaries sought to show how the God-man relation reveals not only God's transcendence but also God's immanence in Christ the God-man. Niebuhr's association with the Theological Discussion Group shaped his theological discourse on the human condition and destiny in relation to God.³⁷³

3.1.1 The Significance of Niebuhr's Objective Relativism

In addition to noting Niebuhr's concern with God-man relation, his goal of recovering the religious motives of conduct also led him to acknowledge an objective relativism in his value theory.³⁷⁴ This view that human experience

³⁷⁰ Barth's understanding of God's transcendence over the world is not to be understood spatially even though he believed that no created order exists "outside" or "below" God's being. Instead, Barth is concerned primarily with God's freedom such that the created order has no claim on God or no ability or means to reach God through its own efforts. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Volume 4 - The Doctrine of Reconciliation Part 1* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1956), 204. See also Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 191.

³⁷¹ Richard R. Niebuhr, "Introduction" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), xxvi-xxvii & Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

³⁷² Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 63.

³⁷³ Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63 & 65.

³⁷⁴ By the term 'objective relativism', Niebuhr posits that human experience and knowledge are described in terms of a symbol-using organism with its environment. Niebuhr consistently

and knowledge are interpreted by a symbol-making human creature with its environment is integral for Niebuhr to show how religion determines conduct. Making room for the objective reality of God to be apprehended by the symbol-making human subject, Niebuhr ensured his theology did not succumb to a subjectivism. Scholars like Kliever, Hoedemaker and Ford have traced this achievement to Niebuhr's rejection of Barth's Christomonism, referring to the objective reality of God in the incarnate Christ.³⁷⁵ Barth's view of God's revelation was a corrective to Schleiermacher's subjectivism, which replaced God as the object of faith with "religious consciousness" as the "object of confidence".³⁷⁶ According to scholars like Kliever, Hoedemaker and Ford, Niebuhr disagreed with Barth's Christomonism that established Christ as the object faith.³⁷⁷ This is substantiated by Niebuhr's critique of Barth and his followers for making God's noetic revelation in Christ their starting point in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).³⁷⁸

adhered to an objective relativism from the late 1920s and would reiterate his conviction of the method of objective relativism in value theory in his later publication *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93–116 & Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960). See also Gerald P. McKenny, "Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 19–33.

³⁷⁵ David Ford and Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 197, Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 96 & L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 103.

³⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 14 & 16.

³⁷⁷ David Ford and Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 197, Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 96 & L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Harper Collins, 1970), 103.

³⁷⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 16-18.

H. Richard Niebuhr Scholars like Elwood, Kliever and Frei have also noted Niebuhr's closer sympathies with Schleiermacher rather than Barth.³⁷⁹ In *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), Niebuhr credited Schleiermacher for making room for a 'point of contact' between God and humanity but disagreed with his error in reducing theology to subjective religious feeling.³⁸⁰ Although Niebuhr was profoundly influenced by Schleiermacher's belief that religious experience informs our subjective reality, he refused to collapse the objective reality of God into a religious consciousness.³⁸¹ His disagreement with Schleiermacher's subjectivism shaped his objective relativism that clarified how the human subject's reflection on the symbol of Christ's cross leads to faith in God. By affirming the priority of God's revelation through the gospel, Niebuhr addressed Schleiermacher's error of ascribing "saving power to faith itself rather than the God of faith."³⁸² As we shall see, Niebuhr's objective relativism enabled him to balance the tension between the objective reality of God in revelation with the subjective activity of faith.³⁸³ By showing that God exists independently of the human state of consciousness, Niebuhr was able

³⁷⁹ Christopher Elwood, "Getting Calvin Right: How Karl Barth Changed Our Reading of the Reformer," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 30 (2009), 78, Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 71 & Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background", 67

³⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 16 & 18. See also Gerald P. McKenny, "Theological Objectivism as Empirical Theology: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Liberal Tradition," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 1991), 22-23.

³⁸¹ Schleiermacher emphasizes the importance of faith and experience in religious experience and the objective reality of God in the epigraph to his *Glaubenslehre*, citing from Anselm's *Proslogion*: "Nor do I seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand. For the one who does not experience does not understand." Fredrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, 1:1 & Anselm, *Proslogion I; De fide trin. 2* as cited in Brent W. Sockness and Wilhelm Gräß, *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology: A Transatlantic Dialogue* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 192.

³⁸² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 14.

³⁸³ Niebuhr believed that the knowledge about the objective reality, God, cannot be abstracted from the subjective activity of faith, and vice versa. William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970), 114.

to defend how faith is the believing response to divine revelation that entails both divine grace and reason.

3.2 Niebuhr's Corrective to Theology's Over-Reliance upon Social Science

By reconciling the objective reality of God with the subjective activity of faith, Niebuhr poses corrective to theology's over-reliance upon social science by upholding God's otherworldly love in the gospel. Niebuhr perceived how theology's over-reliance on social science led to the belief that Christian ethics is "dependent on the social conditions and public opinion of any given time and space."³⁸⁴

"...[T]he truth in relativism makes it necessary to undertake the task of criticizing all our current interpretations of the Christian ethic in order that the purely cultural and Western influences may be distinguished from the original Christian content."³⁸⁵

Although Niebuhr recognized the inevitable truth in relativism, he posits this phenomenon necessitates need to distinguish between the religious content and the cultural influences of the Christian ethic. He substantiates by highlighting how current interpretations of the Christian ethic were influenced by both Western values and "the original Christian content" of revelation and Scripture.³⁸⁶ This is substantiated by Niebuhr's explanation that the "original

³⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 3.

Niebuhr characterizes the theory of relativism as the "fruit of empiricism", "the complement and antithesis of absolutism" and the opposition "to an equally necessary rationalism".

³⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 3.

³⁸⁶ The movement known as scientific biblicism arose in 18th century American Evangelicalism and was associated with the likes of Leonard Woods Jr. Charles Hodge. Hodge states, "The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his

Christian content” refers to “the peculiarity of Christianity as revelation or of faith as a divine *tour de force* by which the relative is transcended”.³⁸⁷

3.2.1 Social Science and The Problem of the Source and Standard of Good

Niebuhr goes further to show how theology’s over-reliance upon social science raised the problem of the source and standard of good because it derived a standard of good from within human society. Niebuhr expounds on this phenomenon in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) where he turned to social science to justify the Church’s distinctiveness:

“The effort to distinguish churches primarily by reference to their doctrine and to approach the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view appeared to him to be a procedure so artificial and fruitless that he found himself compelled to turn from theology to history, sociology, and ethics for a more satisfactory account of denominational differences and a more significant approach to the question of union.”³⁸⁸

Niebuhr demarcates his departure from the move to distinguish churches based on their doctrine and to approach “the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view”.³⁸⁹ Addressing the question of Church unity in

storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches.” The scientific biblicism movement viewed the Bible as factual and as a means of arriving at general truths. Gary B. Ferngren, *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore, Maryland: JHU Press, 2017), 272.

³⁸⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Religious Realism*, by Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Arthur Kenyon Rogers (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 427.

³⁸⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), vii.

³⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, vii.

the face of denominational divisiveness, Niebuhr posits that a doctrinal approach may see disunity as a consequence of sin but offers no way forward for preserving the Church's distinctiveness and unity. In this publication, Niebuhr drew upon "history, sociology, and ethics" to account for the Church's denominational differences.³⁹⁰ While Niebuhr concedes that historical and social scientific methods can be used to study the phenomenon of the Church, he disagreed with social science that a standard of good could be derived from society. Niebuhr substantiates by drawing attention to the "unacknowledged hypocrisy" of denominationalism that represented the "accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society."³⁹¹ Niebuhr cites this example to show that when moral standards are context dependent, the Church loses its moral compass and ends up compromising with human and societal standards. In Niebuhr's context, this took the form of the Church reflecting the social class stratification of society, namely the sect-like denominations being associated with the lower classes and the Church-like denominations with the upper classes.³⁹²

Seeking to show instead that the standard of good needs to be derived from an external source, Niebuhr turns to the apostolic tradition to clarify this required ideal:

"The Christianity of the gospels doubtless contains the required ideal. Its purpose is not the foundation of an ecclesiastical institution or the proclamation of a metaphysical creed, though it seeks the formation of a divine society and

³⁹⁰ Martin Marty identifies Niebuhr's aim to present theology in the guise of history, yet the theology has grown out of the history as much as the history has grown out of the theology. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xxiii.

³⁹¹ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 6.

³⁹² Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 140-164.

presupposes the metaphysics of a Christlike God. Its purpose is the revelation to men of their potential childhood to the Father and their possible brotherhood with each other.”³⁹³

Niebuhr substantiates by locating the required ideal for an objective standard of good in God the Father and Creator who has been revealed by God the Son. This is supported by Niebuhr’s claim that the purpose of Christianity is “the formation of a divine society” based on “the metaphysics of a Christlike God” rather than being the basis “of an ecclesiastical institution” or proclaiming “a metaphysical creed.”³⁹⁴ Here Niebuhr demarcates his departure from a Chalcedonian Christology where Christ is seen as the foundation of the Church, and the corresponding proclamation of a metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity.

Niebuhr justifies his identification of God the Father and Creator as the source and standard of good by clarifying how this criterion is validated through the witness of the Church:

“For the proclamation of this Christianity of Christ and the Gospels a church is needed which has transcended the divisions of the world and has adjusted itself not to the local interests and needs of classes, races, or nations but to the common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized kingdom of God.”³⁹⁵

Here Niebuhr appears to imply that the criterion of good for the Christian religion is not just an internal affirmation but also has to be externally demonstrated through the Church’s participation in God’s interests. This is

³⁹³ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 278.

³⁹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 278.

³⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 280.

supported by Niebuhr's assertion that the Church needs to adjust itself "to the common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized kingdom of God."³⁹⁶ In addition to deriving the standard of good from an external source, Niebuhr justifies God as the source of good that is manifested in creation and the coming Kingdom of God. This understanding of God as the source and standard of good reveals Niebuhr's belief that good cannot be defined apart from God and lays the foundations for his theological ethics of God's goodness.

3.2.2 Secularism and the Demise of the Moral Authority of Religion

Building upon his rejection of a standard of good derived from human society, Niebuhr draws the link between his context of American secularism and its tendency towards an arbitrary human standard of good. Niebuhr substantiates by clarifying how secularism prompted the demise of the moral authority of religion:³⁹⁷

"The movement towards an ethics independent of faith has achieved a previously unknown significance in our day, because of the popular increase of irreligion and the necessity for discovering a basis of worthy conduct for men whose faith in the moral authority of religion has been dissolved in the processes of modern civilization. The result is the humanistic movement which seeks not only to establish ethics in

³⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 280.

³⁹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," *The World Tomorrow* 13 (November 1930), 443.

independence of religion but also to substitute moral ideals for faith, and to win for the former the enthusiasms and devotions historically associated with the latter.”³⁹⁸

In the first instance, Niebuhr uses the phrase the “popular increase of irreligion” to describe the rise of secularism and the dissolution of faith “in the moral authority of religion” in modern civilization.³⁹⁹ Niebuhr attributes this shift towards an arbitrary human standard of good to the denial of the religious basis of ethics and the replacement of faith with moral ideals in Christian ethics.⁴⁰⁰

To recover the religious motives of conduct for his context of American Secularism, Niebuhr turned to 20th century German and American religious realism:⁴⁰¹ “But all of these movements of religious realism are united by a common interest in maintaining the independent reality of the religious object. Hence they represent a movement distinctly different from nineteenth century liberal theology which found its center of gravity in the idea of the ethical value of religion.”⁴⁰² Niebuhr credited both the German and American religious realism movements for recovering the aesthetic dimension of religion by maintaining the independent reality of God as religious object in religious

³⁹⁸ Niebuhr, “Religion and Ethics,” 443.

³⁹⁹ In his retrospective publication, Niebuhr speaks of his fundamental break with “liberal” or empirical theology but also conveys his intention to supplement rather than to completely abandon their efforts.

Niebuhr, “Reformation”, 140.

⁴⁰⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religion and Ethics,” *The World Tomorrow* 13 (November 1930), 443.

⁴⁰¹ Niebuhr would differentiate between the German religious realism of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich from the American religious realism of D.C. Macintosh and Henry Nelson Wieman. Niebuhr however, draws attention to their common intention to uphold to independent reality of God religious object in religious experience.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century,” in *Religious Realism.*, by Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Arthur Kenyon Rogers (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931), 413–428 & H. Richard Niebuhr, “Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other,” *Christian Century* 47 (1930), 915.

⁴⁰² Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 419.

experience.⁴⁰³ Niebuhr however, teased out the nuanced differences between the German and American formulations that were associated with Barth and Tillich, and Macintosh and Wieman respectively.⁴⁰⁴

While Niebuhr appreciated American religious realism for dealing with the content of the religious experience, he disagreed with its exclusive affirmation of God as religious object in religious experience. The movement's inattention to the independent reality of God in revelation led to its failure to recognize the spirit-matter dualism in religious experience:⁴⁰⁵

“The content of experience in religion refers beyond itself to the absolute source of being and meaning. A religious realism that does not recognize the dualism resident in religious experience and therefore neglects the factor of faith by means of which reference to the transcendent is made...”⁴⁰⁶

Niebuhr indicates how American religious realism's failure to affirm a spirit-matter dualism led it to collapse the transcendent God, “the absolute source of being and meaning” into the immanence of material experience.⁴⁰⁷ In doing so, Niebuhr indicates how its negation of faith in the transcendent God led it to replace the religious motives of conduct with naturalistic motives of conduct.

In contrast, Niebuhr credited the German religious realism of Barth and Tillich for being able to supplement American religious realism by affirming the

⁴⁰³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology and Psychology,” *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47–48.

⁴⁰⁴ Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 424-428.

⁴⁰⁵ Niebuhr critiqued American religious realism for being insufficiently observant of the dualism between the event or relation or symbol in which the unconditional comes to expression, and the unconditional. It is too ready to identify the symbol or the occasion with the unconditional.

Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 424-428 as cited in Fowler, *The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 66.

⁴⁰⁶ Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 424-425.

⁴⁰⁷ Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 424-425.

need for faith in acknowledging God as transcendent and absolute.⁴⁰⁸

Drawing upon his earlier critique of American religious realism, Niebuhr challenged the view that divine reality could be directly and immediately experienced.⁴⁰⁹ Although Niebuhr acknowledged American religious realism's attempt to recover the aesthetic value of religion, it's belief that God could be directly known through the senses caused the movement to succumb to the same humanism it sought to correct:

“The revolt against anthropocentrism and anthropocratic tendencies seems insufficient; man remains the center of religion and God is his aid rather than his judge and redeemer. Hence also realistic theology seems to the German to pass over too rapidly into an applied science... by means of which men may use God in the service of interests which remain human...”⁴¹⁰

Niebuhr points out how American religious realism's weakness in collapsing the transcendent God into material experience reduced God to an aid for human salvation rather than man's judge and redeemer. This is supported by his use of the terms “anthropocentrism” and “anthropocratic” to describe how “man remains the center of religion” in American religious realism.⁴¹¹ Arising

⁴⁰⁸ Between the realism of Barth and Tillich, Niebuhr aligned more with Tillich's belief-ful realism that “sees the world with the sober eyes of the scientist or realistic artist, accepting it at the same time as symbolic of the eternal and unconditioned source of all meaning and ground of all being.” This is opposed to empiricism that proposes a ‘self-limiting’ or ‘self-sufficient’ realism which restricts its vision to what is merely infinite.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Preface” in Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Pub. Co., 1956). See also Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 424-428.

⁴⁰⁹ The 20th century religious realism movement that Niebuhr engaged with was Macintosh's theology, which had its foundations in William James' psychology of religion. Macintosh described God as the Supreme Power upon which man is ultimately dependent on and also the Causal Power which constitutes the universe as it is. Macintosh attempts to harmonize both these conceptions in God as Moral Will, the personal companion of man's inner life. Douglas Clyde Macintosh, “The Meaning of God in Modern Religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 6, no. 5 (September 1, 1926), 457-471,

⁴¹⁰ Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 426.

⁴¹¹ Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, 426.

from its realistic interest in theology, Niebuhr clarifies how his contemporaries were too quick to apply God's salvific work in Christ to human conduct and relationships. Niebuhr clarifies how its exclusive focus on the moral aspect of salvation reduced God to an instrument that served human interests and turned theology in an "applied science".⁴¹²

Although Niebuhr credited German religious realism for acknowledging the role of faith in referring to the transcendent God, he did not agree with its exclusive focus on the objective content of revelation: "[I]n the dialectic between the objective criterion of the Word of God in Scriptures and the subjective criterion of the testimony of the Holy Spirit orthodoxy had tended to emphasize the former, separatism the latter, while each needed to recognize the principle represented by the other."⁴¹³ Niebuhr first clarifies how the German religious realists like Barth and Tillich affirmed the independent reality of God in revelation as the Word of God. Niebuhr perceived how German religious realism failed to recover the religious motives of conduct because it negated the subjective testimony of the Spirit that enables the believer's obedience to God's commands. Niebuhr would synthesize the complementary contributions of German and American religious realism to hold both the objective criterion of the Word and the subjective criterion of the Spirit's testimony in dialectical tension.⁴¹⁴ His concern with holding together the objective and subjective criterion for Christianity morality can be attributed to

⁴¹² According to Macintosh, "all laws of theology as a descriptive science will be knowledge of religious experience in relation to its conditions and central cause". Macintosh however, speaks of the need for this descriptive science to become an applied science with supplementing the psychology of religion with positive religious ideas. Douglas Clyde Macintosh, *Theology as an Empirical Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 43.

⁴¹³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 109.

⁴¹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 109.

his 17th century American Evangelical tradition. Associated with the likes of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, Niebuhr's predecessors maintained the tension between the objective revelation of the Word and the subjective testimony of the Spirit.⁴¹⁵

Having made the case for recognizing God as the source and standard of good, Niebuhr conveys his intention to supplement the Christologies of Troeltsch and Macintosh by emphasizing God's otherworldly character. He states: "[R]eligion must bethink itself not only of the goodness of God but also of those elements of divinity which constitute its "plus" – its beyond good and evil, its transcendence and forgiveness."⁴¹⁶ While Niebuhr affirms the compatibility of God's righteousness and love, we see that he does this in the context of God's absolute transcendence as Creator and Redeemer. This is supported by his assertion that in addition to God's goodness, religion needs to deal with elements of divinity that are "beyond good and evil". Responding to the dissolution of the moral authority of religion in Niebuhr's secular context, Niebuhr sought to establish the religious motives of conduct upon God's absolute being and goodness.

3.3 Value Theory and the Religious Motives of Conduct

⁴¹⁵ Niebuhr expounds on how the Awakening in 17th century American Evangelicalism combined the two principles of the "objective criterion of the Word of God in Scriptures and the subjective criterion of the testimony of the Holy Spirit" that had been previously seen as a dialectic during the Reformation.

Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 109.

⁴¹⁶ Richard was influenced by Barth to insist on God's freedom and independence, affirming God's transcendence over all human categories and human claims.
H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper., 1937), 193.

Having uncovered Niebuhr's concern to ground the religious motives of conduct upon God's absolute being and goodness, we turn our attention to how this correspondingly shaped his value theory that undergirds his theological ethics of God's goodness. The year 1931 is a significant milestone in Niebuhr's theological development because he turns from a critical engagement with the intellectual and theological movements of his context to crystallizing his theological convictions. Niebuhr identified how the dissolution of the moral authority of religion because of American secularism led to a rising "disillusionment with the idea of progress and with humanism".⁴¹⁷ Recognizing the need to pose corrective by re-establishing religion as the basis of ethical conduct, Niebuhr set forth the contours of his value theory and theological ethics of God's goodness:

"We may anticipate the development or, rather sketch the task which confronts us, by saying that the transition may most promisingly be sought in three spheres, all interdependent – in continued wrestling with the problem of Jesus and the historical meaning of the revelation of God in history, in continued realistic analysis of religious experience and the search for divine reality in actual religious life, and in ever more urgent effort to realize the eternal will of God, as we must see it from the relative point of view of the present moment, in some form of social and personal justice which will carry within it, as immanent, a revelation of the God who yet remains transcendent, which will be adequate to our own situation but which will contain the absolute demand."⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁷ Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century", 426.

⁴¹⁸ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 106.

In delineating the threefold contours of his theological ethics, Niebuhr first clarifies how he adopts a Christological lens to defend God as absolute being and goodness as portrayed in Scripture. Dealing with the historical meaning of God's revelation in history, Niebuhr draws upon the Hebrew prophets of Scripture who saw God as absolute being to affirm God's transcendence as Creator.⁴¹⁹ Niebuhr's approach to the problem of Jesus by incorporating the biblical Christian worldview would lead him to address God's goodness as revealed in the gospel and Scripture. Consistent with his intention to re-establish God as the source and standard of good, Niebuhr developed his Christology in the context of value theory. This is evident in 1933 article "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus" where he deals with the relationship of Christ's humanity and divinity, and its implications for the values of God's righteousness and love.⁴²⁰ As we shall see in his mid-1930s publications, Niebuhr provides a comprehensive value theory that deals with the values of God's righteousness and love in relation to the gospel, Scripture, and the Kingdom of God.⁴²¹

The second sphere of Niebuhr's theological ethics indicates how his value theory forms the basis for his re-positioning of theology as a pure, disinterested science engaged in for the sake of God and for persons before

⁴¹⁹ Niebuhr's concern with the historical meaning rather than the historicity of God's revelation in history arises from his recognition of historical relativism, namely the view that all knowledge is conditional to a spatial and temporal point of view.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 19.

⁴²⁰ Niebuhr believed that the gospel message was revealed to us in human language by people in a particular culture e.g. Jesus became human and shared in the Jewish cultural ideals and values of his time.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 118.

⁴²¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," *The Journal of Religion* 15, no. 3 (1935), 272–80 & H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937).

God.⁴²² This is supported by Niebuhr's claim that his theological epistemology dealt with the "continued realistic analysis of religious experience and the search for divine reality in actual religious life".⁴²³ Building upon his value theory that focused on how Christ reveals God's goodness, Niebuhr sought for evidence of this reality in the reality of religious experience and the religious life. As we shall see, Niebuhr's epistemology dealt with the knowledge and experience of God's goodness in the context of regeneration and salvation. In chapter 4, we shall see how Niebuhr's theology addressed God, and humanity's relation to God by depicting God as knower, author, judge and redeemer.⁴²⁴ He makes the case for distinguishing between the cognitive knowledge of God's goodness that confronts us in regeneration and the experiential knowledge of God's goodness through salvation that leads to a re-orientation of human values and conduct.⁴²⁵

The third contour of Niebuhr's theological ethics builds upon his approach to the knowledge of God's goodness to deal with the reality of God's goodness in creation and history. Niebuhr's epistemology inevitably leads on to his ontology because the knowledge of God's goodness that comes through salvation leads the believer to acknowledge God as ultimate good.

⁴²² Niebuhr considered the intellectual discipline of theology to be a "pure science" or a "disinterested science" because it is for the sake of God and for persons-before-God" Ronald F. Thieman, *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 40.

⁴²³ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 116.

⁴²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," *Christian Century* 49 (April 6, 1932) as reprinted in Richard Brian Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 3-24.

⁴²⁵ Niebuhr posits that revelation leads to both the revolution of the religious life and the transvaluation of values in ethics, "Revelation is not the development and not the elimination of our natural religion; it is the revolution of the religious life . Our thoughts also about the about the goods which deity sustains are caught up in the great turmoil of a transvaluation." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 99 & Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century", 426.

Here we see that Niebuhr lays the foundations for his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology by seeking to make immanent “a revelation of the God who yet remains transcendent” and calling for the believer in the Church to “realize the eternal will of God”.⁴²⁶

3.3.1 Theology as a Pure, Disinterested Science

In setting forth a value theory and theological ethics of God’s goodness to counter theology’s over-reliance upon social science, Niebuhr makes his case for theology to be re-positioned as a disinterested, pure science. Using the terms “pure science” and “disinterested science” to refer to his conception of theology’s object, Niebuhr claims that God as its religious object cannot be known in isolation, but only in relation to self and to neighbour, and self and neighbour in relation to God.⁴²⁷ Building upon the achievements of German and American religious realism that upheld the independent reality of God as religious object, Niebuhr goes further to qualify that God can only be known by the Church, understood as a community reconciled to God and to one another. This re-positioning of theology is consistent with Niebuhr’s intention to defend the religious motives of conduct by affirming the inseparability of religion and ethics, and the role of faith in ethics.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 116

⁴²⁷ “[T]heology... considered as a pure science does not have as its object God in isolation... The God who makes himself known and whom the church seeks to know is no isolated God. If the attribute of aseity i.e., being by and for itself, is applicable to him at all it is not application to him as known by the Church. What is known and knowable in theology is God in relation to self and to neighbour, and self and neighbour in relation to God.”

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education*, ed. Daniel Day Williams and J.M. Gustafson (New York: Harper, 1956), 112-113.

⁴²⁸ Niebuhr, “Religion and Ethics,” 443–46.

In delineating the contours of his theological ethics, Niebuhr establishes the inseparability of religion and ethics through his epistemology that deals with the subjective personal knowledge of God's goodness in regeneration and salvation. By positing that this knowledge leads to a recognition of God as ultimate good, Niebuhr articulates his belief that religious knowledge and conversion determines how the believer should live and act. Dealing with the Christian's ethical obligation in the context of the believer's reconciled relationship with God, Niebuhr supports his view that God's moral demands are an indicative response, rather than an imperative command.⁴²⁹ Niebuhr also defends the role of faith in ethics because it is integral for showing how the Christian needs to incorporate both otherworldly and this worldly dimensions into their lives. We see this first in his decision to model his value theory after the Hebrew prophets of Scripture to show how an otherworldly God is mediated through faith to a this-worldly community of believers. Correspondingly, Niebuhr in depicting his theology as a pure science also posits that knowledge of God as an otherworldly being can only be known in relation to a this-worldly humanity that needs to be reconciled to God.⁴³⁰ In the last instance, Niebuhr affirms a this-worldly reality of God's

⁴²⁹ Niebuhr attributes his view of the indicative rather than imperative nature of moral claims to the apostle Paul, "This criticism of imperative moral law is one of Paul's great contributions to moral thought, though he makes explicit here only what was present in Jesus' teaching and conduct and what a Jeremiah had sensed."

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Introduction to Biblical Ethics" in Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition*, 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1977), 41-42.

⁴³⁰ Murry references Niebuhr's "Man the Sinner" publication to point out that as early as 1935, "Niebuhr had noted the universality of faith and the nature of faith as trust and loyalty." He would develop this notion further in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960) by defining trust and loyalty as "the fidelity associated in universal religion with radical faith in being."

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," *The Journal of Religion* 15, no. 3 (1935), 272-280. See also William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970), 137. See also H Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Radical*

goodness in creation and history alongside the Church's faith in an otherworldly kingdom that is coming. Taking the form of the Church's mandate to realize the eternal will of God, Niebuhr deals more with the Church's nature and purpose in relation to the transcendent God.

3.4 The Religious Motives of Conduct and Theology as a Pure, Disinterested Science

As we have seen, Niebuhr countered the moral relativism associated with American secularism by recovering the religious motives of conduct, and by positioning theology as a pure, disinterested science. In this early phase of his theological development, Niebuhr conveys his disagreement with theology's over-reliance upon social science, particularly theology; to purport individualistic and naturalistic motives of conduct. Niebuhr sought to pose corrective by defending God as the source and standard of good, so as to justify the religious motives of conduct. We also examined how Niebuhr in the early 1930s delineated the contours of his value theory and theological ethics of God's goodness, and made the case for positioning theology as a pure, disinterested science. This chapter that examines Niebuhr's theological intention to recover the religious motives of conduct sets the backdrop for a systematic exposition of Niebuhr's value theory and his theology of God's goodness in chapter 4.

Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 87.

CHAPTER 4

H. RICHARD NIEBUHR'S VALUE THEORY AND THEOLOGY OF GOD'S GOODNESS (1933-1941)

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Niebuhr's value theory undergirds his theology of God's goodness, thus revealing how he reconciles the believer's reality with his knowledge and experience of God's goodness. As my second research aim, Niebuhr's twofold value theory and epistemology is key to understanding his Christology and pneumatology which clarified how the knowledge of God's goodness is good for the knower from the standpoint of the Christian faith.⁴³¹ Niebuhr's value theory builds upon his preceding recovery of the Christian God as object of faith and clarifies why God is valued and good for the believer in the Church. As we shall see, Niebuhr justifies God as absolute being and good, center of value and the ultimate good for Christians. Niebuhr's value theory that dealt with historical objective revelation formed the basis for his theology of God's goodness that focused on the believer's subjective personal knowledge of God's goodness. Arguing that the knowledge of God is apprehended through both reason and faith, Niebuhr differentiated between the cognitive assent to truth of God as personal Creator and Lord and faith as personal trust in God as judge and redeemer. Niebuhr's theological epistemology reveals the inseparability of his

⁴³¹ "Theology must begin in Christian history and with Christian history because it has no other choice; in this sense it is forced to begin with revelation, meaning by that word simply historic faith"
Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 16.

Christology and pneumatology by affirming Christ's role as divine-human and God-man mediator alongside the Spirit's work in regeneration and salvation. I credit Niebuhr for emphasizing the priority of divine grace over human faith because it makes room for the human faculties of reason and freewill to be transformed by the Spirit. This chapter concludes by conveying Niebuhr's belief that the knowledge of God's goodness is good for the believer in that it transforms his sinful nature and destiny.

4.1 Niebuhr's Christology and the Problem of Faith and History

My aim to show that Niebuhr's Christology needs to be interpreted in the context of his value theory builds upon the contributions of H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who have delved into his approach to faith and history. Scholars Hans Frei, William Russell Murry and Donald W. Shriver have explored how Niebuhr developed his Christology to reconcile the Christian faith with a historical approach to Jesus and the Bible.⁴³² According to these scholars, Niebuhr was initially influenced by the form criticism movement and its engagement with modern biblical scholarship to reconstruct the life and teaching of Jesus.⁴³³ Seeking to counter the liberal construction of Jesus that psychologized Jesus' actions and teachings, Niebuhr agreed with the form critics that the historical Christ cannot be known apart from his appearance in

⁴³² Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper, 1957), 53-65, William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970) & Donald W. Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 30-31.

⁴³³ Niebuhr credits the form criticism movement for claiming that the historical Jesus must be understood through the history and with the history of the apostolic community that loved and worshipped him. He states, "A Jesus of history apart from the particular history in which he appears is an unknown and as unknowable as any sense-object apart from the sense-qualities in which it appears to us. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 27.

a particular history.⁴³⁴ Niebuhr however, rejected form criticism's belief that Christ's personal being is inaccessible to us and sought to show how the person of Jesus is "embedded in and immediately present to his teaching and practice".⁴³⁵ The Christological lens that these scholars adopt in interpreting Niebuhr's approach to faith and history draws attention to his belief that from the standpoint of the Christian faith, the importance of Jesus lies in the historical accounts of his life, death and resurrection.⁴³⁶

4.1.1 The Problem of Jesus in Niebuhr's Value Theory

My interpretation of Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory builds upon the contribution of scholars Murry and Shriver who recognize his starting point from the viewpoint of the Christian faith. Beginning with the historical reality of God's revelation in Christ, they credit him for affirming the importance of historical accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in defense of the biblical faith.⁴³⁷ Murry for example, posits that Niebuhr's Christology was based on the Church's explication of its faith, declaring its loyalty to the Jesus of history, the risen Christ and the eternal Son of God

⁴³⁴ The being of the person of Jesus is not – as it is for the psychologizing school – an ineffable state of awareness behind act and teachings; not is the full personal being inaccessible to us – as it is for the theologians influenced by form criticism. Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 115.

⁴³⁵ Frei indicates how Niebuhr did not side with the prevailing approaches that either sought to continue the liberal construction of Christology based on a historically recovered "psychology" of Jesus, or a Neo-orthodox reaction against the former which entailed "the complete divorce of historical exegesis from Christology". Frei instead credits Niebuhr for defending the unity of Jesus' personal being in his teaching and practice, being "the focus of unity in the teaching and acts of the Lord".

Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr", 115.

⁴³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 29.

⁴³⁷ Richard Niebuhr is associated with the biblical theology movement alongside theologians like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. The movement emphasized the distinctiveness of the Biblical faith in comparison with other contemporary cultures and religions because it could be subject to scientific historical study. Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 164.

incarnate in Jesus.⁴³⁸ According to Murry, Niebuhr used the term “Jesus of history” to refer to the historicity of Christ’s life and death in his Jewish context and the apostolic witness to Christ’s resurrection and ascension.⁴³⁹ According to Murry, Niebuhr affirmed the reality of God’s revelation in Christ by showing how revelation is received through the Church’s historical faith in Christ to reveal the eternal truth of the gospel.⁴⁴⁰ Murry substantiates this claim by positing that Niebuhr affirmed the relativity of Scripture as a historical object by acknowledging the changing interpretations of the New Testament picture of Christ as divine Savior and judge from history to present.⁴⁴¹

Shriver in contrast, expounds on Niebuhr’s approach to faith and history by citing Niebuhr’s assertion that our theology “must begin in Christian history and with Christian history”.⁴⁴² Positing that Niebuhr sought to reconcile the Christian faith with a historical approach to Christ and Scripture, Shriver asserts that Niebuhr’s Christology begins with Christ in his 1st century context, being characterized as Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁴³ Going further to credit Niebuhr for affirming the apostolic witness to Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, Shriver clarifies his belief that Christ has a history and he is remembered and expected.⁴⁴⁴ According to Shriver, Niebuhr built upon his

⁴³⁸ William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970), 214.

⁴³⁹ Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 198.

⁴⁴⁰ Murry credits Niebuhr for interpreting Scripture through the lens of the historical faith community and the Church historian in contemporary times: “A theology that takes seriously the relativity of the historical object as well as the historical nature of Christian faith is a hermeneutical theology that continually moves between the poles of historical faith and present understanding”.

Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 112.

⁴⁴¹ Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 40 & 112.

⁴⁴² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 11 as cited in Donald W. Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 27.

⁴⁴³ Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 27.

⁴⁴⁴ Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 50.

recognition of the historical accounts of Christ as recorded in Scripture to propose a Christ of faith that is co-present and contemporaneous with the believer.⁴⁴⁵

In examining the receptions of Niebuhr's Christology proposed by Murry and Shriver, we see their broad agreement on his twofold concern with the historical and contemporary significance of the historical Christ-events.⁴⁴⁶ Their proposals of Niebuhr's claim that the standpoint of the Christian faith must consider the reality of God's revelation in Christ provides a starting point for interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory. As we shall see, Niebuhr begins with the historical reality of God's revelation in Christ that is recorded in Scripture to interpret God's value and good for the believer in the Church.

4.1.2 The Relation Between Niebuhr's Value Theory and Epistemology

My thesis that argues for interpreting Niebuhr's Christology through the lens of his value theory raises the corresponding question about the relationship between his axiology and epistemology. The hypothesis that his value theory undergirds his theology of God's goodness builds upon the contributions of H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who expound on his belief that our religious knowledge is historically and socially conditioned. Diefenthaler for example asserts that while Niebuhr acknowledged the primacy of God's existent self,

⁴⁴⁵ Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 50.

⁴⁴⁶ The receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by Frei, Murry and Shriver counter Siker's criticisms against Niebuhr for failing to pay sufficient attention to the historic and social communal that gave rise to the present shape of the biblical texts in the first place. Jeffrey S Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

he claimed that God can only be known through his historically and socially conditioned relation with human creatures.⁴⁴⁷ Diefenthaler also credits Niebuhr for recognizing the historical and social character of the mind such that there is no direct access to God as divine being.⁴⁴⁸ Fujiwara in contrast, establishes Niebuhr's concurrence with Ernst Troeltsch in acknowledging our historical relativity as the starting point of his theology.⁴⁴⁹ Fujiwara however, credits Niebuhr for modifying Troeltsch's historical relativism into a theocentric relativism such that "our statements about God are statements of faith", thus precluding that any claims about God can be neutral and objective.⁴⁵⁰ Fujiwara explains that Niebuhr's theocentric relativism was a corrective to Troeltsch's view of relativism that denied all absolutes. Instead, Fujiwara presents Niebuhr's view that faith in the absolute and infinite God allows the believer to acknowledge the relativity of their situation and knowledge.⁴⁵¹ Both Diefenthaler and Fujiwara draw attention to Niebuhr's belief that theology deals with God as object of faith and needs to be approached from a particular standpoint. I build upon their contributions to propose that Niebuhr's value theory approaches God as object of faith from the standpoint of the Christian faith.

⁴⁴⁷ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 42.

⁴⁴⁸ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 42.

⁴⁴⁹ Atsuyoshi Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context: A Believers' Church Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 15.

⁴⁵⁰ Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context*, 16.

⁴⁵¹ Fujiwara quotes Niebuhr's exposition on how faith enables him to find the absolute within the relative: "Just because faith knows of an absolute standpoint, it can therefore accept the relativity of the believer's situation and knowledge. If we have no faith in the absolute faithfulness of God-in-Christ, it will doubtless be difficult for us to discern the relativity of our faith."

Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 239 as cited in Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context*, 15 & 17.

4.2 Niebuhr's Christology and the Reality of God's Revelation in Christ

Our starting point for examining Niebuhr's Christology is his approach to the question of God's nature and goodness from the context of the historical reality of God's revelation in Christ. As we shall see, Niebuhr sought to show how Christ reveals God as absolute being and good in Scripture by focusing on his identity as Creator and Father.⁴⁵² In his 1933 article "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", Niebuhr first justifies his defence of God as absolute being by drawing attention to his moral perfection and goodness as Creator. Niebuhr's apologetic for God's absolute being was occasioned by his disagreement with the social gospel movement's approach to God's revelation in Christ:⁴⁵³

"This may suffice as a sketch of the mind of Jesus in the social gospel... It is the liberal picture of the liberal Jesus: Jesus the moral idealist, Jesus the humanist, upon the whole who believed in God the kind heavenly father, but whose passion was a moral ideal and for whom that moral ideal would have been quite the same whether God existed or not."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Beach-Verhey indicates how Niebuhr sought to recover the Jesus of Scripture to counter the liberal and anthropocentric portrayal of Jesus as moral idealist, thus reducing Jesus' God to a humanist social ideal that depended upon human activity for its realization.

Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2011), 74-75.

John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 39.

⁴⁵³ The social gospel movement concentrated on Jesus as a great moral teacher and his teaching was seen as a blueprint for structuring society, to build the Kingdom here on earth. Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America: 1870 - 1920 - Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch*, First Edition, (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 1966), 44.

⁴⁵⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 119.

Niebuhr draws the link between the social gospel movement's portrayal of Jesus as moral idealist and its weakness in undermining God's revelation in Christ. According to Niebuhr, his predecessors affirmed God's love as Father to the exclusion of God's being as righteous Creator. This is supported by Niebuhr's assertion that the social gospel movement's emphasis on Christ's belief in God as Father and his passion for the moral ideal of love was not dependent on God's existence as Creator.⁴⁵⁵

Niebuhr goes further to elaborate on how the liberal portrait of Christ as moral idealist ends up denying Christ's divinity and his pre-existence and activity since creation.⁴⁵⁶ Instead of affirming God as absolute being, Niebuhr identified how his predecessors defined God in value terms, identifying His love in terms of its value for human existence and relations. This is evident in the movement's propagation of a universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man.⁴⁵⁷ While Niebuhr credited his predecessors for identifying God's love as the basis of human value, he sought to supplement its Christology to uphold God's righteous nature and his absolute being:

“God's doing – not what God ought to do in order that he might live up to the expectations men had of him – stands in the center of Jesus' mind. God for him is not the moral ideal but rather cosmic reality. He is the God of Job rather than the God of Plato.”⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ In his earlier critique of the social gospel movement's theological ethics, Niebuhr indicates how his predecessors reduced the Christian God to God the Spirit to affirm the reign of Christ's Spirit on earth.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁴⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 199 & Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 104.

⁴⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 270.

⁴⁵⁸ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 120.

Niebuhr's decision to maintain the social gospel movement's focus on the mind of Jesus conveys his intention to supplement rather than to completely abandon the social gospel movement's portrayal of Jesus. In his description of the mind of Jesus, Niebuhr emphasizes how the central preoccupation in Christ's mind should be God's sovereign action in creation, as opposed to fulfilling human expectations about God.⁴⁵⁹ This is supported by Niebuhr's claim that his understanding of God's revelation in Christ deals with cosmic reality, and is "the God of Jacob rather than the God of Plato".⁴⁶⁰

Niebuhr appears to attribute the social gospel movement depiction of Christ as moral idealist to its incorporation of a Platonic conception of God as a moral ideal or form of goodness. In contrast to his predecessors who incorporated the worldview of 4th century Greek philosophy, Niebuhr argues for interpreting God's revelation in Christ through the lens of a Judeo-Christian worldview. This in turn, would shape Niebuhr's Christology by demarcating his departure from 20th century modern Christology that depicted Christ as eschatological prophet and Redeemer.⁴⁶¹ In contrast, he proposes a Christological starting point in Christ's mind as pious Jew and Jewish prophet to reconcile God's righteousness and love in Christ:

⁴⁵⁹ The notion of the Kingdom of ends originated with Immanuel Kant but influenced 19th and early 20th century German and American liberalism, namely Albrecht Ritschl and the social gospel movement.

J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 175.

⁴⁶⁰ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", 120.

⁴⁶¹ 20th century modern Christology was associated with Martin Kahler's important study, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* in which he argued that history and theology came together in the eschatological mission and message of Jesus. Diefenthaler, H. Richard Niebuhr, 78 & James Leslie Houlden, *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 177.

“But the mind of Jesus the Jew was not merely the mind of Jesus the Jewish prophet: it was also the mind of Jesus the pious Jew... He unites the two elements... in a true synthesis, the fear of God and the love of God, the knowledge of God the enemy and the knowledge of God the deliverer.”⁴⁶²

Niebuhr uses the term “mind of Jesus” to expound on how Jesus’ mind was focused on his role as lawgiver and Messiah, thus enabling him to unite Israel’s fear of God with its love for God.⁴⁶³ Reflecting first on the place of Christ in Israel’s history, Niebuhr indicates how Christ’s divinity and humanity enabled the Jews to hold together God’s righteousness and love in his plan of salvation. This is supported by Niebuhr’s identification of a true synthesis between the knowledge of God the enemy and the knowledge of God the deliverer.⁴⁶⁴ By first addressing Christ’s place in Israel’s history, Niebuhr defends the biblical depiction of God as absolute being as Creator and Father.

Having addressed the place of Christ in Israel’s history, Niebuhr proceeds to expound on the significance of Christ in apostolic history to show Scripture reveals God as absolute good:⁴⁶⁵

“That is why Jesus the revolutionary Jew was not a moralist but a strategist... the Kingdom of God for him was a hope, not an ideal... An ideal is an end toward which we strive; a hope is a termination which is given, cannot be achieved. To act in the

⁴⁶² Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 121.

⁴⁶³ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 118-119.

⁴⁶⁴ “Jesus Christ is not only the Jew who suffered for the sins of Jews and so for our own sins; he is also the member of the Roman world-community through whom the Roman past is made our own...”

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 61.

⁴⁶⁵ By his notion of God as center of value, Niebuhr refers to how “Christians may speak about God only from their particular standpoint of faith in God, who is the Absolute and of center of value for us.”

William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 18.

light of an assured hope is not to engineer a direct road toward the “telos” but rather to prepare oneself for a gift, so that no one will miss its possibilities.”⁴⁶⁶

By suggesting that Christ be conceived as a strategist rather than a moralist, Niebuhr conveys his belief that God’s goodness is revealed through what Christ has done in his death, resurrection and ascension. Drawing attention to Christ’s faith in God the Father, Niebuhr highlights the New Testament emphasis God’s realization of the plan of creation and redemption. Niebuhr justifies the biblical portrayal of God as absolute good by revealing humanity’s ultimate dependence on God for life and salvation. Countering the social gospel movement’s claim of the universal Fatherhood of God, Niebuhr holds together God’s righteousness in the gospel and God’s love in the Kingdom. By positing that Jesus saw the Kingdom of God as a “hope, not an ideal” that was assured, Niebuhr qualifies that receiving the gift of the gospel is a pre-requisite for entering the Kingdom.⁴⁶⁷ I credit Niebuhr for supplement the social gospel movement’s belief that the Kingdom contains the teleology of the Christian religion by re-establishing the gospel as the norm of the Christian religion.⁴⁶⁸

By recovering gospel as the norm of the Christian religion, Niebuhr is able to show how the recognition of God as absolute good leads to the appropriation of God’s righteousness and love towards sinners:

⁴⁶⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 122.

⁴⁶⁷ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 120.

⁴⁶⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

“The strategy of Jesus the Jewish revolutionary centers in the principles of repentance, faith, forgiveness, and innocence suffering for guilt... yet such repentance is only possible to faith which see deliverance beyond the judgment. Without faith in that future, repentance is impossible.”⁴⁶⁹

Niebuhr substantiates by clarifying how Christ’s strategy as Jewish revolutionary both fulfilled the Jewish law and imposed the judgment of the law upon sinners. This judgment however, leads to sinners being delivered from sin and death because Christ’s “innocence suffering” took away the guilt of sinful humanity. Niebuhr emphasizes how the judgment of the law leads the sinners to repent from sin and respond in faith to the gospel for the forgiveness of sins. This is supported by his qualification that repentance “is only possible to faith which see deliverance beyond the judgment”.⁴⁷⁰ Developing his Christology to show that God’s being need not be equated with his goodness, Niebuhr differentiates between God’s being as Creator and Father and his goodness in the gospel.

4.2.1 Revelation as Mediated through Tradition and Scripture

Niebuhr’s approach to his Christology to defend God as absolute being and good in the context of his value theory uncovers his view of revelation as mediated through tradition and Scripture. Making the case for how Niebuhr’s value theory shaped his epistemology, I posit that his treatment of God’s revelation in Christ precludes the notion of a direct, unmediated revelation

⁴⁶⁹ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 123.

⁴⁷⁰ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 123.

from God. This is supported by Niebuhr's recognition of a historical relativism in revelation, namely that "the historical limitations of all thought about God demand that theology begin with and in an historical community."⁴⁷¹ As we have seen, Niebuhr addressed the place of Christ in Israel's history and apostolic history to show how the historical Church's recognition of God as absolute being and good was preserved and transmitted through Scripture.⁴⁷²

In making the case for revelation to be mediated through both tradition and Scripture, Niebuhr posits that this view as opposed to direct revelation leaves room for Christ and the Spirit's work in Scripture:

"The original edition of the moral law is not handed to us in definitive form through any act of revelation. Let us rather say that when the lawgiver is revealed with his intentions the reasoning heart is granted the rudiments of a scholarly equipment by means of which, with much pain and labor, it may through all its history work at the restoration of the fundamental text."⁴⁷³

In dealing with God's self-revelation in the gospel and Scripture, Niebuhr clearly rejects an unmediated revelation by stating that God's moral law is not given by direct revelation nor in any definitive form.⁴⁷⁴ Instead, Niebuhr clarifies how Christ reveals the salvific intentions of God the lawgiver and the Spirit reveals the truth of the gospel in the mind and heart of the believer.⁴⁷⁵ Niebuhr affirms the Spirit's work in Scripture first through the apostolic writers,

⁴⁷¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 19.

⁴⁷² Richard maintained that "all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower... so that no universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible."
Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 5.

⁴⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90.

⁴⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90.

⁴⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90.

but also in hermeneutics such that the “reasoning heart” is enabled “through all its history [to] work at the restoration of the fundamental text”.⁴⁷⁶

4.2.2 God as Center of value and the Reality of Man’s Sinful State

Having defended God as absolute being and good in the context of God’s revelation in Christ, Niebuhr turned his attention to affirm God as center of value amidst the reality of man’s sinful state.⁴⁷⁷ Using the term center of value to refer to value-relations, namely being in relation to being, Niebuhr conveys his twofold intention to uncover God and humanity’s infinite value.⁴⁷⁸ This is in line with Niebuhr’s concern with the believer’s reality where he builds upon his clarification of the reality of God’s revelation in Christ to acknowledge the reality of man’s sinful state before God. Here Niebuhr posits the believer’s worldview is based on the reality that he lives under the authority of God as Father and Creator and in the presence of God in Christ. Niebuhr’s approach to value-relations by clarifying how Christ enables the sinner to stand in the presence of God is a counterreaction to an anthropocentric appeal to humanity’s goodness as the basis for its value. This is described by Niebuhr as “modern attempts to define goodness as value without metaphysical basis” by imposing a “radical separation between value and being.”⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90.

⁴⁷⁷ C. David Grant, *God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984).

⁴⁷⁸ Niebuhr’s essay “The Center of Value” was reprinted in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960). This essay presents Niebuhr’s fundamental claims that value is a function of ‘being in relation to being’ and that value relations among beings are re-constructed when God is taken into account.

Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 107.

⁴⁷⁹ Niebuhr, “Religion and Ethics,” 445 & Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” 93.’

Niebuhr poses corrective to this modern anthropocentrism by grounding the metaphysical basis of God's goodness upon God's absolute being as Creator and Father: "And now I came to understand that unless being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and all being, the ground of its "that-ness" and its "so-ness," was trustworthy – could be counted on by what had proceeded from it – I had no God at all."⁴⁸⁰ Here Niebuhr expresses his view that the infinite value of God is grounded in God's being in itself, and is the basis for humanity's infinite value as the ground of being. By emphasizing the need for God's absolute being to be proven trustworthy, Niebuhr expounds on how God's infinite value has been demonstrated through Christ's death on the cross. To counter the belief in humanity's goodness as the basis of human value, Niebuhr sought to establish God's infinite value through the cross as the metaphysical basis of value.⁴⁸¹ Taking the form of his twofold doctrine of creation and sin, Niebuhr first sought to show that God's infinite value is revealed through humanity's infinite value:⁴⁸²

"The doctrine of creation is the presupposition of the doctrine of sin. The latter doctrine implies that man's fundamental nature, obscured and corrupted though it is, is perfect. His perfection as a creature, or his health, is not a far-off achievement, a

⁴⁸⁰ Niebuhr, "Reformation," 249.

⁴⁸¹ According to Grant, Niebuhr identified God as the one relationship as definitive and the final criterion in decision making. This center is chosen as the critical principle or organizing center to unify all other values. As the starting point for values, decision making and judgment, it is treated as though it were ultimate even though it is a final entity or relationship. C. David Grant, *God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 128,

⁴⁸² Niebuhr starting point in a doctrine of creation presupposes the self's relation to the world and the ground of the world as the givenness of life, history and myself to show that God as sovereign Creator precedes his discernible actions in human history. Niebuhr, "Reformation", 139.

more or less remote possibility which future generations may realize after infinite effort; it is rather the underlying datum of life."⁴⁸³

Qualifying first that our human identity is rooted in God the Creator, Niebuhr recovers the metaphysical basis of value depicting God as the source of value. This is supported by Niebuhr's assertion that his biblical doctrine of sin presupposes the doctrine of creation to convey his belief that humanity's infinite value is from being made in God's image.⁴⁸⁴ This perfect nature despite being marred from the corruption of sin, remains intrinsic because it is "the underlying datum of life."⁴⁸⁵

Niebuhr attributes the failure to recognize God as the metaphysical basis for human value to the false confidence in human goodness such that the human creature could justify oneself through ethical living:

"Science and art have successfully resisted the tyranny of moralism but religion has accepted the yoke willingly and allowed its concept of sin to be reduced to "moral guilt" as previously it allowed its concept of God to be identified with "moral perfection".⁴⁸⁶

This is supported by Niebuhr's identification of a moralism in that reduced sin to "moral guilt" and identified God with "moral perfection" because of its belief

⁴⁸³ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 273.

⁴⁸⁴ Niebuhr held the classic Christian conviction that no person is without sin yet maintains the belief that humans are essentially good, and sinfulness is only a distortion of that prior and more basic goodness: "Man in the Protestant view is a ruin but he is the ruin of a Coliseum or a Perthenon, not the ruin of a hovel. He is a diseased tree, a warped oak, and not a sick tumbleweed."

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Idea of Original Sin in American Culture" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 174-191.

⁴⁸⁵ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 273.

⁴⁸⁶ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 274.

that man can be justified by his own righteousness. To substantiate this claim, I first clarify Niebuhr's definition of moralism as an insistence "either on an ideal end and on the adjustment of means to ends or on the observation of moral laws as of transcendent validity."⁴⁸⁷ Niebuhr's definition of moralism accounts first for his rejection of God as the ideal end of moral perfection which rests upon the assumption that human creatures can obey God's moral laws by themselves. Correspondingly, Niebuhr also accounts for his refusal to reduce sin to moral guilt because it purports that moral adjustment or improvement can lead man to attain God's likeness and righteousness.⁴⁸⁸

Niebuhr attributes moralism's common error in reducing God's righteousness to human righteousness to its belief that moral principles and values are universally true. Niebuhr critiques: "The moralist forgets that he occupies a standpoint, that his evaluations are relative to that standpoint, and that the standpoint itself is of no greater finality than the standpoints of religion, science and art."⁴⁸⁹ Niebuhr conversely argues that our human moral judgments are made from a particular standpoint and compares this standpoint to "the standpoints of religion, science and art".⁴⁹⁰ The standpoint that Niebuhr proposes for human moral judgements through his twofold doctrine of creation and sin is the Christian worldview of God as Creator who is working of his redemptive purpose:

"Christianity is not primarily concerned with the question of assessing the blame but with the fact and the cure... The starting-point of the doctrine of sin is not man's

⁴⁸⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," ed. Diane Yeager, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (1988), 115–27.

⁴⁸⁸ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 274.

⁴⁸⁹ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 274.

⁴⁹⁰ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 274.

freedom but man's dependence; freedom accounts for the fact that man can be and is disloyal, not for the fact that he ought to be loyal."⁴⁹¹

In identifying the Christian worldview as the framework for human moral judgements, Niebuhr emphasizes how human moral judgements are made in light of man's sinful state and his need for redemption. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's claim that Christianity's primary concern is the "fact and the cure" for sin, rather than the blame for human sin. Upholding God's righteousness as Creator alongside man's dependence, Niebuhr clarifies how sin is the "fact that man can be and is disloyal" to the true God, to the only trustworthy and wholly lovable reality".⁴⁹² Niebuhr's emphasis on man's freedom only to be disloyal to God and his inability to save himself sets the backdrop for explaining Christianity's concern with the cure for sin. Supplementing his doctrine of creation and sin with a corresponding doctrine of redemption, Niebuhr builds upon his recovery of humanity's infinite value to address God's infinite value that was revealed in Christ's cross. Niebuhr's threefold doctrine of creation, sin and redemption seeks to show how God's redemption through Christ's death is the cure for sin and also transforms value relations. Making the case for how God's infinite value is made known through humanity's infinite value, Niebuhr indicates how redemption restores the sinner's trust in God as the source and centre of human value.⁴⁹³ This process of redemption that restores God's image in sinful humanity also leads

⁴⁹¹ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 277.

⁴⁹² Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 276-277.

⁴⁹³ Cauthen expounds on Niebuhr's conviction that the existential situation of man in the world requires a god of some sort to whom they can be related in faith: "Faith here means trust in some centre and source of value, and loyalty to that which gives value to the self." Kenneth Cauthen, "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 10 (1964), 10.

to a re-orientation of values in which God's infinite value is chosen over all other finite values and causes.⁴⁹⁴

4.2.3 Revelation as Mediated through the Word and Spirit

Having addressed how historical revelation is mediated through tradition and Scripture, Niebuhr proceeds to show how biblical revelation is mediated through the Word and Spirit, and is received through reason and faith.

Reiterating how his value theory sets the parameters for his epistemology, Niebuhr clarifies how his approach to biblical revelation is able to confess divine transcendence without falling into a subjectivism. Niebuhr's emphasis on the coherence of Word and Spirit in biblical revelation constitutes his corrective to the Puritan successors of Jonathan Edwards who identified the idea that the human will is the source of all good and evil.⁴⁹⁵ Niebuhr states: "[T]he Christian strategy of the restraint of evil must be wholly subordinated to the strategy of the reconciliation. Later Puritanism fell into the error of giving the doctrine of sin pre-eminence over the doctrine of redemption."⁴⁹⁶ Against their belief that sin is inherited and requires a freewill repentance, Niebuhr seeks to defend man's complete dependence upon God to rescue humanity from sin. Through his biblical doctrines of creation, sin and redemption that dealt with the fact and cure for sin, Niebuhr was able to affirm the Word's

⁴⁹⁴ In his essay "Faith in God and in God", Niebuhr asserts that God is the "enemy of all our causes," and "the opponent of all our gods," the slayer of all that separates sinful humanity from God.

Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 122.

⁴⁹⁵ Fowler establishes Niebuhr adherence with Jonathan Edwards in debunking the myth that the human will is the source of all good and evil because it denies man's complete dependence upon God for redemption.

Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 106.

⁴⁹⁶ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", 280.

testimony to God as the source of all good and evil and a Spirit-enabled repentance.

Niebuhr's justification of biblical revelation as mediated through the Word and Spirit accounts for his corresponding claim that revelation is apprehended through reason and faith. This progression can be seen as part of Niebuhr's efforts to reconcile religion and social science by drawing upon historical and sociological studies to characterize his theology as a critical idealism and realism. Niebuhr states: "A critical idealism is always accompanied, openly or disguisedly, by a critical realism which accepts on faith the independent reality of what is mediated through sense, thought it discriminates between uninterpreted and unintelligible impressions and verifiable, constant, intelligible content."⁴⁹⁷ In contrast, Niebuhr traces the origins of the term "critical idealism" to historical and sociological studies in its recognition of the social and historical character of the mind's categories.⁴⁹⁸ Rejecting a universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves, Niebuhr's critical idealism is "belieffully" realistic, in Professor Tillich's meaning of that phrase and employed the category of individuality in the interpretation of events.⁴⁹⁹ Making the case for a fully independent objective history, Niebuhr's critical idealism addressed how revelation is first received through reason because God's Word is based on facts and events of history.

⁴⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 10.

⁴⁹⁸ Niebuhr clearly differentiates his critical idealism from Kant's critical idealism that distinguished between pure and practical reason in order to reconcile a fully independent objective history with a valid religious history.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, xxxiii.

⁴⁹⁹ By referring to Tillich's "belief-ful realism", Niebuhr refers to an attitude that takes seriously the stubborn facts of the situation, of man and of God; and it combines radical criticism with appreciation of the relative values involved.

Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 174. See also Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," 413–428.

Niebuhr's corresponding concept of "critical realism" appears less straightforward particularly because it builds upon his prior recognition of the God's objective Word to acknowledge the Spirit's subjective testimony. Niebuhr explains the coherence of the Word and Spirit in enabling the sinner to accept on faith the independent reality of God that is "mediated through sense".⁵⁰⁰ In this regard, he distinguishes between the "verifiable, constant, intelligible content" of the Gospel message and the "uninterpreted and unintelligible impressions" of the Spirit" that lead to repentance and faith.⁵⁰¹ Coining his critical idealism and realism to reconcile a fully independent objective history with a valid religious history, Niebuhr affirms the progressive revelation of God's redemptive plan through Scripture and the Spirit.

4.3 The Believer's Reality in the Church: The Now-And-Not-Yet Kingdom

In *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), Niebuhr concludes his value theory by addressing how God can be both the absolute demand and the ultimate good for the Christian. Having dealt with the reality of believer's worldview and sinful condition, Niebuhr deals with the believer's reality in the Church, which is the Kingdom of God. Having previously clarified the nature of God's goodness and value in the context of historical and biblical revelation, Niebuhr focuses on the expression of God's goodness in the believer and the Church. Niebuhr's decision to appropriate the biblical metaphor of the

⁵⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 10.

⁵⁰¹ Diefenthaler traces Niebuhr's critical realism to the apostolic understanding of faith as trustful reception of the Gospel message, which entails inclusion into the covenant and a new understanding of God's purpose in history. Repentance and faith are given by grace and are the means through which the Holy Spirit is received as a gift from God. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 70.

Kingdom of God to the religious life was influenced by his American Evangelical tradition:

“In the early period of American life, when foundations were laid on which we have all had to build, “Kingdom of God” meant “sovereignty of God”; in the creative period of awakening and revival it meant “Kingdom of Christ”; and only in the most recent period had it come to mean “Kingdom on earth.”⁵⁰²

Niebuhr draws upon the tradition of American Evangelicalism and its superimposition of the biblical metaphor of the Kingdom of God onto American religious life. Niebuhr traces the first appropriation of the Kingdom of God to 16th and 17th century American Puritanism associated with Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather, in which the Kingdom was equated with God’s sovereignty: “The sovereignty of God was no longer the dynamic activity of the being who created, judged and saved mankind in every moment of time; it was now rather the rule of his laws...”⁵⁰³ As opposed to the biblical affirmation of God’s transcendent sovereignty as Creator, judge and Saviour, Niebuhr clarifies how his predecessors focused on the law as the manifestation of God’s righteousness. This re-interpretation of the values of the Kingdom of God to affirm God’s righteousness to the exclusion of his love arose because Niebuhr’s Puritan forebearers were focused on the ethical implications of the Kingdom. Seeking to articulate how Christians should live under the reign of God or as member of God’s Kingdom, they called for an obedience to God’s laws and allegiance to God’s rule.

⁵⁰² Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xii.

⁵⁰³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 170.

The 19th century revival movement represented by Timothy Dwight and Lyman Beecher that succeeded American Puritanism in contrast interpreted the kingdom of God as the Kingdom of Christ.⁵⁰⁴ Appropriating the Kingdom of God metaphor to mean either the present church on earth or heaven with its eternal rewards, Niebuhr expounds on the 19th century movement's eschatological perspective of Christ's Kingdom of love that is an already and not yet reality.⁵⁰⁵ Combining eschatology and ethics, Niebuhr's 19th century forbearers designated the Church as "the executive arm of God's moral government".⁵⁰⁶ Niebuhr however, criticized his 19th century predecessors for failing to acknowledge the sinfulness of the Church that expresses itself in self-righteousness. He states: "[T]he Church has become a self-conscious representative of God which instead of pointing men to him points them first of all to itself."⁵⁰⁷ Here Niebuhr highlights the error of 19th century American Puritanism in replacing God's righteousness with human righteousness and designating the Church as agent of God's loving grace and government.⁵⁰⁸

Niebuhr concludes by expounding on how the social gospel movement appropriated the Kingdom of God metaphor to function as an ethical ideal that could be attained through human striving and effort:⁵⁰⁹ "In similar manner the

⁵⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 170 & 172.

⁵⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 170.

⁵⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 176.

⁵⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 176.

⁵⁰⁸ Ottati indicates Niebuhr's rejection of Lyman Beecher's conception of the institutional Church as "the divine practical system for accomplishing the salvation of the world" by seeing itself as the sole agent of God's grace and moral government.

Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 50. For Lyman's notion of the institutional Church, see David J. Bosch, *Witness To The World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 154.

⁵⁰⁹ Niebuhr's oft-quoted critique of the social gospel movement: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 193.

idea of the coming kingdom was robbed of its dialectical element. It was all fulfilment of promise without judgment. It was thought to be growing out of the present so that no great crisis needed to intervene between the order of grace and the order of glory.”⁵¹⁰ Niebuhr indicates how the social gospel movement subsumed eschatology under ethics to affirm God’s love to the exclusion of his righteous justice. Claiming that the Kingdom of God had been fully revealed in Christ, the social gospel movement purported a works righteousness by reducing God’s mission to the alleviation of social ills.⁵¹¹ In tracing how the idea of the Kingdom of God has developed through the history of American Evangelicalism, Niebuhr perceived how his predecessors failed to hold together righteousness and love as values of the Kingdom. In his bid to pose corrective by affirming the Kingdom values of righteousness and love, Niebuhr departs from his predecessors to deal with the history of the Kingdom of God as empirical reality, rather than a theoretical idea.

4.3.1 God’s Absolute Demand and God as Ultimate Good

Niebuhr sought to uphold righteousness and love as values of the Kingdom because of its implications for balancing the tension between God’s absolute demand and God as the ultimate good in ethics. Consistent with his concern to counter a moral relativism in Christian ethics, Niebuhr seeks to justify how

⁵¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 193.

⁵¹¹ Niebuhr asserts assertion that “there was no way toward the coming kingdom save the way taken by a sovereign God through the reign of Jesus Christ”. Niebuhr was against the social gospel movement’s belief that the coming Kingdom was the fulfilment of human potentialities and expectations rather than the manifestation of God’s sovereign reign in Christ.

Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 198. See also Scott R. Paeth, *The Niebuhr Brothers for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 41.

God is both the normative standard and the ultimate goal for the Christian.⁵¹² Niebuhr expounds on his intention to hold together these deontological and teleological purposes by calling for the Protestant principle of Kingdom of God and the Catholic principle of the vision of God to be brought closer together.⁵¹³ While Niebuhr drew upon the Catholic principle of the vision of God to affirm God as ultimate good, he refuses to reduce good to a metaphysical principle. Instead, Niebuhr builds upon his prior understanding of value-relation to define the ultimate. Niebuhr asserts that the ultimate “is present whenever being confronts being, wherever there is becoming in the midst of plural, interdependent, and interacting existences. It is not a function of being as such but of being in relation to being”.⁵¹⁴ Explaining why God is the ultimate good because of the believer’s reconciliation with God through Christ, Niebuhr indicates how this goodness is expressed in the believer becoming the righteousness of God in him.⁵¹⁵ Niebuhr also drew upon the Protestant principle of the Kingdom of God to defend God as the normative standard of good for the Christian. Building upon his prior recognition of the gift of the gospel as a pre-requisite into the Kingdom, Niebuhr clarifies that fulfilling God’s absolute demands is a loving response to grace rather than duty.⁵¹⁶

Niebuhr’s concern with the expression of God’s goodness in the believer and the Church would cause his valuational ethics to be both

⁵¹² Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 4-11.

⁵¹³ Niebuhr published *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) as a counterreaction to Reinhold’s disparagement of the expectation of God’s coming here and how in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Richard defended the eschatological hope for the kingdom and its social value.

Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 17 & Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2021), 98

⁵¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 106-107.

⁵¹⁵ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 101.

⁵¹⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 120.

philosophical and empirical. Niebuhr attributes his philosophical and empirical approach to the profound influence of St. Augustine and his *City of God*, while also maintaining sociology's respect for empirical reality:

“The history of the idea of the kingdom of God leads on to the history of the kingdom of God. Hence my greatest hope is that such a work may serve “even as a stepping stone” to the work of some American Augustine who will write a *City of God* that will trace the story of the eternal city in its relations to modern civilization instead of to ancient Rome...”⁵¹⁷

Going beyond his efforts to trace how the idea of the kingdom of God has developed within his American Evangelical tradition, Niebuhr reiterates his intention to seek manifestations of the Kingdom in modern civilization. This is supported by his assertion that the “history of the idea of the Kingdom of God” leads on to the “history of the Kingdom of God”.⁵¹⁸ Building upon his predecessors' efforts to superimpose the Kingdom of God metaphor to American religious life, Niebuhr goes further to seek visible and concrete signs of the Kingdom in modern civilization. Modelling his approach after Augustine's *City of God*, Niebuhr conveys his intention to trace the story of the Church's relationship to God and its witness to modern civilization.⁵¹⁹

In the first instance, Niebuhr emphasizes how a philosophical approach is essential for clarifying the Church's relationship to God before its

⁵¹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xvi.

⁵¹⁸ “A God without wrath brought men and woman without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without the cross”. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 233-235.

⁵¹⁹ Niebuhr's endeavour to relate the eternal Kingdom of God to modern civilization is grounded in his belief that God's revelation is empirical rather than logical because it is observable in “the pattern of a life, a poem or of other things dynamic”. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 164.

engagement with culture:⁵²⁰ “Insofar as Protestantism was a movement of protests, its principle of the kingdom of God was very effective. In the name of the kingdom it would challenge the absolute claims of every relative power... The institutional church was required to give way to the living word of God, conceived... in a prophetic sense.”⁵²¹ Niebuhr clarifies how the Protestant principle of the Kingdom of God defended God’s omnipotence by challenging “any absolute claims of every relative power”.⁵²² Rooted in God’s everlasting reign as Creator and King, Niebuhr clarifies how it called for the Church to live under the authority of the Word of God as prophetic witness to God’s coming Kingdom.

Niebuhr correspondingly addresses the how the Catholic vision of God shapes the Church’s prophetic role in culture, emphasizing the need for it to be verified in empirical reality. He posits that the vision of God is apprehended through faith by the believer at salvation as both theoretical and axiological knowledge.⁵²³

The Evangelicals made effective and explicit the Protestant principle that God and faith belong together, or that a knowledge of God which is conceptual only and not axiological is not really knowledge at all... The kingdom of Christ remains then a rule of knowledge. To be a member of this kingdom is to be one who sees the excellency

⁵²⁰ Niebuhr was concerned with showing how the interpretation God’s revelatory truth in Christian history leads to the Church’s experience of God’s Lordship and its corresponding response of witness to God’s Kingship.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 24-26. See also Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 116.

⁵²¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 28-29.

⁵²² Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 28-29.

⁵²³ In *The Responsible Self* (1963), Gustafson attributes Niebuhr’s belief in the mutual implication of knowledge of God and self to the influence of John Calvin: “For the Christian, in the fashion of Calvin, this self-knowledge occurs in relation to the knowledge of God... Ethics is knowledge of ourselves in relation to our knowledge of God.” Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 15-16.

and the beauty of God in Christ, and so loves him with all his heart for his own sake alone.”⁵²⁴

In his bid to bring the Protestant principle of the Kingdom closer with the Catholic vision of God, Niebuhr draws upon his American Evangelical tradition that was influenced by the Protestant Reformers. Niebuhr alongside his tradition incorporates Luther’s claim that God and faith belong together and Calvin’s belief that knowledge of God is both conceptual and axiological.⁵²⁵

Incorporating these Protestant principles into his appropriation of the metaphor of the Kingdom of God, Niebuhr first qualifies that faith and love of God in Christ is a pre-requisite to membership in the Kingdom. Niebuhr substantiates by expounding on how members of the Kingdom “see the excellence and beauty of God in Christ” and express a loving devotion to God alone.⁵²⁶ Correspondingly, Niebuhr interprets the Catholic vision of God in terms of the kingdom of Christ as “a rule of knowledge” that is both theoretical and concerned with value. Niebuhr indicates how the mental anticipation of Christ’s coming Kingdom compels the believer to pursue God as ultimate value. In distinguishing between the philosophical and empirical reality of the Kingdom of God, Niebuhr affirms God as absolute demand and ultimate good and makes room for the believer to share in Christ’s Kingdom mission.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 105.

⁵²⁵ Niebuhr states, “At the beginning of the modern era Luther vigorously and repeatedly affirmed that God and faith belong together so that all statements about God which are made from some other point of view than that of faith in him are not really statements about him at all.”

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 12 & Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 15-16.

⁵²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 105.

⁵²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 105.

4.3.2 Value Theory as the Basis for Niebuhr's Theology of God's Goodness

Having examined how Niebuhr developed his Christology in the context of his value theory, I proceed to show how his value theory forms the basis for his theology of God's goodness. As we have seen, Niebuhr's value theory incorporated "the methods and the fruits of Biblical and historical criticism as well as of natural and social science".⁵²⁸ Niebuhr's refusal to ignore the contributions made by modern biblical scholarship and natural and social science shaped his belief that axiology and epistemology are interrelated and overlapping. Having implications for his theology of God's goodness, Niebuhr sought to interpret revelation based on the lived experience of a particular community, interpreted through the religious reasoning and faith of its members.⁵²⁹

Although Niebuhr chose to undergird his theological epistemology with a value theory, he concedes a relativism, rather than an absolutism because of his place in modern civilization: "To speak of revelation now is not to retreat to modes of thought established in earlier generations but to endeavor to deal faithfully with the problem set for Christians in our time by the knowledge of our historical relativity."⁵³⁰ Expounding on the overlap between his value theory and epistemology, Niebuhr posits that the knowledge of God's revelation in Christ is inseparable from the knowledge of our historical

⁵²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 2.

⁵²⁹ Yeager credits Niebuhr for renewing Augustine's theology, particularly his beliefs in the relationship or collaboration between reason and faith and for recognizing the rightful place of paradox in religious reasoning.

Diane Marcia Yeager, *Reasoning Faith: H. Richard Niebuhr's Renewal of the Theology of St. Augustine* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 1981), 11.

⁵³⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 12.

relativity. To recall, Niebuhr defines “historical relativism” as the newfound “realization that the point of view which a man occupies in regarding religious as well as any sort of reality is of profound importance.”⁵³¹ Associating historical relativism with the modern civilization of his time, Niebuhr denounces returning to the pre-Enlightenment religious thought of his 17th century American Evangelical forbearers.⁵³² While Niebuhr’s first recognition of historical relativism can be traced to the profound influence of Ernst Troeltsch in the early 1920s, he modified Troeltsch’s historical relativism that dealt with historical events as objects conditioned by their contexts.⁵³³

His unique definition of historical relativism that acknowledges “the historical limitations of all thought about God demand that theology begin with and in an historical community” owes more to Schleiermacher’s influence.⁵³⁴ In the 16th century, Schleiermacher affirmed the historicity of the human object alongside God as subject to define dogmatic theology as a second order expression of religious experience.⁵³⁵ Refusing to reduce revelation to a subjective state of consciousness, Niebuhr conversely affirmed the historicity

⁵³¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 4.

⁵³² “To speak of revelation now seems imply reversal of the enlightenment in religious thought which began when Schleiermacher asked and answered his rhetorical question to the cultured despisers of faith: “Do you say that you cannot away with miracles, revelation, inspiration? You are right; the time for fairy tales is past.”

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 2.

⁵³³ Troeltsch’s understanding of historical relativism is closely related to his view of history, in the sense of the metaphysical affirmation that all historical events are conditioned by their contexts, so that “all historical phenomena are unique individual configurations.”

Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1971), 89 & Wesley J. Wildman, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 110.

⁵³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 19.

⁵³⁵ Schleiermacher dogmatics or *Glaubenslehre* proposed an innovative empirical method for Protestant theology that involved a systematic analysis of the contemporary Protestant religious consciousness.

Jan Lochman and John Mbiti, *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 858.

of the human subject alongside God as object of faith in revelation.⁵³⁶ Niebuhr substantiates:

“But our historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object; man, it points out, is not only in time but time is in man. Moreover and more significantly, the time that is in man is not abstract but particular and concrete; it is not a general category of time but rather the time of a definite society with distinct language, economic and political relations, religious faith and social organization.”⁵³⁷

While Niebuhr acknowledged man as the human object in revelation that is being acted upon by God the subject, he is more concerned with making the case for the historicity of the human subject in revelation. On one hand, Niebuhr affirms God’s Spirit acting upon the human object in regeneration to renew the mind of natural man that is situated in time.⁵³⁸ His chief interest however, is on acknowledging that the human subject’s faith in Christ for salvation is a response to the divine initiative in revelation. This is substantiated by Niebuhr’s identification of a particular, durational time in man where the repentant sinner shares in the apostolic memory of Christ’s death and resurrection and the continuing activity of God’s redemption.⁵³⁹ Niebuhr’s recognition of the historical relativism of revelation is consistent with his value

⁵³⁶ Niebuhr’s corrective to Schleiermacher’s view of dogma drew upon Luther’s conviction that God and faith such that “all statements about God” must be made from the point of view of faith.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 12.

⁵³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 7.

⁵³⁸ Niebuhr was against the social gospel movement’s weakness in replacing an individual regeneration with the regeneration of society.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁵³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 7.

theory that made room for the believer's reality in the form of a Judeo-Christian worldview and the sinful human condition.

4.3.3 The Shift from Dogmatic to Confessional Theology

Niebuhr facilitates the shift from a dogmatic to a confessional theology through his twofold recognition of the historical relativity and religious relativity of revelation. Holding together these two forms of relativism with the term confessional, Niebuhr sets forth a theology that begins with and in an historical community and in a particular faith.⁵⁴⁰ For this definition, Niebuhr builds upon his recognition of historical relativism to acknowledge a religious relativism, namely that an inquiry into the nature of the object of faith has to begin in a particular faith:

“The acceptance of the reality of what we see in psychological and historically conditioned experience is always something of an act of faith; but such faith is inevitable and justifies itself or is justified by its fruits.”⁵⁴¹

Niebuhr posits that our claim of knowledge rests upon the acceptance of divine revelation as a “psychological and historically conditioned experience” is an “act of faith”. Revealing his notion of faith as perception, Niebuhr proceeds to assert that our knowledge of God is based on the sinner's perception and experience of salvation. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's statement that faith in God for salvation is inevitable because the revealed

⁵⁴⁰ Niebuhr's recognition of historical relativism shaped his conviction that “no universal knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible, so that all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower.”

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 5.

⁵⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 10.

truth of the gospel “justifies itself or is justified by its fruits.”⁵⁴² In his inquiry on faith as an epistemological means to apprehend revelation, Niebuhr’s recognition of faith as a grace gift and bearing fruit in life builds upon his value theory that affirmed the infinite value of God and of humanity. Having shown how the redeemed sinner comes to recognize God’s infinite value, Niebuhr clarifies how this reorientation of values compels the believer to bear God’s image through acts of righteousness and love. As we shall see, Niebuhr’s theology that makes room for the believer’s response to God’s goodness accounts for the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology.

4.4 Niebuhr’s Confessional Theology of God’s Goodness

Niebuhr’s theological inquiry into God’s goodness took the form of a confessional theology that recognized Christ and the Spirit’s work in Scripture and salvation. In developing his theological epistemology, Niebuhr posits that the knowledge of God’s goodness is shaped by the relative standpoint that the redeemed sinner occupies in Christian history and faith.⁵⁴³ His concern with the theme of God’s goodness is not new, given that his value theory also sought to show how God’s righteousness and love are compatible.⁵⁴⁴ By asserting that Niebuhr’s value theory undergirds his theology of God’s goodness, I reiterate his rejection of an absolute revelation that would justify the universal validity of the Christian religion⁵⁴⁵:

⁵⁴² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 10.

⁵⁴³ Niebuhr speaks of the relative standpoint that the believer occupies in Christian history and faith.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74.

⁵⁴⁴ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 272-280.

⁵⁴⁵ Niebuhr was profoundly influenced by Troeltsch’s approach to the problem of discerning, in the relative, tendencies toward the absolute goal while acknowledging the limitation that the absolute is a “mere approximation of true, ultimate, and universally valid values.”

“A revelation that can be used to undergird the claim of Christian faith to universal empire over the souls of men must be something else than the revelation of the God of that Jesus Christ who in faith emptied himself, made himself of no reputation and refused to claim the kingly crown.”⁵⁴⁶

Niebuhr explains that he rejects the notion of God’s absolute revelation in Christ because it affirms the divinity of Christ at the expense of undermining Jesus’ self-giving humanity.⁵⁴⁷ This is supported by Niebuhr’s claim that God’s revelation in Christ needs to affirm Christ’s faith and obedience to the Father in the form of his life, death and resurrection.

4.4.1 Christianity as Revealed Religion: Christ and the Spirit’s Work in Scripture and Salvation

As opposed to treating Christianity as a universal religion, Niebuhr posits that his context of modern civilization required that Christianity be seen as a revealed religion. His conception of Christianity as revealed religion approached Christ’s humanity as a hermeneutical question and acknowledged the Spirit’s role in the inspiration of Scripture had soteriological implications. Niebuhr’s recognition of Christ and the Spirit’s work in Scripture incorporates the achievements in scholarship made by the form criticism movement: “The latest movement in New Testament criticism, Form Criticism,

Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 15.

⁵⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21.

⁵⁴⁷ Diefenthaler credits Niebuhr for affirming the man, Jesus Christ as “the revelation of God” and “at the same time the revelation of our own true being and moral duty. He is the revelation of God; that is, his kind of self-giving for others is and discloses what God is always up to.”
Diefenthaler. *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 119.

underlines this fact for us – that the book arose out of the life of the Church and that we cannot know a historical Jesus save as we look through the history and with the history of the community that loved and worshipped him.”⁵⁴⁸ Niebuhr first conveys his agreement with the form criticism movement that Scripture arose out of the life of the Church and its divine inspiration was through the Church guided by the Spirit. Given this presupposition, Niebuhr states that the human Christ has to be known in his *Sitz im Leben* and through the history of the apostolic Church that loved and worshipped him.⁵⁴⁹ He states: “Whatever it was that the Church meant to say, whatever was revealed or manifested to it, could be indicated only in connection with an historical person and events in the life of his community. The confession referred to history and was consciously made in history.”⁵⁵⁰ Claiming that the knowledge of Christ was based upon the apostolic witness and testimony that was recorded in Scripture, Niebuhr posits that the Church’s confession of Christ is rooted in tradition rather than scholarship.⁵⁵¹

Having clarified his view of Christ and the Spirit’s interrelated work in Scripture, Niebuhr delves into its soteriological implications in terms of the believer’s knowledge and response to God’s goodness. Niebuhr first posits

⁵⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 27.

⁵⁴⁹ The term “Sitz im Leben” in the context of form criticism was first used by Hermann Gunkel to the life setting or situation of a type of text (a genre) rather than the context of a single text. Rudolf Bultmann and other New Testament scholars would eventually modify the term to refer to the life setting of a single text.

Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context* (London, United Kingdom: A&C Black, 1999), 310.

⁵⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 23.

⁵⁵¹ Fowler notes that Niebuhr was just as skeptical about the historical reliability of the New Testament sources of documentation for details on the life and sayings of Jesus: “There is no possibility of gaining access to Jesus Christ except as he is presented to men by those who have faith in him”.

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991), 8 as cited by Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 227.

that the believer's response to God's goodness in salvation rests upon the sinner's subjective knowledge of God in Christ and personal confession of faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life:

“Religious response to revelation is made quite as much in a confession of sin as in a confession of faith and a theology which recognizes that it cannot speak about the content of revelation without accepting the standpoint of faith must also understand that it cannot deal with its object save as sinners' rather than saints' theology.”⁵⁵²

Depicting God as the object of faith in his confessional theology, Niebuhr claims that the content of revelation is “the unveiling of the value of a known being” rather than the “self-disclosure of an unknown being”.⁵⁵³ Reiterating his rejection of God's absolute revelation in Christ, Niebuhr makes the case for God's personal revelation in Christ that can only be understood through the subjective standpoint of faith. This is supported by Niebuhr's emphasis on the need to deal with the content of revelation from the standpoint of “sinners' rather than saints' theology”.⁵⁵⁴ Here Niebuhr qualifies that experiencing and coming to a knowledge of God's goodness in salvation requires the Spirit's regeneration to enable the human subject to recognize his sinful human condition and his need for salvation.

4.4.2 Niebuhr's Doctrine of God-for-Us: Knowledge as Good for the Knower

⁵⁵² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21-22.

⁵⁵³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 111.

⁵⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21-22.

Expounding on his doctrine of God-for-us in the concluding chapter of *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), Niebuhr clarifies how the knowledge of God's goodness is good for the knower. Depicting God as knower, author, judge and only savior, Niebuhr sought to show how the knowledge of God's goodness in Scripture and salvation has value for transforming the believer's nature and destiny.⁵⁵⁵ Having its starting point in the historic faith of the Christian community, Niebuhr posits that the "faith of Christian revelation is directed towards a God who reveals himself as the only universal sovereign and as the one who judges all men".⁵⁵⁶ Niebuhr's conviction of God's identity as Creator and judge of the world forms the basis for his assertion that knowledge of God's goodness has value for addressing the religious questions of human nature and destiny.

Beginning with his portrayal of God as knower of all things, Niebuhr posits that human nature is grounded in the image of God such that there is "a point of contact" for man to know God. He expounds: "To know a knower is to begin with the activity of the other who knows us or reveals himself to us by his knowing activity. No amount of initiative on our part will serve to uncover the hidden self-activity."⁵⁵⁷ While Niebuhr does not limit God's infinite knowledge to his knowledge of human creatures, he delimits that our creaturely knowledge of God is only because of God's initiative in making himself known. Niebuhr substantiates by acknowledging God's "hidden self-activity" in Christ, particularly in the cross, and "his knowing activity" through

⁵⁵⁵ Revelation means God, God who discloses himself to us through our history as our knower, our author, our judge and our only savior." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

⁵⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 20.

⁵⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 77.

the Spirit within man. Building upon his Christological value-theory, Niebuhr reiterates the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology in his epistemology that deals with the knowledge of God and selves.

Building upon his portrayal of God as knower of all things, Niebuhr proceeds to expound on his portrayal of God as the author of history: “We are set free to trace the external course of events without fear or passion just because we have been given confidence in the author of these events.”⁵⁵⁸ Consistent with his affirmation of God’s omniscience, Niebuhr indicates how sinful and finite human creatures have been given confidence in God’s sovereignty over history. Here Niebuhr reveals how the knowledge of God’s goodness in Scripture entails an understanding of his personal involvement in relating and sustaining creation. As such, his defence of God’s omniscience and sovereignty over history is intended to show how this knowledge transforms the believer’s sinful nature.⁵⁵⁹ According to Niebuhr, the believer’s confidence in God’s omniscience and His sovereign purpose of redemption through Christ leads to a continual repentance of sin and the Spirit’s renewal of God’s image in man.

In addition to showing how the knowledge of God’s goodness in Scripture has value for transforming human nature, Niebuhr also seeks to convey how the knowledge of God’s goodness in salvation speaks to our human destiny. Niebuhr first expounds on his characterization of God as

⁵⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 91.

⁵⁵⁹ Richard departed from his brother Reinhold’s view that God was a transcendent judge who made human responsibility possible by giving humanity the freedom to defy God’s absolute goodness. For Richard, God was “not so much the absolute, as he is the determining dynamic”. In his personal letter to Reinhold, he criticizes his brother for reducing religion to a power rather than conceding that religion is intended to direct us to God. Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 145.

judge, looking beyond the outward conduct to judge the human heart:

“Revelation is the moment in which we find our judging selves to be judged not by ourselves or our neighbors but by one who knows the final secrets of the heart; revelation means the self-disclosure of the judge.”⁵⁶⁰ Niebuhr makes the case for God’s authority to judge humanity based on Christ’s fulfilment of the law, thus affirming the Spirit’s conviction of sin within the human heart.⁵⁶¹ This is supported by his characterization of revelation as a moment in which “judging selves” find themselves judged by God who is the knower of human hearts.⁵⁶²

Niebuhr’s last picture of God as the only savior holds together his answer to the religious questions of human nature and destiny by making room for the sinner’s response to the knowledge of God’s goodness in salvation. Niebuhr states, “The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ meets no unresponsive will but the living spirit of men in search of all good. And he fulfils our need. Here is the one for whose sake every life is worth living, even lives that seem bereft of beauty, of truth and of goodness.”⁵⁶³ Niebuhr justifies how God is the ultimate good because He meets man’s existential need by encountering God’s spirit within man and bestowing worth and purpose to the human life.⁵⁶⁴ Emphasizing how the personal encounter with God in Christ allows for the human will to yield to God’s Spirit and receive

⁵⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

⁵⁶¹ Niebuhr’s concern to re-interpret God’s relation to humanity by focusing on his role as judge was his counterreaction to liberal Protestantism’s compromise with romanticism and scientific naturalism to propose an “evolutionary” interpretation of God’s relation to humanity: “it reconciled God and man by deifying the latter and humanizing the former.” Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 193.

⁵⁶² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

⁵⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 98.

⁵⁶⁴ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 54.

salvation, Niebuhr posits that the knowledge of God's goodness in salvation transforms our destiny of sin and damnation into an eternal destiny of communion with God. Niebuhr's approach to the religious question of human destiny once more reiterates the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology by indicating how the Spirit effects Christ's transformative work on the human will in salvation. Niebuhr's doctrine of God-for-us deals with the meaning of revelation in terms of how the knowledge of God's goodness in Scripture and salvation has value for addressing the religious questions of human nature and destiny. I credit Niebuhr for reconciling the reality of the believer's Judeo-Christian worldview and sinful human condition with the transformative knowledge and experience of God's goodness. As we have seen, Niebuhr clarifies how the knowledge of God's goodness leads to the sinner being renewed in God's image, and destined for eternal fellowship with God.

4.5 The Valuational Basis of Niebuhr's Theology of God's Goodness

In this chapter, we have examined the interrelation between Niebuhr's axiology and epistemology by showing how his value theory undergirds his theology of God's goodness. Interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory, we have seen how he affirmed the historical and biblical revelation of Christ to clarify the nature and expression of God's goodness and value. We also noted the overlap between Niebuhr's value theory and his epistemology given his recognition that revelation is mediated through tradition, Scripture and the Word and Spirit. This formed the basis for his theological epistemology that dealt with the knowledge and experience of

God's goodness in Scripture and salvation. In addition to clarifying the interrelated work of Christ and the Spirit in enabling the knowledge and experience of God's goodness, Niebuhr's theology also clarifies how this knowledge is good for the knower. Culminating in his doctrine of God-for-us, Niebuhr addressed the religious questions of human nature and destiny. Depicting God as our knower, author, judge and only savior, he conveyed how sinful humanity is continually being renewed in God's image, and is destined for eternal communion with God. Niebuhr's theological epistemology that reveals the inseparability of his Christology and pneumatology sets the backdrop for examining his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

GOD'S GOODNESS IN NIEBUHR'S TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY (1941-1946)

The purpose of the chapter is to examine Niebuhr's efforts to develop a Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology that would clarify the interrelation between divine goodness and human response.⁵⁶⁵ I aim to uncover the Trinitarian framework that scaffolds Niebuhr's theological ethics of God's goodness because it has implications for the credibility of the Church's witness through its loving unity and acts of justice. To address this aim, we shall first examine how the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity was forged in the crucible of World War II (1939-1945). Confronted by the human atrocities of evil and the plight of innocent human suffering, Niebuhr departed from his contemporaries who interpreted the war as God's judgement to address the dilemma of America's participation in the war. Interpreting the war instead through the lens of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr focused his efforts instead on defending God's sovereign goodness and moral order in creation. Niebuhr's theory of war that affirmed the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity formed the basis for his practical doctrine of the Trinity that functioned as the norm for human

⁵⁶⁵ According to Gustafson, Niebuhr envisioned Trinitarian theology as a critical discipline for man's practical life to defend the educational authority of Scripture for Christian theology. Drawing upon the Church's shared knowledge on God's action, Niebuhr proposes a way for the Church to respond to God's moral goodness, "Responsibility affirms – God is acting in action actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action." James Gustafson, "Introduction" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 23 & 126. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View," *Motive* 4 (1943), 46.

relationships and the Church. Taking the form of his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, Niebuhr modelled the Church's unity and its prophetic witness after the life and mission of the Trinity. Niebuhr located the Church as empirical reality in the eschatological tension and in secular culture to show how it participates and is conformed to God's goodness, His righteousness and will.

The paucity of scholarship on the link between Niebuhr's Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology can be attributed to his early 1940 war articles not being considered as part of his larger theological corpus.⁵⁶⁶ In the reception of his war articles, H. Richard Niebuhr scholars like Richard B Miller, Jon Diefenthaler and James Fowler have focused on comparing his responses to World War II (1939-1945) and the Manchurian Crisis (1931-1933).⁵⁶⁷ While this approach traces the development of Niebuhr's view of God's nature and action in history, it negates how his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology is integral to holding together his theology and ethics. To address scholars' failure to read Niebuhr's war publications as part of his theological corpus, I will show in this chapter to how Niebuhr's context of war shaped the inseparable relation between his Christology and understanding of the Trinity. I show that Niebuhr's Trinitarian thought was shaped by the need to defend God's sovereign goodness in Christ amidst the human atrocities of evil

⁵⁶⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 630–633, H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 953–955 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943), 513–515.

⁵⁶⁷ Richard Brian Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Trinitarian theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 3-70, Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, First Edition (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 80 & James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001), 183-188.

committed in the war and the plight of innocent sufferers.⁵⁶⁸ Interpreting the war in terms of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr affirmed God's sovereign goodness in Christ and his moral order in creation.⁵⁶⁹ His theory of war that recognized the work of the Trinity in redemption formed the basis for the development of his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology after the war.

5.1 The War as the Crucible for Niebuhr's Trinitarian Thought?

My thesis raises the question on whether World War II functioned as the crucible in which Niebuhr developed his Trinitarian thought, building upon Leupp's contribution in locating his Trinitarian theology in the aftermath of World War II.⁵⁷⁰ Aside from Leupp, the association between Niebuhr's war publications and his understanding of the Trinity has been neglected by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship. Scholars like William Werpehowski, Theodore R Weber and Richard B. Miller have focused on standalone readings of Niebuhr's war articles. Assuming a Christian democratic America in his context, they viewed these works as political theology which examines how religious beliefs motivate political action.⁵⁷¹ Werpehowski for example,

⁵⁶⁸ Niebuhr expounds on his newfound conviction of God's sovereign goodness in Christ that emerged in the 1930s: "The fundamental certainty given to me then... was that of God's sovereignty... And now I came to understand that unless being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and all being, the ground of its "that-ness" and its "so-ness," was trustworthy – could be counted on by what had proceeded from it – I had no God at all." Niebuhr, "Reformation", 249.

⁵⁶⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 630–633. & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 953–955.

⁵⁷⁰ This hypothesis was raised given that Niebuhr's war articles that were penned in 1942–1943 stand in between in his doctrine of God that was explained in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941) and his doctrine of the Trinity in "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" (1945). Leupp has identified how Niebuhr developed his Trinitarian theology in the aftermath of World War II and before the ascent of Trinitarian theology in his own context. Roderick T. Leupp, *The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology: Themes, Patterns & Explorations* (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 129.

⁵⁷¹ William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Trinitarian theology and the Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 68, Weber

identifies Niebuhr's theological vision as the Christian's responsibility to help "the nation to become morally fit either to stay out or to enter into war."⁵⁷² Miller's comprehensive study on Niebuhr's war publications compares his early *Christian Century* essays on the Japanese Manchurian conflict with his subsequent responses to America's participation in World War II.⁵⁷³ Miller notes how Niebuhr moved away from his earlier pacifist position to address the "moral constitution of individual agents" as a guideline for an ethics of war.⁵⁷⁴ Of these three scholars, Weber draws an integral link between Niebuhr's Christology and his war publications by crediting him for using the analogy of crucifixion to explain how the innocent suffer vicariously for the sins of the guilty in war.⁵⁷⁵ While each of their receptions yield insight into Niebuhr's political theology, they do not associate his war articles with his broader theological development in the 1940s. As such, my thesis seeks to supplement their contributions by reading Niebuhr's war publications as part of his larger theological corpus.⁵⁷⁶

5.1.1 Epistemology, Ontology and the Question of God's

Goodness

Theodore R. Weber, *War, Peace and Reconciliation: A Theological Enquiry* (Bristol, CT: ISD LLC, 2016), 49 & Richard B Miller, "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles: A Transvaluation of Value," *The Journal of Religion* 68, no. 2 (1988), 242–262.

⁵⁷² H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis," *Christianity and Society* 6, no. 3 (1941), 11–17.

⁵⁷³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," *Christian Century* 49 (1932), 378–380.

⁵⁷⁴ Miller, "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles", 244.

⁵⁷⁵ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 513-515 & Weber, *War, Peace and Reconciliation*, 48.

⁵⁷⁶ My thesis builds upon Diefenthaler's recognition that Niebuhr's views of World War II and the ensuing Cold War years galvanized his reflections on Church and world, and thus should be read as a part of his holistic theological development. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 56.

To read Niebuhr's war publications as an integral part of his publications in the 1940s, the starting point of our inquiry is his epistemology that dealt with the knowledge of God's goodness and the knowledge of selves. Niebuhr's epistemology has ontological implications because it presupposes the existence of God as subject who is at work in creation and redemption.⁵⁷⁷ As we have seen in the last chapter, Niebuhr depicted God as "our knower, our author, our judge and our savior" to deal with God's revelation in "our history"⁵⁷⁸ Niebuhr uses the term "our history" to define Christian history as the covenantal relationship that began with Israel but extends to the contemporary believer through Christ.⁵⁷⁹ Having focused his efforts on clarifying how knowledge of God's goodness leads to a personal trust in the living God, Niebuhr claims that this enables the believer to ascertain God's action in the world: "The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is now trusted and known as the contemporary God, revealing himself in every event; but we do not understand how we could trace his working in these happenings if he did not make himself known to us through the memory of Jesus Christ; nor do we know how we should be able to interpret all the words of God save by the aid of this Rosetta stone."⁵⁸⁰ Here Niebuhr qualifies that tracing God's action in the world presupposes God's self-revelation in Christ that has been made known through Scripture and salvation and requires a

⁵⁷⁷ "When we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all of our thinking and that through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering and doing and what our potentialities are." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 73.

⁵⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

⁵⁷⁹ Kliever claims that Niebuhr's theological program pivots on a Christology which holds together God's radical sovereignty and graciousness with man's radical historicity and sinfulness.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, x as cited in Lonnie D Kliever, "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *The Journal of Religion* 50, no. 1 (1970), 33.

⁵⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 81.

personal response of faith and commitment.⁵⁸¹ Niebuhr's qualification that recognizing God's revelatory action in history rests upon the believer's prior knowledge and trust in God forms the backdrop for reading Niebuhr's war publications in the 1940s. I posit that Niebuhr's defence of God's sovereign goodness and moral order in the war builds upon his prior exposition on the knowledge of God's goodness in Scripture and salvation.⁵⁸²

5.1.2 The Transformative Effect of God's Goodness

The link between Niebuhr's approach to the knowledge and action of God's goodness rests upon his conviction of God's goodness that transforms the life of the believer and the Church.⁵⁸³ While affirming the knowledge of God's goodness in Scripture and salvation, Niebuhr goes further to address how this goodness is embodied in the Church's tradition and the human conscience:

"We carry in our personal memory the impress of moral laws; in our social memory no less there are the long traditions of what ought and ought not to be done. As the latter tradition is embodied in laws, constitutions and institutions available to the external view, so the former doubtless has its physical counterpart in the structure, in the neural pattern of our organism."⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸¹ "When we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all of our thinking..."

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 73.

⁵⁸² H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 630–633 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943), 513–515.

⁵⁸³ Siker highlights how biblical authority for Niebuhr is also closely connected with the Christian experience and understanding of revelation, since the Bible points to God's revelation and Christians identify their own experience of God's continuing revelation with that to which Scripture bears witness.

Jeffrey S Siker, *Scripture and Trinitarian theology: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

⁵⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 83-84.

Niebuhr first speaks of how the conversion experience leads to God's moral laws being written upon the believer's mind and heart and this is verified through the Spirit's influence on the human conscience. This is supported by Niebuhr's claim that the believer carries in his "personal memory the impress of moral laws" and this is physically expressed in the "neural pattern" of the human mind.⁵⁸⁵ In contrast, Niebuhr expounds on how God's goodness, in terms of his standard of good; has been embodied in the life of the Church. Substantiated by his use of the term "social memory" to refer to the tradition of the Church, Niebuhr clarifies how God's standard for right and wrong are embodied in the "laws, constitutions and institutions" of the Church.⁵⁸⁶ In expounding on how knowledge of God's goodness becomes embodied, Niebuhr reiterates his belief in the compatibility of righteousness and love: "The conversion of the imperative into an indicative and of the law whose content is love into a free love of God and man is the possibility which we see through revelation."⁵⁸⁷

Niebuhr clarifies how the imperative nature of God's law is turned into an indicative because God's righteousness in Christ imputed to the believer to enable his loving response of obedience. In expounding on how the knowledge of God's goodness becomes embodied in the religious life,

⁵⁸⁵ Niebuhr uses the term "common memory" to describe how persons not only share the present life, but also adopt as their own the past history of others. As such, their personal memories are inseparable from the memory of the community, "*Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed common memory must be created.*"

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 86 as cited in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, *Feminist Companion to Paul: Deutero-Pauline Writings* (London, United Kingdom: A&C Black, 2003), 86.

⁵⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 84.

⁵⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 89.

Niebuhr emphasizes the permanent transformation that occurs because of revelation:

“It is true that revelation is not the communication of new truths and the supplanting of our natural religion by a supernatural one. But it is the fulfillment and the radical construction of our natural knowledge about deity through the revelation of one whom Jesus Christ called “Father.”... God’s self disclosure is that permanent revolution in our religious life by which all religious truths are painfully transformed and all religious behavior transfigured by repentance and new faith.”⁵⁸⁸

Niebuhr first rejects the view that revelation communicates new truths in order to re-position Christianity as a supernatural religion rather than a natural religion. Instead, Niebuhr interprets revelation as “the radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity” that entails a “permanent revolution in our religious life”.⁵⁸⁹ Here Niebuhr speaks of a transformation of religious truths and behaviour that occurs through the sinner’s repentance and faith in God for the gift of salvation.⁵⁹⁰ By establishing the continuity between the “fulfilment and radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity”, Niebuhr clarifies how God’s self-disclosure transforms religious truths and conduct.⁵⁹¹ Consistent with his intention to justify the religious motives of conduct, Niebuhr indicates how the believer is convicted of their self-interested motives and is redirected towards seeking God’s interests: “By that revelation we are convicted of having corrupted our religious life through our

⁵⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 95.

⁵⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 95.

⁵⁹⁰ Niebuhr emphasized the need to maintain the standpoint of Christian faith and revelation which are directed toward the God of Jesus Christ to make room for the believer’s faith response to God’s call and the corresponding transformation of the believer. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 21..

⁵⁹¹ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 116.

unquenchable desire to keep ourselves with our love of our good in the center of the picture.”⁵⁹²

5.2 The War and the Collapse of Christian Democratic America

Niebuhr’s concern to build upon the knowledge of God’s goodness to verify the expression of God’s goodness was occasioned by his context of World War II that marked the collapse of Christian democratic America.⁵⁹³ As successor of the social gospel movement, Niebuhr criticized the social gospel movement for nationalizing the Christian religion because of its assumption that Christianity and democracy were locked in a mutual embrace: “We recommend Christianity to ourselves and others, we defend our churches by trying to show how valuable they are for democracy; on the other hand we endeavor to prove that democracy is good by proving that it is Christian.”⁵⁹⁴ On one hand, his predecessors held the belief that Christianity provides democracy with a system of beliefs that integrates its values of freedom, respect and equality. On the other hand, Niebuhr draws attention to the movement’s conviction that democracy is superior to other political systems because of its Christian underpinnings.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 99.

⁵⁹³ Niebuhr attributed the nationalization of the Christian religion to the social gospel movement which “reinterpreted the democratic, humanistic ideas of modernism too much in the light of the New Testament” so as to reduce divine action to “religiously motivated human action.

Niebuhr, “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,” 118.

⁵⁹⁴ “We recommend Christianity to ourselves and others, we defend our churches by trying to show how valuable they are for democracy; on the other hand we endeavor to prove that democracy is good by proving that it is Christian.”

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religion and the Democratic Tradition” [1941], as published in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1996), 144.

⁵⁹⁵ While Niebuhr acknowledged Christianity’s relation to democracy, he was against both the isolationist and interventionist positions in the war because both groups made “democracy” an object of religious devotion.

The co-dependent relation between Christianity and democracy was challenged however, because of the ethical dilemma concerning America's participation in the war.⁵⁹⁶ With the outbreak of World War II, Niebuhr found himself embroiled with the isolationist and interventionist debates with regards to the Allies' cause against Nazi Germany.⁵⁹⁷ Niebuhr refused to assume either an isolationist or interventionist stance on America's participation in war because both camps made "democracy" an object of religious devotion by establishing the popular will as the final authority in society.⁵⁹⁸ Disagreeing with how both theories of war sought to relate theology to politics, Niebuhr claimed that faith in God entailed an indifference to all forms of government.⁵⁹⁹ While Niebuhr did not advocate a complete separation between religion and politics, he believed that faith in God would orientate political participation towards ensuring the equal welfare of others.⁶⁰⁰ Niebuhr also departed from his predecessors who employed religion to justify the superiority of a particular political system.

While Niebuhr made room for the Christian's political participation, he saw the need to ground it upon a Christian theory of history that would shape

H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," Earl Lecture, Berkley Divinity School, October 1940, HRN Papers, Harvard Divinity School as cited in Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, First Edition edition (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 57.

⁵⁹⁶ The first effort to reconcile the Christian faith with an indictment of history was proposed by pacifists like A. J. Muste and Charles Clayton who criticized President Roosevelt's efforts to turn America into an "arsenal of democracy."

Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1961), 375-385.

⁵⁹⁷ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 56-57.

⁵⁹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," in *Theology, History Culture: Major Unpublished Writing*, ed. William Stacy Johnson, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 143-158.

⁵⁹⁹ Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy, 143-158.

⁶⁰⁰ Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy, 143-158.

socially responsible behaviour.⁶⁰¹ Niebuhr's first efforts to set forth a theory of human events, including war; can be traced his 1943 publication "War as Crucifixion" where we see how Niebuhr defends God's sovereign goodness amidst the persistence of evil, including the human atrocities of war.⁶⁰² Niebuhr's defence of God's sovereign goodness as Creator and sustainer was a counterreaction to the amoral view of war proposed by the isolationists. Interpreting war as a conflict of powers, in which the powers are the object of God's judgment, the isolationists claimed that it makes no moral difference which side wins.⁶⁰³ Niebuhr attributed the isolationists' amoral theory of war to its portrayal of God as transcendent Creator while negating his action in the created world. In its bid to show that God exists independently of creation, the isolationists reduced God the Father to the Lord of the Spiritual life to justify its pacifist stance in the war.⁶⁰⁴ While the isolationists affirmed God's fatherly love for creation, Niebuhr acknowledged the movement's neglect of the moral obligation appropriate to him as righteous Creator. In contrast, the interventionists proposed a moral theory of war that affirmed God's judgment over the sinful nations but assumed the moral superiority of the Christian American nation. As opposed to the isolationists' overemphasis on God's transcendent existence, the interventionists focused on God's immanence in history. Seeking to show how God acts to execute retributive justice on the

⁶⁰¹ "Man, being incurably rational, cannot act without some theory of the events in which he is participating. This truth is clearly apparent in the case of war" because theories of war deal with both the situation at hand and the "important elements in any responsible behavior." H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion" (1943) as published in Richard Brian Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Trinitarian theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 63.

⁶⁰² Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 64-65.

⁶⁰³ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 63.

⁶⁰⁴ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 64.

sinful nations, Niebuhr perceived how the interventionists affirmed God's righteousness as judge to the exclusion of God's love in Christ.⁶⁰⁵

5.2.1 Niebuhr's Defence of God's Sovereign Goodness in Christ

Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with the theories of war proposed by his contemporaries led him to defend God's sovereign goodness in Christ in his Christian theory of history. Posing corrective to the isolationists' affirmation of God's love to the exclusion of his righteousness, Niebuhr makes the case for God's righteous and loving action in redemption: "The question must arise for Christians whether that understanding of the nature of cosmic justice which the crucifixion of Jesus Christ discovered to men must not and may not be applied to war, as it must and may be applied to many personal events that are unintelligible save through the cross."⁶⁰⁶ Examining the presuppositions for a Christian theory of history, Niebuhr affirms God's sovereign goodness in Christ by affirming a cosmic justice that was made accessible to men because of Christ's atoning death. By establishing the cruciform event as the basis for God's cosmic justice, Niebuhr clarifies how God as sovereign Redeemer displayed his righteousness in Christ and his love for mankind.⁶⁰⁷ This is

⁶⁰⁵ Diefenthaler highlights Niebuhr's criticism against the isolationists for limiting their attention to peacemaking on the grounds that humankind rather than God made war. Alongside the interventionists, they compromised the monotheism of the Christian faith by reducing the universal God and Father of all things to the Lord of the Spiritual life. Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1986), 63-64.

Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 64.

⁶⁰⁶ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 65-66.

⁶⁰⁷ Niebuhr's recognition of God's goodness as moral Creator in the war will carry over into his Trinitarian theology where he sees "human moral action as the response to God's redeeming action, the response of those set free, literally, from the burdens of the past." James Gustafson, "Introduction" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1999), 38. See also Patrick D. Miller, "Divine Command and Beyond: The Trinitarian theology of the Commandments" in William P. Brown, *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 22.

substantiated by Niebuhr's claim that Christ's death ushered in a "divine order of graciousness" such that the wrath of God's justice is seen alongside God's mercy towards sinners.⁶⁰⁸

While Niebuhr does not appropriate the notion of cosmic justice to war, he incorporated the motif of Christ's crucifixion into his Christian theory of history to affirm the sovereign triumph of God's goodness over evil.⁶⁰⁹ Interpreting the events of history through the lens of sin and grace, Niebuhr indicates that while sin persists, the believer can act in hope because of God's sovereignty over good and evil.⁶¹⁰ In this regard, Niebuhr also poses a corrective to the interventionists' theory of war that affirmed God's righteousness as judge to the exclusion of God's love in Christ. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's claim that the cross is a "call to repentance – not to sorrow but to spiritual revolution – is an act of grace, a great recall from the road to death which we all travel together, the just and the unjust, the victors and the vanquished."⁶¹¹ Instead of claiming that history and events can be seen through God's decrees and judgment, Niebuhr sees judgement as part of God's greater redemptive plan for humanity and creation.⁶¹² This broad redemptive plan of salvation enabled Niebuhr to build upon his prior recognition of God's righteousness and love as Creator to clarify how God's

⁶⁰⁸ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 68.

⁶⁰⁹ Diefenthaler draws the link between Niebuhr's emphasis on divine grace and his understanding of the economy and unity of the Triune God, "The first line of thought draws attention to divine grace: how God acts as gracious; the second, to the divine integrity which is its source: how God is, as the ground of how he acts. The former emphasizes the threeness in the oneness; the latter the oneness in the threeness." Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 58.

⁶¹⁰ Niebuhr claims that all action performed in light of divine grace and crucifixion "will be performed in hope, in reliance on the continued grace of God in the midst of our ungraciousness".

Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 70.

⁶¹¹ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 70.

⁶¹² Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 70.

grace holds together God's righteousness as judge and God's love manifested in the cross. In contrast to his contemporaries who wrestled with the ethical dilemma of America's participation in the war, Niebuhr addressed how Christians should interpret historical events in light of God's sovereign goodness in Christ.

5.2.2 Reconciling God's Transcendence and Immanence

In defending God's sovereign goodness in Christ, Niebuhr reveals how he reconciled God's transcendence over creation with God's immanence in history. Niebuhr's concern with God's transcendence and immanence was shaped by a third theory of war that affirmed God's transcendence as Father while undermining God's immanence in his spirit. Drawing upon the biblical portrayal of God as Father of Christ, the third group that Niebuhr characterizes as the "diltheists" affirmed God's absolute judgment on sinners:

"A third group makes a distinction between the absolute judgment of God to which all men must respond with penitence and the relative judgments of men to which other relative judgments must be opposed. For those who find themselves in this group the war requires the double response of contrition for common sin and of confident assertion of the relative rightness of democracy in opposition to totalitarianism."⁶¹³

Niebuhr uses the term "diltheists" or pragmatists to characterize this group because of their belief in two gods, namely "the Father of Jesus Christ and our country, or Him and Peace".⁶¹⁴ Niebuhr's characterization credits the

⁶¹³ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 50.

⁶¹⁴ Niebuhr criticizes the "diltheists" for having "two gods, the Father of Jesus Christ and our country, or Him and Peace. Country, Democracy and Peace are surely values of a high order, if they are under God, but as rivals of God they are betrayers of life." Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 50. See also Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 64.

pragmatists for affirming Christ's divinity that points to God the Father while undermining Christ's humanity that reveals God's immanence in history. He substantiates by showing how God's absolute judgment leads to the "double response of contrition for common sin" and the "assertion of the relative rightness of democracy in opposition to totalitarianism".⁶¹⁵

Niebuhr accounts for the "diletheists" deism by revealing how it undermined a doctrine of the Trinity by focusing exclusively on Christ's divinity. Drawing the link between Christ's humanity and the Spirit's role in revealing God's immanence in creation, Niebuhr notes how the "diletheists" reduced God's peace to the peace of the American nation. This imposition of a secular, rather than a biblical immanence, caused the pragmatists to rely on their relative judgment that democracy is right and superior to totalitarianism.⁶¹⁶ While Niebuhr credited the pragmatists for their attempts to reconcile God's existence as both transcendent and immanent, he recognized how its efforts were thwarted by its Christology and understanding of the Trinity. Failing to affirm Christ's humanity and God's immanence in history, Niebuhr perceived how the "diletheists" distorted the perspective on evil by attributing it to irrationality or an amoral power struggle.⁶¹⁷

Affirming moral evil to the exclusion of natural evil, Niebuhr also criticized the "diletheists" for failing to bring comfort to innocent sufferers of war: "Vicarious suffering shows up dramatically the tragic issue of our wrongdoings and wrong-being in the midst of our human solidarity."⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 50.

⁶¹⁶ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 50.

⁶¹⁷ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 64.

⁶¹⁸ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 67.

Reiterating their error in undermining God's immanence in history, Niebuhr conveys his belief that the whole work of creation belongs to the redemptive plan of salvation. Establishing Christ's crucifixion as the basis of God's cosmic justice, Niebuhr makes the case for Christ's vicarious suffering in humanity's place for their acts of sin and depraved state.⁶¹⁹ Niebuhr also clarifies how Christ's vicarious suffering revealed God's cosmic justice because his atonement satisfied God's wrath against the sinfulness and guilt of mankind.

Having delineated an Christian theory of history that is grounded in Christ's crucifixion, Niebuhr proceeds to set forth a theory of war based upon Christ's resurrection.⁶²⁰

"To recognize God at work in war is to live and act with faith in resurrection... To see God in the war as the vicarious sufferer and redeemer, who is afflicted in all the afflictions of his people, is to find hope along with broken-heartedness in the midst of disaster."⁶²¹

Niebuhr appears to suggest that the sinner who has been redeemed by Christ's death is able to discern God's involvement in human affairs, including wars.⁶²² Building upon his Christian theory of history that affirmed God's cosmic justice through Christ's death, Niebuhr proposed a Christian

⁶¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Idea of Original Sin in American Culture" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 174-191.

⁶²⁰ Niebuhr approaches God's action in the war from a post-resurrection standpoint that situates the believer "in the presence of God" and "in the presence of every individual event, good or evil". God for Niebuhr is not a removed Creator but is intimately involved in creating and sustaining creation.

H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?," as published in Richard Brian Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Trinitarian theology* (Knoxville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 59.

⁶²¹ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 55.

⁶²² Fowler posits that Niebuhr's efforts during World War II focused on discerning God's action in the war, and to understand how Christians might respond to God's action in it. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 184.

perspective of war that was grounded in Christ's resurrection. This is substantiated by his assertion that the Christian needs to "live and act with faith in resurrection" in order to "see God in the war as vicarious sufferer and redeemer".⁶²³ Here we see that builds upon his prior defence of God's sovereign goodness in Christ to make the case for God's moral order in creation by affirming God's continual presence and renewal of creation. Defining evil as the perversion of the good, Niebuhr's emphasis on God's moral order allows for the believer "to find hope along with broken-heartedness in the midst of disaster."⁶²⁴ Addressing the plight of innocent suffering in the war, Niebuhr posits that believers can find comfort in the paradox of suffering and glory in Christ's death and resurrection.⁶²⁵ Niebuhr's twofold Christian theory of history and his perspective of war thus goes beyond the three theories of war proposed by his contemporaries. His incorporation of the metaphor of Christ's cross and resurrection united Christ's humanity and divinity, and affirmed the work of the Trinity in redemption. Shaped in the crucible of war, Niebuhr reconciled God's immanence in Christ with God's transcendent moral order through the Spirit.

5.3 The Move from Theocentric to Trinitarian Theology

⁶²³ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 55.

⁶²⁴ In *Christ and Culture* (1951), Niebuhr conveys his view of "evil as perversion, and not as badness of being,"

H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 194.

⁶²⁵ "Interpreted through the cross of Jesus Christ the suffering of the innocent is seen not as the suffering of temporal men but of the eternal victim "slain from the foundations of the world". Human action in the war for Niebuhr shares the common characteristic of being "performed in hope, in reliance on the continued grace of God in the midst of our ungraciousness".

Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion", 67.

When the war ended in 1945, Niebuhr would turn his attention from a theocentric focus on God's sovereign goodness to further his Trinitarian theology. His efforts drew upon his Protestant tradition and also built upon his Christian theory of history and war that affirmed the work of the Trinity in redemption:

“How, then, does Protestantism raise the question of God and how does it seek and find its answers to its problems? How does the problem of God present itself to us who work in this living tradition? It comes to us as an eminently practical problem, a problem of human existence and destiny, of the meaning of human life in general and of the life of self and its community in particular... In other words the problem of God arises for us in its subjective or personal rather than in its objective or impersonal form.”⁶²⁶

Having addressed the goodness of the Triune God's action in redemption, Niebuhr turned his attention to address how the believer and the Church embodies this goodness in history. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's assertion that he shared the same concerns with his American Protestant predecessors to address the practical problem of God and its implications for human existence and destiny.⁶²⁷ Niebuhr emphasizes his concern with the “subjective or personal” problem of the self's unity rather than “its objective or impersonal form” in the unity of the Triune God.⁶²⁸ The unity of the self that

⁶²⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Nature and Existence of God” (n.d.), Collection 695, Box 6 (17), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University. (Hereafter known as Niebuhr Archives)

⁶²⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Nature and Existence of God” (n.d.), Collection 695, Box 6 (17), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University. (Hereafter known as Niebuhr Archives)

⁶²⁸ Ottati also identifies Niebuhr's concern with the subjective problem of the self's unity as opposed to the objective problem of the unity of God, “Christianity addresses the *subjective problem* of the self's unity amidst the plurality of relations in which it stands through the trinitarian perception of God”

Niebuhr envisions is a unity of faith and will because it entails the “acceptance of a divine ingression” and a response of human aspiration.⁶²⁹

In his post-war publication “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience” (1945), Niebuhr indicates how this unity of faith and freewill is a by-product of accepting the Triune grace in redemption.⁶³⁰ Niebuhr substantiates by emphasizing the dependent relation between Christ’s judgment of sin and the Spirit’s sanctification of the believer’s life.⁶³¹

“But the theological analysis understands that when the other in the self, the Holy Spirit, let us say, is loyal to his cause, the universal community, and in the light of that cause requires the self to judge itself to be a transgressor, he can yet be friendly to the self. Instead of excluding the self from companionship with the divine other the latter remains within the self, a source of consolation, and of inspiration toward the keeping of the principles which have been transgressed.”⁶³²

Niebuhr draws the link between the Spirit’s loyalty to the Church as universal community and the continued sanctification of the self because sin persists even after salvation.⁶³³ His post-conversion standpoint is supported by his

Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr’s Theology* (Washington, D.C: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 158.

⁶²⁹ Douglas F. Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Protestants: God the Creator* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 4-5.

⁶³⁰ Pauw credits Niebuhr for rejecting a universal moral sense and recognizing the limits of human reason. According to Pauw, Niebuhr recovered Edwards’ emphasis on the need for divine grace to perceive the glory of God’s nature.

Amy Plantinga Pauw, “The Future of Reformed Theology: Some Lessons from Jonathan Edwards” in David Willis-Watkins et al., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 460.

⁶³¹ Niebuhr indicates how the believer’s conscience has been awakened to agonize over sin against the Creator and the consolation of Christ through the Spirit who helps the believer meet God’s moral demands. The choice is between “the agonized conscience of the awakened, and the consoled conscience of one who in the company of the spirit seeks to fulfill the infinite demands of the infinite other.”

H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. 13 (1945), 359.

⁶³² Niebuhr, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience,” 359.

⁶³³ H. Richard Niebuhr speaks of the universal community of being and God as the “principle of being.”

Ottati, *Theology for Liberal Presbyterians and Other Endangered Species*, 73.

claim that while the self judges “itself to be the transgressor, he can yet be friendly to the self” because the divine other “remains within the self.”⁶³⁴ Niebuhr’s explanation of how the Spirit continues to convict the Christian of sin and to inspire him to keep God’s laws enables him to affirm the unity of the believer’s faith in Christ and freedom through the Spirit.

5.3.1 Towards a Trinitarian Theology for the Church

Building upon his recognition of how the work of the Trinity in redemption leads to a unity of the self, he would turn his attention to developing a Trinitarian theology for the Church. Niebuhr’s corresponding concern with the unity of God and its implications for the life of the Church revisits his value theory in *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). As we have seen, Niebuhr in this publication expressed the need to uphold God as absolute demand and ultimate good by bringing the Kingdom and the vision of God closer together.⁶³⁵ By the post-war period, Niebuhr shifted from his appropriation of the metaphor of the Kingdom of God to incorporate a broader Trinitarian framework for the Church’s norm and purpose.⁶³⁶ This progression in Niebuhr’s thought to revere the Trinity associates him with the neo-orthodox movement that sought to recover the Christian theological heritage and to

⁶³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Nature and Existence of God” (n.d.), Collection 695, Box 6 (17), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University. (Hereafter known as Niebuhr Archives)

⁶³⁵ Niebuhr’s concern with verifying the fact of God’s kingship can be traced to *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) where he sought to develop a miniature counterpart to Augustine’s *City of God* or Edwards’s *History of the Work of Redemption*. Martin E. Marty, “Introduction” in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan, 1988), xiv.

⁶³⁶ Helmut Richard Niebuhr, “The Norm of the Church,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 4 (1946), 5–15.

renew traditional modes of thought.⁶³⁷ Arising as a countermovement in Germany and America, Niebuhr perceived that the movement's aim was to draw upon the Christian tradition to rethink "man's relations, nature, and destiny".⁶³⁸

While Niebuhr agreed with the existential emphasis of the movement, his aim of reforming the insular outlook of his denomination shaped his concern with the prophetic renewal of the Church.⁶³⁹ This interest is evident in his earlier publications and co-publications namely *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) and *The Church Against the World* (1935). Although Church reform remained as Niebuhr's perennial concern, his approach would shift from drawing upon social science to a Trinitarian paradigm. While Niebuhr continued to share the social scientific concerns on human behaviour and social relations, he sought for an explanation from religion rather than social and behavioural theories. This paradigm shift can be traced to his 1945 publication "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" where Niebuhr conveys his intention to appropriate the Trinity as a paradigm for human relationships and the Church.⁶⁴⁰ As such, we shall see how Niebuhr utilises the Trinity to affirm the sociality of the self to "state

⁶³⁷ Richard has often been associated with the American neo-orthodox movement which sought to counter liberalism's human optimism and its stress on God's immanence by asserting the reality of sin and God's transcendence.

Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff, *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 426.

⁶³⁸ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 371.

⁶³⁹ The American neo-orthodox movement associated with the Niebuhr brothers had a distinct flavour in comparison to German neo-orthodoxy that had Karl Barth as one of its main proponents. The Niebuhr brothers argued for a new Christian realism and critiqued churches for failing to realize their prophetic renewal.

Espín and Nickoloff, *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, 426.

⁶⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 371.

Christian truth from the point of view of the Church rather than the individual as subject“.⁶⁴¹

Niebuhr also advanced a self-critical stance, in which the Church allows for its witness to be verified by those outside the Church, namely heretics and modern critics of Christianity.⁶⁴² Citing how the Church has benefited from external histories of itself, Niebuhr attributes his stance to Church historiography that has traced the development of the Church throughout the ages. Establishing the doctrine of the Trinity as the foundational belief of the Church, Niebuhr posits that even heretics can be included into “the body on which they are actually dependent”.⁶⁴³ Niebuhr characterizes a heretic as one who refuses to accept the revealed truth of the Trinity, referring to what the Bible says about the nature of God. While Niebuhr drew upon Church historiography to acknowledge the historical character of the Church, he also balanced this with the divine nature of the Church. Asserting that the Church always acts “in history, faith and sin”, Niebuhr on one hand depicts the Church as a social institution in society that takes in other “revelations” about the world.⁶⁴⁴ Conversely, Niebuhr posits that the Church also acts in “faith and sin” because it is established as part of God’s revealed will to redeem humanity and creation.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴¹ Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 371.

⁶⁴² Niebuhr uses the term “external history” to refer to an impersonally observed history that deals with ideas, interests, movements among things.

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 33 & William Russell Murry, *Faith and History in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Madison, New Jersey: Drew University., 1970), 167.

⁶⁴³ Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 384.

⁶⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 86.

⁶⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 86.

Niebuhr's twofold conception of the Church's divine nature and historical existence constitutes his efforts to re-articulate the Protestant formula of the invisible Church and the visible Church:

"Protestantism, especially early Lutheranism, sought a solution for the problem with the aid of a formula ultimately derived from Augustine. There were two churches, it declared a visible church and an invisible one; the invisible church is the Church of faith; the visible church is the human institution. But the relation of these two churches was never clearly worked out... Insofar as it assumes the Church of faith, the invisible company of elect, is made up of scattered individuals, it seems to be in downright error, misconceiving the nature of society and of the Church in particular, which is not simply a society of saved men but the saved society of men."⁶⁴⁶

While Niebuhr credited his Protestant predecessors for distinguishing between the divine and empirical reality of the Church, he sought to supplement the invisible-visible Church distinction proposed by Augustine and Luther.⁶⁴⁷ Addressing their failure to clarify the relation between the invisible and visible Church, Niebuhr poses corrective by supplementing its portrayal of the invisible Church of faith as a society of saved men.⁶⁴⁸ Niebuhr's additional view of the Church as "the saved society of men" goes beyond his predecessors' affirmation of the Spirit's incorporation of believers into the body of Christ to note how the Spirit unifies the Church.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," *Religion in Life* 15 (Winter 1945-1946), 113.

⁶⁴⁷ Niebuhr drew upon Reformed ecclesiology's notion of the visible and invisible Church, "One of the great needs of present-day institutionalized and divided Christianity, perhaps particularly in America with its denominations, is recovery of faith in the invisible catholic church."

Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xxv-xxvi.

⁶⁴⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," *Religion in Life* 15 (Winter 1945-1946), 113.

⁶⁴⁹ Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 113.

Niebuhr demarcates his departure from Luther's depiction of the invisible Church as Christ's hidden and mystical body, a "spiritual, internal Christendom".⁶⁵⁰ Instead, conceiving of the Church's divine nature as an "actual interpersonal reality, not form, but an action, trust and loyalty experienced" many times over.⁶⁵¹ Niebuhr depiction of the Church as actual interpersonal reality draws upon his prior affirmation of the work of the Trinity in redemption that reconciles the believer to God and fellow believers. Niebuhr however, builds upon this truth that undergirds the interpersonal nature of the Church to convey that this is a continuing reality through the Church's exercise of trust and loyalty to God through the ages.⁶⁵²

5.3.2 Niebuhr's Concern with the Soteriological Implications of the Trinity

Niebuhr's explanation on how the Church's divine nature rests upon the work of the Trinity in redemption shaped his concern with the soteriological implications of the Trinity:

⁶⁵⁰ In addition to Augustine, Luther was also influenced by Jan Huss's notion of the invisible church, referring to the church as 'Christ's mystical body, that is, hidden body...'. This influenced Luther's writing *On the Papacy* (1520) where he described the invisible church as 'natural, basic, essential and true, we shall call "spiritual, internal Christendom". Huss, *De Ecclesia*, 17 & Luther, LW 39, 71 as cited in John P. Bradbury, *Perpetually Reforming: A Theology of Church Reform and Renewal* (London, United Kingdom: A&C Black, 2013), 37.

⁶⁵¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987), 117-118.

⁶⁵² Niebuhr sought to counter Christianity's tendency to replace faith in God with faith in one's finite Church such that one's Church for God becomes the object of our trust and loyalty. He speaks of an ecclesia-centrism "insofar as the community that centers in Jesus Christ is set forth both as the object of his loyalty and the Christian's loyalty." Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 60.

“It may be that the doctrine of the Trinity, just because it represented the union of philosophy and faith in the early centuries, will be re- thought and restated by a theology which undertakes to re-appropriate the Christian tradition and to make explicit what has been implicit in Western thought. The approach to the doctrine of the Trinity from the point of view of man's enduring crisis is of greater importance.”⁶⁵³

Niebuhr first concedes that a metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity may have been appropriate for a Western Christendom context because of the assumed union of philosophy and faith. Given his concern however, to address the interrelation between the invisible and visible Church, Niebuhr argues for approaching the doctrine of the Trinity from the standpoint of man's existential crisis.⁶⁵⁴ Addressing the soteriological implications of the Trinity, Niebuhr was more concerned with how the Trinity gives meaning to human existence and the existence of the Church.⁶⁵⁵ This is supported by Niebuhr's assertion that his doctrine of the Trinity addresses “the relation of Jesus Christ to the Creator of nature and Governor of history as well as the Spirit immanent in creation and in the Christian community.”⁶⁵⁶ Reiterating his decision to ground Christ's humanity and divinity upon his death and resurrection, Niebuhr

⁶⁵³ Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 372.

⁶⁵⁴ Niebuhr believed that the doctrine of the Trinity should be pressed into greater ecumenical service than currently observed because it is poised to “address the whole gamut of existential and social concerns because it represents the Church's more encompassing vantage point over against the strictly individual”.

Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 372 as cited in Roderick T. Leupp, *The Renewal of Trinitarian Theology: Themes, Patterns & Explorations* (Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 129.

⁶⁵⁵ Bauerschmidt posits that Niebuhr was influenced by Kant to propose an entirely anthropological doctrine of the Trinity, having little relevance for what it does or does not say about God. According to Niebuhr, “Trinitarianism is by no means as speculative a position and as unimportant for conduct as it is often maintained.” Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 80 as cited in Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Trinity in the Christian Life” in Gilles P. Emery and Matthew Levering, *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2011), 532.

⁶⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 81.

accounts for his affirmation of the Spirit's immanence in creation and the Church. Dealing first with how the Trinity gives meaning to the human life, Niebuhr clarifies how Christ's death that renews the image of God in man allows for the believer to participate in the Spirit's renewal of creation.⁶⁵⁷ With regards to the meaning of the Church's existence, Niebuhr posits that the Church because of its faith in Christ's resurrection is enabled by the Spirit's presence in the Church to glorify God the Father.

5.4 The Personal Triune God and the Norm of the Church

Having demarcated his departure from a metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity, Niebuhr clarifies that his Trinitarian ontology deals with the personal Triune God as revealed in Scripture and as the norm of the Church:⁶⁵⁸

“As the church explicates its faith it becomes aware of the fact that its loyalty is not to the Jesus of history only, nor to the risen Christ alone, but to the eternal Son of God incarnate in Jesus... Jesus Christ, the faith of Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures constitute the norm of the church in such fashion that the one implies the other.”⁶⁵⁹

Niebuhr substantiates by drawing attention to the Church's threefold loyalty to the “Jesus of history”, “the risen Christ alone” and “the eternal Son of God incarnate in Jesus”.⁶⁶⁰ In the first instance, I posit that Niebuhr uses the

⁶⁵⁷ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 272–80.

⁶⁵⁸ In “Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic” (1929), Niebuhr had already expressed his dissatisfaction with a descriptive or “value-free” social science because their descriptive accounts of morality purported a moral relativism in Christian ethics. He claimed in this early publication that Christ's life and teachings constitute the absolute norm of the Christian religion.

Niebuhr, “Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic”, 6.

⁶⁵⁹ Niebuhr, “The Norm of the Church,” 12.

⁶⁶⁰ Niebuhr's use of the phrase ‘eternal Son of God incarnate’ refers to the ascension of Christ because he “typically uses the word ‘incarnation’ to denote the concrete expression in human life of exclusive trust in God's goodness and universal loyalty to the whole realm of God's creation.”

Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 95.

phrase “Jesus of history” to refer to the historical events of Christ’s life and death that reveal his humanity. For this interpretation, he draws upon his interpretation of war as crucifixion to convey how the Church’s loyalty to Christ is based upon his atoning work as substitute for humanity’s sin.⁶⁶¹

Correspondingly, I assert that his reference to “the risen Christ alone” draws attention to the historical and continuing reality of Christ’s resurrection that points to his divinity. In this regard, Niebuhr appears to incorporate his interpretation of war through the lens of Christ’s resurrection to claim that the Church’s loyalty to Christ is demonstrated in its identification with Christ’s Kingdom cause to establish God’s justice and love on earth.⁶⁶² Niebuhr’s last reference to “the eternal Son of God incarnate in Jesus” is key to linking the Christological metaphors that he developed in the war with his Trinitarian thought. Niebuhr uses the phrase ‘eternal Son of God incarnate’ to refer to the Triune work in redemption because the Son who is in eternal relation to the Father and the Spirit took on human form to fulfil God’s plan to redeem creation.⁶⁶³

By utilizing these three Christological terms in the Church’s explication of its faith, we see in his publication “The Norm of the Church” (1946) that Niebuhr consolidates his perspective on war and the doctrine of the Trinity. The inseparability of his Christology and understanding of the Trinity that is grounded in the Triune work in redemption allowed him to establish the Trinity

⁶⁶¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “War as Crucifixion,” *Christian Century* 60 (1943), 513–515.

⁶⁶² H. Richard Niebuhr, “War as the Judgment of God,” *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 630–633.

⁶⁶³ Niebuhr uses the phrase ‘eternal Son of God incarnate’ to refer to how the Son’s eternal relations to the Father and the Spirit was expressed in each of the Triune person’s role in the work of redemption. As Kliever has pointed out, Niebuhr “typically uses the word ‘incarnation’ to denote the concrete expression in human life of exclusive trust in God’s goodness and universal loyalty to the whole realm of God’s creation.” Lonnie D Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 95.

as a norm for human relationships and the Church. This claim that I make is substantiated by Niebuhr's assertion that "Jesus Christ, the faith of Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures" are interrelated norms of the Church. Niebuhr's reference to "Jesus Christ" and "the faith of Jesus Christ" first reiterates the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity such that Christ's perfect unity transforms relationships through the salvation he brings. These Christological norms uncover the basis for Niebuhr's recognition of the sociality of the self because it draws attention to his recognition of the sinner's reconciliation with God and with fellow believers.

Niebuhr's corresponding reference to "the Scriptures" as a norm of the Church builds upon his preceding recognition of Christ's eternal relations with the Father and the Spirit to affirm the personal Triune God of Scripture. It appears to me that Niebuhr was concerned with the unified story of God's redemptive plan for creation and its implications for the Church that is loyal to Christ:

"Positing the presence of loyalty to Jesus Christ, it seeks for external and recognizable signs of that presence... The problem now is not what kind of religious organization is church, but how the presence of a community of those who are loyal to Jesus Christ manifests itself."⁶⁶⁴

Having identified three interrelated norms for the Church's loyalty to Christ, Niebuhr moves beyond the Church's explication of its faith to address the Church's expression of its faith in the Triune God of Scripture. Niebuhr distinguishes between the work of the Trinity in the salvation of sinners and the work of the Trinity in the redemption of creation, conveying his primary

⁶⁶⁴ Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," 12.

interests in the Triune work to redeem creation. We can see this in Niebuhr's assertion that he is more interested in the problem "of how the presence of a community of those who are loyal to Jesus Christ manifests itself" rather than the "kind of religious organization" the Church is.⁶⁶⁵

While Niebuhr links the Church's loyalty to Christ with the soteriological implications of the Trinity, he clarifies that he is more interested in the evidence of the Church as redeemed community as opposed to the nature of the Church. By "positing the presence of loyalty to Jesus Christ", Niebuhr appears to assume that the Church is made up of redeemed believers whose relations are modelled after the Triune life of unity and diversity among persons.⁶⁶⁶ Niebuhr clarifies the need to assume, rather than to prove the presence of the Church's loyalty to Jesus Christ because he concedes that the presence of the Church's loyalty is difficult to evaluate:

"There are no ways in which an infallible judgment may be made that the Christian church is present. All that seems possible is a series of negative judgments, beginning with the apostolic test: If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his. As in the case of the statement of faith, so in the case of the marks of the church: one can only proceed with exclusion. The church takes for granted that all who profess loyalty to Christ are loyal and then excludes from that number those who show by their actions that they are not in the presence of Christ."⁶⁶⁷

In this regard, Niebuhr qualifies that the presence of the Church's loyalty to Christ cannot be infallibly proved because it rests upon the Spirit's work to

⁶⁶⁵ Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," 12.

⁶⁶⁶ Niebuhr's decision to ground the Church's origins in the life of the Triune God stems from his eschatological perspective of the "invisible" Church as an "emergent" reality within the Church that served, at least in part, to further unity with God and the rest of humankind. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches of Sight", *Religion in Life* 15 (1945), 107-115.

⁶⁶⁷ Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," 14.

unify the diverse believers that constitute the Church. Niebuhr substantiates by asserting that both the Church's "statement of faith" about its beliefs and the external "marks of the Church" can only be assessed through a "series of negative judgments".⁶⁶⁸ Here Niebuhr clarifies that the marks of the Church are embodied by Spirit-filled believers who strive towards the ecumenical unity of the Church as an act of worship to the Triune God. By distinguishing between the norms and marks of the Church, I credit Niebuhr for setting forth a Trinitarian ontology that ascertains the nature of the Triune God based upon the Church's unity as a body of redeemed believers.

5.4.1 Niebuhr's Trinitarian Ecclesiology and the Church's Mission in Society

As we have seen, Niebuhr's Trinitarian ontology addressed questions about how the being of the Triune God could be ascertained from the Church's marks of unity rather than the being of the Church. His corresponding Trinitarian ecclesiology that deals with the Trinity as the norm of the Church, rather than human relationships; has implications for the Church's mission in society. The shift in Niebuhr's attention from the being of the Triune God to the nature of the Church can be identified in his publication *The Gift of the Catholic Vision* (1948). In this publication, Niebuhr appears to suggest that the nature and mission of the Church is informed and motivated by the Catholic vision of communion with God who is the ultimate good. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's qualification that the Church is able to recognize God as the ultimate good because it has first received "the gift of the Gospel, the gifts of

⁶⁶⁸ Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," 14.

faith, hope and love”.⁶⁶⁹ Here Niebuhr conveys that his Trinitarian ecclesiology deals with the interplay of divine goodness and human response by emphasizing God’s goodness in the gospel, Scripture, salvation and the Church. By the threefold “gifts of faith, hope and love”, I posit that Niebuhr refers to God’s goodness in Scripture that leads to faith in Christ, God’s goodness in salvation that enables the hope of eternal life and God’s goodness in the Church that compels love for his Kingdom. My interpretations draws upon his earlier publications where Niebuhr had addressed these expressions of God’s goodness to convey the compatibility of God’s righteousness and love in his nature and will.⁶⁷⁰

I attribute Niebuhr’s concern with the interrelation between divine goodness and human response to theology’s incorporation of modern social science in his context of American secularism. The turn to social science raised the need for Niebuhr to reconcile metaphysical claims about reality with empirical reality, given “the engagement of the Christian mind with the emergent scientific mind”:⁶⁷¹

“In our efforts to deal with the questions science put to theology we have been forced to fall back on our common Christian faith, to discover and realize its distinctiveness, to explain at least to ourselves its metaphysical implications. The problems raised

⁶⁶⁹ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 507.

⁶⁷⁰ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner”, 272-280, Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr, “H. Richard Niebuhr, “War as Crucifixion,” 5-15 &

⁶⁷¹ Niebuhr speaks of reconciling religion and social science in terms of reconciling “the engagement of the Christian mind with the emergent scientific mind” such that the conflict of religion with social science disappears.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “Modernism,” in R. A Seligman and Alvin Johnson, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*: (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 1066.

here cut across the issues we raised and which divided us within the Christian community.”⁶⁷²

Although Niebuhr sought to reconcile Christian reasoning with social scientific reasoning, he emphasized the need to begin with the Christian faith and its metaphysical claims about reality. Falling back on the Trinity as the foundation of the Christian faith, Niebuhr affirms God as ultimate reality but recognizes how this principle has been challenged by 18th and 19th century German liberalism. The liberal endeavour to discern ultimate reality through a progressive view of history and science rather than through God’s progressive revelation of himself divided the Church.⁶⁷³

Embroiled in the Church’s divide over the metaphysical claims of God as ultimate reality and seeking empirical evidence for ultimate reality, Niebuhr sought to balance between the metaphysical and empirical. Godsey expounds on how this shaped Niebuhr’s call for “the church to defend the substance of its faith against the world” and to “engage the world for the sake of its mission.”⁶⁷⁴ From Godsey’s exposition, we gather that he saw the Church as the instrument that could bridge between metaphysical claims and empirical evidence of God as ultimate reality. Building upon his Trinitarian ontology to develop a Trinitarian ecclesiology, Niebuhr qualifies that the Church’s mission in society rests upon the Church’s relation to the Triune God and his mission:

“First, the Church is an eschatological society, or, as we may better say in our times, it is an emergent reality, hidden yet real; and secondly, the religious institutions called

⁶⁷² Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 509.

⁶⁷³ Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 100.

⁶⁷⁴ John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 18.

the churches are subject like all the rest of this secular society of ours to a constant process of conversion.”⁶⁷⁵

Making the case for how the Church’s relation to God distinguishes it from all other groups or societies, Niebuhr characterizes the Church as an “eschatological society”, “an emergent reality, hidden yet real”.⁶⁷⁶ Situating the Church in eschatological history, Niebuhr indicates how the Church participates in the life of the Triune God and is in the process of being transformed into the likeness of God.

Departing from the liberal belief in human progress through history and science, Niebuhr argues instead that the Church is caught up in God’s progressive revelation of Himself.⁶⁷⁷ Noting how the Church and secular society are in “a constant process of conversion”, Niebuhr conveys his belief that both these institutions are subject to God’s renewal of creation.⁶⁷⁸

Niebuhr however, differentiates that while secular society experiences this renewal through God’s common grace, the Church is transformed through God’s saving grace, a living encounter with the Triune God:

“[The Church] is directed toward the revelation of God in Christ, toward the Christ who is not first of all the spirit in the Church but the Lord it encounters, toward the

⁶⁷⁵ H. Niebuhr, “Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” *Religion in Life* 15 (Winter 1945-1946), 114.

⁶⁷⁶ H. Niebuhr, “Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” *Religion in Life* 15 (Winter 1945-1946), 114.

⁶⁷⁷ Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018), 100.

⁶⁷⁸ Neoorthodoxy revived the Augustinian distinction between the “visible” and the “invisible” Church but focused exclusively on the fact that churches were “contradictory” to the eternal reality of the church. Niebuhr held the eschatological view that the “invisible” church was an “emergent” reality within the churches and served to further unity with God and the rest of humankind.

H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Hidden Church and the Churches of Sight,” *Religion in Life* 15 (1945), 107-115.

Word carved on tables of stones and nailed on a cross... toward the kingdom and the law that rule and judge us from a throne that is lifted high above us.”⁶⁷⁹

Here Niebuhr references his prior appropriation of the doctrine of the Trinity as the norm of human relationships and the Church by clarifying how the Church’s vision of unity arises from being under the Lordship of the Triune God. Emphasizing how its encounter with the Triune God is mediated through the Word and Spirit, Niebuhr expounds on how the Church is directed towards Christ the Word incarnate and the reign of God’s Kingdom and Law through the Spirit.⁶⁸⁰

By drawing attention to the Church’s Lordship under the Triune God, Niebuhr is able to justify how the Church’s mission in secular society flows from its relation with the Triune God:

“The Church always tends to retreat into religion and to become the religious institution of a civilization but cannot remain content with that role. Its members forever transcend the boundaries of what men call religion; they form sects, societies within society yet apart from society; they enter restlessly into the political and economic life of the civilizations in which they dwell...”⁶⁸¹

“

Although Niebuhr emphasizes the Church’s historical character as the “religious institution of a civilization”, he makes the case for the transcendent character of the Church.⁶⁸² This transcendence that goes beyond religion

⁶⁷⁹ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 509.

⁶⁸⁰ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 509.

⁶⁸¹ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 520.

⁶⁸² In the *Church Against the World* (1935). Niebuhr had earlier expressed his concern that the Church in seeking to prove its usefulness to modern civilization had lost its distinctiveness and abandoned the Christian discipline of life.

stems from the Church's participation in the Triune mission of reconciliation that leads it to form sects and sub-societies that remain distinct from society.⁶⁸³ Given that the Triune God's reconciling mission extends beyond the Church to include all creation, the Church also has an impetus to be an agent of reconciliation in the political and economic life of its society.⁶⁸⁴

5.4.2 Divine Goodness and Human Response in Niebuhr's Trinitarian Ecclesiology

This dynamic tension between the transcendent nature and immanent influence of the Church shaped Niebuhr's understanding of the interplay between divine goodness and human response. Having shown how the metaphysical claims about God as ultimate reality are validated through the eschatological character of the Church, Niebuhr seeks empirical evidence of God as ultimate reality. According to Niebuhr, the Church as eschatological reality functions as a sign to the ultimate reality of God by participating in God's redemptive plan and the Kingdom, and being continually sanctified by the Spirit. This is supported by Niebuhr's characterization of the Church as "an eschatological community hastening toward a final and inclusive judgment, but also as a spiritual society, aware of the presence of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ, which is the Spirit of God."⁶⁸⁵ Dealing with the

H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis Pickens Miller, *The Church Against the World* (Chicago; New York: Willett, Clark & Co., 1935), 123-156 as reprinted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 608.

⁶⁸³ Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 520.

⁶⁸⁴ Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 520.

⁶⁸⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Gospel, the World and the Church" (1946) as republished in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsibility of the Church for Society and Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Kristine A. Culp (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 66.

transcendent reality of the Church that is living in union with the Triune God, Niebuhr clarifies how the Church is continually subject to the goodness of the Triune God:

“We are led to inquire into the objectivity of an event and a process that is not simply within us but over against us, which concerns us not only as persons but as a community, and concerns us not only as the community of the Church but as the community of mankind in its never-to-be-repeated history.”⁶⁸⁶

Niebuhr first emphasizes the objectivity of the conversion event and the continuing process of salvation throughout the Christian life that reflects the initiative of the Triune God in redemption. Justifying how the believer in the Church has experienced the Triune goodness of God, Niebuhr indicates how it leads to persons and the Church being conformed to God’s righteous nature and loving will. Niebuhr in turn, depicts the Church as subject to the work of the Trinity in redemption by emphasizing the Church’s kinship with creation “as the community of mankind” in redemptive history.

Having demonstrated how the Church is transcendent because it is continually subject to the goodness of God’s action in creation, Niebuhr was able to frame its immanent influence as a response to divine goodness.⁶⁸⁷

“Finally, Catholic vision moves the Church into a new perspective. For now we see that the human response to divine action is not so much religion as Church. It is not

⁶⁸⁶ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 519-520.

⁶⁸⁷ Niebuhr’s discontent with the sociological approach adopted in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) led him to probe into the internal dynamics of the Church, beginning to see the Church as a movement which has its center in faith in the Kingdom of God. He affirmed the independence of the Christian faith, seeing it as an aggressive movement “which molds culture instead of being molded by it.” Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ix-x. See also Joon-Sik Park, *Missional Ecclesologies in Creative Tension: H. Richard Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007), 48.

the Christian religion with which we are concerned, as our predecessors were concerned with it, but the *ecclesia* which worships, to be sure, which has religious ideas and religious rites, but which is something more inclusive and more strange than a religious association.”⁶⁸⁸

Niebuhr first explains how his Trinitarian ontology that grounds the Church’s unity upon the unity and diversity of the Trinitarian persons is the basis for re-orientating the Church towards God as ultimate value. He uses the phrase “Catholic vision” to refer to the vision of ecumenical unity because it is an act of the Church’s worship of the Triune God. This emphasis on the aesthetic value of religion, through the Church’s worship of the Triune God, constitutes his corrective to the social gospel movement’s exclusive focus on the ethical value of religion.⁶⁸⁹ Resulting in its error of reducing divine action to religiously motivated human action, Niebuhr emphasizes the need to move beyond his predecessors’ notion of the Church as religious association.⁶⁹⁰

Niebuhr in contrast, proposes a more inclusive definition of the Church that clarifies how its action is motivated by the Triune mission of reconciliation rather than human religiosity:

“For Catholicism is as much an affair of the mind as it is of the organization of the Church. We cannot live in the Catholic Church save as the Catholic Church is also in us, in our minds and spirit; it cannot be in us, however, save as we also live in it.

Among the joys which the Catholic vision has brought there is this joy—that we know

⁶⁸⁸ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 520.

⁶⁸⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁶⁹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and Barthianism,” in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 117-122.

our theology to be one work in a many-sided enterprise in which we serve and are being served.”⁶⁹¹

Niebuhr indicates how the Catholic vision of ecumenical unity is both a mindset of the Church and an organizing principle that determines the Church’s identity and mission. This is supported by Niebuhr’s claim that Catholicism is in the minds and the spirit of believers in as much as the Church participates in its reality.⁶⁹² Here Niebuhr emphasizes how Catholicism is both a conviction and reality of the Church because it is based on Scripture’s witness and the Church’s participation in the Trinitarian mission of reconciliation. In his Trinitarian ecclesiology, Niebuhr balances between the Triune God’s action to renew the Church and the Church’s agency as a community of reconciliation. Addressing the interplay between divine goodness and human response, Niebuhr speaks of how the Church responds to God’s goodness in the Church through its loving unity and acts of justice in secular society. I credit Niebuhr for clarifying how empirical evidence for the ultimate reality of God can be found in the Church’s prophetic witness to God’s ultimate reign of justice and love.⁶⁹³

5.5 War and Niebuhr’s Trinitarian Ontology and Ecclesiology

In this chapter, we have examined how World War II was the crucible in which Niebuhr built upon his epistemological concern with the knowledge of God’s

⁶⁹¹ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 520-521.

⁶⁹² In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960), Niebuhr reacts against a church-centered faith in which the Church is reduced to a “community of those who hold common beliefs, practice and common rites, and submit to a common rule” because it replaced faith in God with faith in the Church.

Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 58.

⁶⁹³ Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 521.

goodness to address God's good action in history. Confronted with the ethical dilemma of America's participation in the war, we have seen how Niebuhr departed from his contemporaries who interpreted the war as God's judgment to justify its political stance in the war. In contrast, we see instead how Niebuhr interpreted the war in terms of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection to affirm the work of the Trinity in redemption. Niebuhr's twofold Christian theory of history and perspective of war formed the basis for his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology in the post-war period. Appropriating the doctrine of the Trinity as the norm of human relationships and the Church, Niebuhr clarified how the Church's distinctive being is modelled after the unity and diversity of the Triune persons. His corresponding Trinitarian ecclesiology addressed the Church's mission in society vis-à-vis its relation to the Triune God through its prophetic witness of God's ultimate reign through its loving unity and acts of justice.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN ETHICS AS PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE GOODNESS

In the concluding chapter, I seek to convey Niebuhr's view that Christian ethics is participation in divine goodness through the Church's witness to God's righteousness and love through its acts of justice and unity.⁶⁹⁴ I renew attention to my thesis argument that Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity culminates in a theological ethics of God's goodness. My thesis has traced the link between Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity to his theory of theory of war that affirmed Christ's humanity and divinity in the context of the work of the Trinity in redemption.⁶⁹⁵ This soteriological lens accounts for Niebuhr view of ethics as participation because it calls for the Church who has experienced God's goodness in redemption to participate in God's redemptive plan.⁶⁹⁶ Although my thesis culminates in Niebuhr's theological ethics, its key contribution is advancing

⁶⁹⁴ In his examination of Niebuhr's ecclesiology, Park highlights how Niebuhr's emphasis on the primacy of divine action in his ethics has led scholars like Gustafson and Fowler to criticize him for the passive role he accords to human agency.

Joon-Sik Park, *Missional Ecclesiologies in Creative Tension: H. Richard Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007), 25.

⁶⁹⁵ Niebuhr appropriates the metaphor of crucifixion to address the plight of innocent human sufferers in the war because it can also be seen as an occasion for redemption.

Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion, 513-515.

⁶⁹⁶ Kathryn Tanner has criticized Niebuhr's moral realism for severely limiting human potential to act responsibly in society because too many things must be accepted as "givens", "Among the followers of Niebuhr, God's action and intentions are displayed only in what life forces us to respond to; our own acts of responsible choice in the face of such forces cannot be themselves within the sphere of God's working in the same direct way."

Kathryn Tanner, "A Theological Case for Human Responsibility in Moral Choice," *The Journal of Religion* 73, no. 4 (1993), 592-612.

receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by incorporating the theme of God's goodness, his righteousness and love. As we have seen, Niebuhr consistently affirmed the compatibility of God's righteousness and love in the gospel, Scripture, salvation and the Church by acknowledging a faith standpoint in his theology and ethics. This faith standpoint allowed Niebuhr to defend the religious motives of conduct by reconciling an otherworldly God with a this-worldly human existence.⁶⁹⁷

Given my thesis argument that Niebuhr developed his Christology and understanding of the Trinity to justify his theological ethics of God's goodness in a secular age, I conclude by examining three main aspects of his contribution. The first aspect is how my thesis advances receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by calling for his Christology to be interpreted in the context of his value theory. I attribute Niebuhr's decision to undergird his theological ethics with a value theory to his dissatisfaction with the social gospel movement's weakness in subordinating God to human standards of value.⁶⁹⁸ Arising from its theological starting point in pneumatology, the social gospel movement reduced God's goodness to a relative good intended to serve human interests.⁶⁹⁹ By interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the context of value theory, I show that I am able to supplement and converge the

⁶⁹⁷ Niebuhr maintained that our reasoning and response to God as object of revelation must always be from the standpoint of "what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our own point of view." Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 12.

⁶⁹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 101. See also Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 168.

⁶⁹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

contributions of H. Richard Niebuhr scholars who have read his Christology as soteriology.

The second contribution focuses on the perennial theme of God's goodness, namely God's righteousness and love; that permeates throughout Niebuhr's value theory and theological ethics. Culminating in his approach to the dynamic interplay between divine goodness and human response, I credit Niebuhr for justifying how sinful human creatures can be transformed to participate in God's righteous nature and loving will.⁷⁰⁰ Niebuhr's emphasis on the transformation and participation of human creatures can be attributed to the manner in which he reconciles God's righteousness and love in the gospel, Scripture, salvation and the Church. By examining Niebuhr's exposition on the theme of God's goodness, I convey his belief that a faith standpoint and response is required to bridge the God-man relation.

The third and final aspect renews attention to Niebuhr's context of American secularism that shaped his concern to reconcile religion and social science. While Niebuhr concurred with social science on the sociality of the self and its concern with human relationships and society, he qualifies that their similar interests and goals may lead to different answers for each discipline. As we have seen, Niebuhr attributed the sociality of the self to the work of the Trinity in redemption such that the believer is reconciled with God and fellow believer. Niebuhr also drew upon Trinitarian thought to answer questions about the nature of human relationships and the Church's place in

⁷⁰⁰ While Niebuhr depicted God as the primary agent in history, he framed the relationship of divine and human agency in the understanding that the sovereign God is always engaging within history as well as beyond history, realizing God's will even through the most immoral and sinful human agents." Douglas A. Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131.

society. While he maintained that religion and social science draw upon different knowledge bases, he would incorporate social science's concern with the empirical in validating religious truth-claims. Niebuhr's concern to hold together the theoretical and empirical is integral for a renewed reading of his *Christ and Culture* publication. In the prelude to this publication, Niebuhr describes how he incorporated a social scientific typology for his study of theological ethics.⁷⁰¹ Although Niebuhr concedes that social scientific methods have value for examining the approaches to Christianity and culture, it is religious truths that inform how Christianity should engage with culture. While my thesis does not provide a systematic exposition on Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951), I conclude my thesis by setting forth some guidelines for reading this publication as part of his broader theological corpus.

6.1 Interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the Context of his Value Theory

The literature review of my thesis has examined the three distinct strands of receptions where H. Richard Niebuhr scholars have read his Christology as soteriology. My thesis has gone further to show that by interpreting Niebuhr's Christology in the context of his value theory, these three divided receptions can be held together. As we have seen, Niebuhr's Christology was developed as a corrective to the social gospel movement's theological starting point in pneumatology. Niebuhr perceived how its starting point in the reign of Christ's Spirit on earth reduced God's goodness to a relative good intended to serve

⁷⁰¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Types of Christian Ethics," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, by Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 15–29. See also D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in 'Christ and Culture,'" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003), 101–120.

human well-being and progress.⁷⁰² Revealing how his predecessors succumbed to secularism's move away from an otherworldliness, Niebuhr sought to pose corrective by recovering God's goodness, in the form of his righteousness and love. Niebuhr in particular, sought to address the social gospel movement's weakness in emphasizing God's love to the exclusion of his righteous wrath against sin because it undermined a Christian doctrine of immortality.⁷⁰³ Niebuhr's desire to recover an otherworldly hope in immortality led him to develop a Christology that built upon his predecessors' concern with the God-man relation.⁷⁰⁴ By identifying Niebuhr's concern with the relation of God and man, I account for scholars' agreement that his Christology is to be read as soteriology, affirming Christ's work to reconcile humanity and God.

6.1.1 Christianity as Revealed Religion, Not Supernatural Religion

My thesis first departs from the receptions of Ottati, Hall and Yoder who credit Niebuhr for identifying Christ as the source of salvation. Locating Niebuhr's Christology in the context of revelation, they focus on his achievement in re-establishing Christianity as a supernatural religion. Positing that Niebuhr posed corrective to German liberalism's denial of Christ as the only means of salvation, they fail to acknowledge his incorporation of the fruits of biblical and

⁷⁰² H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁰³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁰⁴ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 168.

historical criticism, and natural and social science.⁷⁰⁵ Given his intention to reconcile Christianity with modern civilization, Niebuhr sought to position Christianity as a revealed religion, rather than a supernatural religion; that was mediated through tradition and Scripture.

In his publication “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus” (1933), we saw how Niebuhr drew upon modern biblical scholarship to set forth a Christology that dealt with God in terms of goodness and value.⁷⁰⁶ Constituting his effort to supplement the social gospel movement’s starting point in pneumatology, Niebuhr used the phrase “mind of Jesus” to criticize his predecessors for its socio-historical method that historicized Christ in 4th century Greek philosophy.⁷⁰⁷ Identifying how his predecessors dealt with the God of Plato rather than the God of the Old Testament, Niebuhr accounts for the social gospel movement’s depiction of Christ as moral teacher whose mind was focused on the renewal of society.⁷⁰⁸ Accounting for the social gospel movement’s starting point in the reign of Christ’s Spirit on earth, Niebuhr’s predecessors reduced God to a relative good that served the interests of human well-being and progress.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁵ “The work of a hundred and fifty years in theology cannot be ignored, the methods and the fruits of Biblical and historical criticism as well as of natural and social science cannot be so eliminated from men’s minds.”

Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 2.

⁷⁰⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 115–127.

⁷⁰⁷ Within the social gospel movement, Shailer Mathews is associated with the sociohistorical method that viewed Christian doctrinal statements as both function of and creative response to the dominant “social mind” of a given culture as a given period in history.

William D. Lindsey, *Shailer Mathews’s Lives of Jesus: The Search for a Theological Foundation for the Social Gospel* (New York, United States: SUNY Press, 1997), 58.

⁷⁰⁸ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 115–127.

⁷⁰⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]” (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

Addressing the problem of Jesus raised by the social gospel movement and the implications for the revelation of God in history, Niebuhr posed corrective by situating Christ's life and teachings in the cultural and social milieu of first-century Judaism.⁷¹⁰ His approach to the historicity and historical significance of Jesus drew upon biblical criticism to affirm Christ's foreknowledge of God's salvific plan; and Christ's foreshadowing of God's ultimate kingship over creation.⁷¹¹ His depiction of Christ as Jew and Jewish prophet in relation to God's identity as Creator and King enabled Niebuhr to defend God as absolute being as revealed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Niebuhr's decision to ground his value theory upon Scripture enabled him to reposition theology as a revealed religion that was compatible with the strides made by 20th century biblical scholarship.

This compatibility enabled Niebuhr to justify the historical intelligibility of revelation rather than to purport that the intelligibility of revelation is a private decision made by an individual. We examined evidence of this in Niebuhr's depiction of Christ as revolutionary strategist rather than a moralist.⁷¹² Claiming that Christ viewed the Kingdom of God as a hope rather than an ideal to be striven after, Niebuhr emphasizes how contemporary believers are called to the same hope in the Kingdom that the apostles had. Niebuhr establish the continuity between the apostolic faith and the believer's contemporary faith to show that the intelligibility of revelation is because of the

⁷¹⁰ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment", 102-103 & Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 115-127.

⁷¹¹ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", 115-127.

⁷¹² Niebuhr's depiction of Christ as strategist counters the social gospel movement's teleological ethics: "To act in the light of an assured hope is not to engineer a direct road towards the 'telos' but rather to prepare oneself for a gift, so that one will not miss its possibilities."

Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", 122.

faithful transmission through tradition. By asserting that the Kingdom of God is a gift and an assured hope, Niebuhr posits that as the object of theology needs to be loved because of his intrinsic and promised goodness.⁷¹³ Building upon his prior recognition of God's absolute being as Creator and King, Niebuhr depicts God as absolute good as revealed in Scripture. Niebuhr's Christology that dealt with God as absolute being and good reveals his distinct approach to the meaning of the revelation of God in history. Interpreting God's revelation in Christ in the context of Judeo-Christian history and salvation history, Niebuhr claims that Christianity is a revealed religion mediated through tradition and Scripture.

6.1.2 Individual Salvation and Value Relations, Not Social

Implications

My thesis has examined the receptions of Niebuhr's Christology by Sherry, Fowler, Godsey and Hoedemaker who credit him for reconciling the individual experience with the social implications of salvation. While I agree with them on the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology, I propose that he was more concerned with the value relations that result from individual salvation rather than the social implications of salvation. In this regard, I disagree with the abovementioned scholars that Niebuhr sought to counter the nationalization of the Christian religion by the social gospel movement. I argue instead that Niebuhr maintained the social gospel movement's concern

⁷¹³ Niebuhr was against what he characterized as the "scientific inadequacy" of value theology, arguing instead for a disinterested interest in the object of theology i.e. loving God "for his own sake rather than for the sake of any value, high or low, material or spiritual, which he is conceived to conserve, promote or increase." Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology", 101-102.

with the God-man relation but refrained from reducing God to human standards of value. As we have seen, Niebuhr's approach to the God-man relation in salvation was a corrective to the social gospel movement's assumptions about the goodness of the individual. Delimiting sin to social groups and structures, Niebuhr's predecessors reduced sin to moral guilt and undermined the reality of man's sinful state.⁷¹⁴

Niebuhr sought to affirm the inseparability of Christ and the Spirit's work in the process of Scripture and salvation to justify his view of God as both object of faith and a center of value that men rely on and to which they are loyal.⁷¹⁵ While he acknowledged Christ and the Spirit's role in effecting salvation, he was more concerned with clarifying how salvation re-orientates the sinner's values and relations towards God. We examined this progression in Niebuhr's value theory to deal with value relations through a close reading of his publication "Man the Sinner" (1935) where he clarified the interrelation between humanity's infinite value and the recognition of God as infinite value. Building upon his conviction that revelation is mediated through tradition and Scripture, Niebuhr claimed that revelation is mediated through the Word and Spirit and apprehended through reason and faith.

Beginning with his twofold doctrine of creation and sin, Niebuhr affirmed the Spirit's regeneration of the sinner to point to humanity's infinite value in relation to God. Niebuhr first indicates how Creator God bestowed humanity's infinite value by making them in His image but sin has corrupted the image and blinds man to his value. This is supported by Niebuhr's claim

⁷¹⁴ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 273.

⁷¹⁵ Kenneth Cauthen, "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 10 (1964), 10.

that human nature is perfect, and this perfection is the “underlying datum of life” rather than “something to be achieved in the far-distant future”.⁷¹⁶

Acknowledging how sin hinders humanity from recognizing God as the source of value and humanity’s infinite value, Niebuhr emphasizes how repentance and faith is necessary for restoring God’s image in man. While the Spirit’s work of regeneration enabled the sinner to recognize God as the source of value and humanity’s infinite value, Niebuhr posits that a conversion experience is needed to apprehend God’s infinite value. As we have seen, Niebuhr affirmed Christ’s saving work in converting the regenerated sinner, leading him to choose God’s infinite value over all other finite values and to obey God’s commands.⁷¹⁷

Niebuhr’s Christology and pneumatology depicted Christ as divine-human and God-man mediator and affirmed the Spirit’s work in regeneration and enabling the believer’s obedience.⁷¹⁸ Niebuhr’s value-relations that clarified the interrelation between God and humanity’s infinite value formed the basis for his theology of God’s goodness by making room for a ‘point of contact’ between God and man. My thesis builds upon the contributions of scholars Sherry, Fowler, Godsey and Hoedemaker who credit Niebuhr for affirming both Christ and the Spirit’s work in salvation. I attribute Niebuhr’s emphasis on Christ and the Spirit’s interrelated work in individual salvation to his concern with the value-relations between God and humanity.

⁷¹⁶ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 273.

⁷¹⁷ The phrase ‘center of value’ is not used directly by Niebuhr in his works but was coined by Grant in his recognition of the important role that Niebuhr’s value theory had on his theology.

C. David Grant, *God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984).

⁷¹⁸ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 274 & 278.

6.1.3 The Church's Participation, Not the Believer's Responsibilities Following Salvation

The third stream of reception of Niebuhr's Christology by Frei, Kliever, Irish and George Hunsinger focus on his clarification of God's purpose of salvation in Christ, particularly with the believer's responsibilities following salvation. My thesis departs from their approaches that located Niebuhr's Christology in the context of ethics and associated him with the American neo-orthodox movement and the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr and Emil Brunner. According to these scholars, Niebuhr adopted American neo-orthodoxy's biblical doctrine of immortality that was based upon "God's creative Word" to show that the believer could exercise his responsibility to God in the material realm.⁷¹⁹ While my thesis agrees with these scholars that Niebuhr sought to clarify God's purpose of salvation in Christ, I posit that he addressed it in terms of the Church's participation in the life and mission of the Triune God. In this regard, it can be said that Niebuhr saw ecclesiology as ethics and rejects the view that an individualistic anthropology can serve as the basis for social ethics.

The beginnings of Niebuhr's view of ecclesiology as ethics can be traced to his publication *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) where he proposes a valuational ethics that has both philosophical and empirical aspects. This is first seen in the preface to this work where he asserts that the history of the idea of the kingdom of God leads on to the history of the kingdom of God.⁷²⁰ As opposed to his predecessors who superimposed the

⁷¹⁹ Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 391.

⁷²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xxvi.

biblical metaphor of the Kingdom of God on American society, Niebuhr sought to discern visible signs of the Kingdom on earth. Niebuhr sought to supplement the philosophical with the empirical to show how metaphysical claims about God as ultimate reality can be verified through empirical evidence of ultimate reality. This intention to seek evidence of God as ultimate reality in turn, shaped Niebuhr's valuational ethics which balanced between how the believer in the Church can simultaneously affirm God as absolute demand and ultimate good for the Christian.

Although Niebuhr first used the biblical metaphor of the Kingdom of God to deal with the empirical reality of the Church, we saw how he addressed the Church's being and mission in Trinitarian terms after the war. Shaped in the crucible of World War II, Niebuhr's interpretation of the war through the lens of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection formed the basis for his practical doctrine of the Trinity by uniting Christ's humanity and divinity. His Christology and understanding of the Trinity took the form of his twofold Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology that established the Trinity as the paradigm for human relationships and the Church. Niebuhr balances between the Church's transcendence and immanence in culture by qualifying that the Church's relationship with God informs its mission in society. Niebuhr appears to present a view of ecclesiology as ethics that called for the Church to be marked by unity and to witness to God's ultimate reign through acts of justice in secular society.

6.1.4 Towards a Convergence of Niebuhr's Christology

My thesis that makes the case for Niebuhr's Christology to be interpreted in the context of his value theory makes room for the three distinct receptions of his Christology by H. Richard Niebuhr scholarship to be converged. My thesis has raised however, the need to modify these predominant receptions so that the interrelations between his Christology, pneumatology and understanding of the Trinity can be clearly elucidated. Developing his Christology because of his concern with the God-man relation, Niebuhr sought to ascertain the goodness and value of God in relation to Scripture, the human situation and the Church. By arguing for Niebuhr's Christology to be interpreted in the context of his value theory, I convey how his value theory holds together his corresponding epistemology and ontology.

6.2. The Significance of the Theme of God's Goodness in Niebuhr's Value Theory and Theological Ethics

The second contribution of my thesis explains the significance of the consistent theme of God's goodness, His righteousness and love; in framing Niebuhr's value theory and theological ethics. We have seen how this culminates for Niebuhr in the dynamic interplay between divine goodness and human response, thus revealing how sinful human creatures can be transformed to participate in God's righteous nature and loving will.⁷²¹

Niebuhr's emphasis on the transformation and participation of human creatures can be attributed to the manner in which he reconciles God's

⁷²¹ While Niebuhr depicted God as the primary agent in history, he framed the relationship of divine and human agency in the understanding that the sovereign God is always engaging within history as well as beyond history, realizing God's will even through the most immoral and sinful human agents."

Douglas A. Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131.

righteousness and love in Christ, salvation and the Church. Having implications for his value theory and theological ethics, we shall examine Niebuhr's achievements in showing that the credibility of the Christian faith rests upon the objective revelation of Scripture, man's subjective knowledge of God and the empirical reality of the Church. Shaped as a counterreaction to his context of American secularism that denied the realm of otherworldliness, I credit Niebuhr for showing how faith holds together the otherworldly, and this-worldly aspects of Christianity.

6.2.1 God's Goodness in Christ and the Objective Revelation of Scripture

In the first instance, Niebuhr sought to show how our Christian faith rests upon the historical objective revelation of Scripture by reconciling God's nature of righteousness and love as revealed in Christ. He was able to justify the objective nature of biblical revelation by showing how the historical events of Christ's life, death and resurrection make the biblical propositions about God's nature of goodness true. This was evident in Niebuhr's portrayal of Christ as Jew and Jewish prophet to show how God's righteousness was revealed through the faithfulness of Christ in his life and death.⁷²² As we have seen, Niebuhr affirmed Christ's faith in God the Father and his willing obedience in death to show how his earthly conduct was motivated by his eternal relation to the Father. Correspondingly, we also examined Niebuhr's

⁷²² Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 115-127.

depiction of Christ as a strategist who saw the Kingdom of God as a gift and a hope to show how God's love was revealed through Christ's resurrection.⁷²³

Niebuhr maintained an eschatological tension between the historical reality of Christ's resurrection that inaugurated God's Kingdom and the hope the Kingdom that is rooted in the past fact of Christ's resurrection. By establishing the continuity between God's righteousness and love as revealed in Christ, Niebuhr conveys his belief that the biblical propositions about God's righteous nature and loving nature are grounded in the objective events of Christ's life, death and resurrection. In justifying the objective revelation of Scripture, I credit Niebuhr for acknowledging how Christ's standpoint of faith mediates between God's otherworldly nature and his this-worldly presence to redeem creation. In response to American secularism that signified a move away from an otherworldliness, Niebuhr clarifies how faith enabled the spiritual to be verified in the material.

6.2.2 Man's Subjective Knowledge of God's Goodness

In addition to addressing God's righteousness and love as revealed in Christ, Niebuhr sought also to demonstrate how man's personal subjective knowledge of God's goodness can be transformative for the knower. As we have seen, Niebuhr dealt with the knowledge of God's righteousness and love in subjective terms because of his belief that biblical revelation is mediated through the Word and Spirit. This turn from objective revelation in Scripture to subjective knowledge arose because of Niebuhr's claim that knowledge of God is apprehended through the believer's reason and faith. Niebuhr justified

⁷²³ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 115-127.

the need for reason and faith in acquiring knowledge of God because man's sinful state blinds him to the truth of God's goodness. In his bid to show how God's righteous wrath against sin can be held alongside God's love for sinners, Niebuhr first clarified how Christ's Word enables the sinner to comprehend the gospel message. Correspondingly, Niebuhr indicates how the Spirit leads the sinner to repent and place faith as trust in God for salvation and eternal life. This interplay between divine grace and the human faculties took form in Niebuhr's theological epistemology where he depicted God as knower, author, judge and redeemer.

Through his theology of God's goodness, Niebuhr first emphasized the role of the apostolic faith in bridging between God's righteous nature as Creator and God's love as Father. His treatment of the knowledge of God's goodness in Scripture is good for the knower because it enables the sinful human nature to be renewed into God's image. Niebuhr subsequently also acknowledges the role of the sinner's faith in mediating between God's righteous judgment against sin and God's loving will to redeem humanity. Niebuhr clarifies how this knowledge of God's goodness in salvation is good for the knower because it transforms the human destiny of death into an eternal communion with God. Niebuhr's theological epistemology emphasizes the priority of divine grace over human faith to distinguish between the theoretical knowledge of the gospel message and the practical knowledge of salvation. Niebuhr establishes the continuity between the apostolic faith and the contemporary sinner's faith to show how God's otherworldly righteousness and love is first mediated through faith to be recorded in the objective reality of Scripture. Correspondingly, God's otherworldly righteousness and love is

further mediated through the sinner's personal faith to be expressed in the objective reality of salvation. Niebuhr goes further to assert that the objective reality of salvation, find practical expression through the believer's response of love by obeying God's laws following salvation. Although Niebuhr's theology of God's goodness deals with the objective reality of Scripture and salvation, it remains subjective because it is based on the subjective activity of faith by the Church throughout the ages. This subjective faith standpoint that characterizes Niebuhr's theology of God's goodness reveals his achievement in balancing the tension between God's otherworldly will for humanity and a this-worldly fulfilment of God's will for salvation.

6.2.3 Participation in God's Goodness and the Empirical Reality of the Church

The last dimension in which Niebuhr affirms the compatibility of God's righteousness and love is in his explanation of how human creatures are able to participate in God's goodness. This took the form of his Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology that affirmed the empirical reality of the Church in its relation to God and its mission in society. My thesis accounted for the inseparability of Niebuhr's Christology and understanding of the Trinity by showing how his interpretation of the war in terms of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection enabled him to affirm the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity.⁷²⁴ Niebuhr envisioned these Christ-events as cosmic events that determined God's relationship to the world to defend God's sovereign goodness in Christ and

⁷²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 630–633, H. Richard Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?," *Christian Century* 59 (1942), 953–955 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943), 513–515.

the moral order in creation.⁷²⁵ Niebuhr's recognition of the continuity between God's righteous action in Christ and God's loving action in creation shaped his concern to address the interplay between divine goodness and human response. Establishing the Trinity as the norm for human relationships and the Church, Niebuhr was able to define divine goodness in terms of the life and mission of the Triune God. Correspondingly, Niebuhr made room for the human response to Triune goodness by showing how the Church's being is actualized by modelling its unity after the Trinity of the three persons. In addition to showing how the Church participates in the life of the Triune God, Niebuhr went further to show that the Church's mission in society stems from the mission of the Triune God. He positioned the Church as a prophetic sign of God's love and righteousness through the unity of its members and its acts of justice in secular society.

. As we have seen, Niebuhr developed his ecclesiology to show how the metaphysical claims about God as ultimate reality can be reconciled with empirical evidence of God as ultimate reality.⁷²⁶ Through his twofold Trinitarian ontology and ecclesiology, Niebuhr first clarified how the faith standpoint of the Church is necessary to defend the metaphysical claims about God as Trinity. Grounded in his prior affirmation of the work of the Trinity in redemption, Niebuhr focused his efforts on showing how this faith is expressed through the Church's conformity to God's righteous nature and loving will. Niebuhr counteracts the move away from an otherworldliness purported by American secularism by reconciling the Church's ultimate reality

⁷²⁵ Niebuhr appropriates the metaphor of crucifixion to address the plight of innocent human sufferers in the war because it can also be seen as an occasion for redemption. Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion, 513-515.

⁷²⁶ Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 509.

and empirical reality. Making the case for his view of ecclesiology as ethics, Niebuhr clarifies how the Church's goal of ultimate communion with God shaped its visible marks of unity and acts of justice in secular culture. I credit Niebuhr for showing how the faith of the Church is able to bridge between God's otherworldly being and mission and the Church's this-worldly being and mission.

6.2.4 The Goodness of God in a Secular and Post-Christian Age

In my thesis, I noted that the consistent theme of God's goodness, His righteousness and love; in Niebuhr's value-theory and theological ethics. Developed as a counterreaction to American secularism and its denial of the realm of otherworldliness, Niebuhr incorporated this theme to show how faith is integral for reconciling an otherworldly God with a this-worldly human existence. As such, Niebuhr's identification of the theme of God's goodness has value for Christianity in a secular and post-Christian age. By the term "post-Christian", I refer a period in which Christianity is no longer acknowledged as the predominant religion in society. In the first instance, Niebuhr's treatment of God's goodness in Christ in the context of the objective revelation of Scripture delimits God as the standard of good to the Christian religion. Affirming the mediated nature of revelation through tradition and Scripture, Niebuhr posits that God's standards have been stipulated in Scripture and are only binding on adherents of the Christian faith. Niebuhr concedes that God's standards are clearly different from the world's values and Christians should not impose the Christian standards and worldview on their secular and non-Christian counterparts.

Instead of imposing moral judgments upon the secular or post-Christian societies that we live in, Niebuhr posits that divine goodness, and our experience of its reality in salvation should compel the Christian to obey God's moral commands. As we have seen, Niebuhr qualified that God can only be acknowledged as the source of good through regeneration, and a conversion experience that re-orientates values is needed to affirm God as infinite value. I also credit Niebuhr for acknowledging that man depraved in sin is unable to seek good, whether in the form of God's righteousness or will; unless the Spirit draws him to Christ. Substantiating his argument that revelation needs to be mediated through Word and the Spirit, Niebuhr rejects the view that man can acquire a natural knowledge of God's goodness through his providential ordering of creation. According to Niebuhr, Christians in a secular or post-Christian age are forced to concede that natural theology can no longer appeal to the reason of our secular counterparts or adherents of other faiths. Instead, Niebuhr appears to suggest that we need to know God through a Spirit-regenerated reason and a Spirit-led repentance and faith to receive the truth of the gospel message and salvation.

In choosing to deal with Christian ethics through the interplay of divine goodness and human response, rather than divine action and human response; Niebuhr emphasizes the relational nature over the imperative nature of moral obligations. This is not to say that Niebuhr denies the claim that morality is grounded upon God's character and commands but that he views morality as a response of love rather than being motivated by duty. Seeing how secularism challenged the notion of absolute and universal moral principles, Niebuhr made the case for a Christian morality that rests upon the

believer's reconciled relationship with God and with one another. Justifying his view of Christian morality as a response of love to the experience of God's goodness, Niebuhr emphasizes the sociality of the self to replace an individualistic ethics with ecclesiology as ethics. His approach that does not subsume the individual under the Church makes room for redeemed human creatures to be transformed and to participate in God's righteous nature and loving will. Situating the believer firmly within the Church, Niebuhr modelled the Church's unity after the Triune relations of love and its mission after the Triune God's reconciling mission. Having practical relevance for Christianity in a secular and post-Christian age, Niebuhr posits that Christian morality rests upon the credibility of the Church's witness in the form of its unity and acts of justice that point to God's righteous reign.

6.3 Religion as the Compatible Partner for Social Science

The third and final contribution of my thesis examines Niebuhr's contribution to the debate between religion and social science, given his intention to reconcile religion and social science for his context of American secularism. Niebuhr perceived that religion and social science are compatible partners because they agree on the sociality of the self and are similarly concerned with questions about human relationships and society. While Niebuhr acknowledged these areas of overlap, he posits that as distinct disciplines, they draw upon different knowledge bases to arrive at the answers to these concerns. As my thesis has shown, Niebuhr rejected theology's over-reliance upon the social sciences of sociology and psychology because it purported

naturalistic and individualistic motives of conduct.⁷²⁷ In contrast, we examined Niebuhr's intention to recover the religious motives of conduct by justifying the role of faith in ethics, and the inseparability of religion and ethics.⁷²⁸ In addition to showing how faith balances between the otherworldly and this-worldly aspects of Christianity, Niebuhr also drew upon the Christian faith and tradition to address the God-man relation. His understanding of Trinity in particular shaped Niebuhr's view on the sociality of the self and the nature of human relationships and the Church in society.

If we take seriously Niebuhr's claim that religion and social science are compatible but have distinct knowledge bases, it has implications on our reading of his *Christ and Culture* publication. As we have seen, Niebuhr sought to defend the metaphysical claims about God as ultimate reality by seeking empirical evidence of ultimate reality. This reveals his view that while truth claims are distinctive to the Christian religion, there is room for empirical social scientific methods in validating these claims. As evident in the prelude to *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr describes how he incorporated a social scientific typology for his study of theological ethics.⁷²⁹ Although Niebuhr concedes that social scientific methods have value for examining the approaches to Christianity and culture, it is theology that informs how the Christian should engage with culture. I conclude my thesis by setting forth

⁷²⁷ Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic," 8.

⁷²⁸ Niebuhr, "Religion and Ethics," 443-446.

⁷²⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Types of Christian Ethics," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, by Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 15-29. See also D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in 'Christ and Culture,'" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003), 101-120.

some guidelines for reading Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) as part of his broader theological corpus.

6.3.1 Value Theory in Theology and Ethics

In my thesis, we examined Niebuhr's value theory as the basis for his theological ethics, while acknowledging its shared concerns with value theory in social science on the valuing subject and why humans value things.

Developing his value theory in the 1930s, Niebuhr indicates how religion and social science comes to different conclusions on why humans value things because of their conception of the valuing subject. As we have seen, Niebuhr rejected the social scientific view of the human creature as the valuing subject and instead depicted the human creature as valued object. In "Man the Sinner" (1935), Niebuhr clarified the interrelation between God the valuing subject and the sinner as valued object to convey how human creatures have an intrinsic potential to be valued. Niebuhr's view that our infinite human value is bestowed upon by the Creator by virtue of being made in God's image emphasizes the Creator-creature dependence.⁷³⁰ Niebuhr departs from social science where the self is the valuing subject, and his value is "by virtue of the place in society which he occupies".⁷³¹ Although Niebuhr first established God as valuing subject to show that value is external to the human creature, he would also depict God as object of value in the context of value relations.

In my thesis, we have also examined how Niebuhr addressed the God-man relations in terms of value relations to clarify how man comes to

⁷³⁰ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 272–80.

⁷³¹ Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," 176-181.

acknowledge God as infinite value and to account for the notion of the social self in Christianity. As we have seen, Niebuhr indicates how sin blinds man to the infinite value of God and human creatures, and a conversion experience is necessary for the believer to choose God as infinite value over other finite human values.⁷³² This intrinsic and revealed value relation also formed the basis for Niebuhr's recognition of the social self, even though the sociality of the self is also a familiar concept in social science. Niebuhr's social self in contrast, leaves room for the realm of an otherworldliness because it acknowledges a prior reconciliation of the believer's relationship with God before affirming the believer's relations with fellow believers in the Church.

Having associated developments in modern social science with the rise of American secularism, Niebuhr was aware of how its denial of an otherworldliness had implications on its ultimate value commitments. This was apparent in Niebuhr's criticism against the social gospel movement and American empiricism, particularly Macintosh for seeking ultimate value only in the temporal and purporting a moral relativism in Christian ethics.⁷³³ In his bid to clarify why humans value things, Niebuhr build upon his prior recognition of the believer's reconciled relationship with God to convey that this value is grounded in the worth of the relationship. Given that this relationship reveals God's infinite worth, Niebuhr justifies how the believer is called to live by the otherworldly values of righteousness and love as revealed in Scripture and salvation through the Spirit. Expounding on these convictions in *The Kingdom*

⁷³² Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 272–80.

⁷³³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Untitled Essay on the [Kingdom Gospel and Other Worldliness]" (Union Theological Seminary, 1919), Niebuhr, H. Richard (Helmut Richard), 1894-1962. Papers, 1919-1962., bMS 630, bMS 630/4 (17)., Harvard Divinity School Library, Harvard University.

of *God in America* (1937), Niebuhr indicates how Scripture reveals God as absolute demand whereas saving faith compels the believer to pursue God as ultimate good.

6.3.2 Religion, Social Science and the Church's Mission in Culture

Niebuhr's efforts to reconcile religion and social science are most apparent in his 1940s war and post-war publications where he clarifies the Church's mission in American secular culture. Although Niebuhr in the 1920s rejected theology's over-reliance upon the social sciences of sociology and psychology, he sympathized with the discipline's interests in human relationships and society.⁷³⁴ Niebuhr developed his corrective to the subordination of religion to social science in the crucible of World War II because its events challenged the notion of a Christian democratic America.⁷³⁵ Confronted with the ethical dilemma of America's participation in the war, Niebuhr rejected the moral superiority of the American nation because it was based on the false premise that democracy was divinely ordained.⁷³⁶ As we have seen, Niebuhr proposed a Christian theory of history that dealt with God's action in the events of human history, including the war; to defend God's sovereign goodness in Christ and his moral order in

⁷³⁴ In *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), Niebuhr dealt with the triadic relation between history, sociology and ethics to address divisive relationships within the Church and its impact on the Church's ethical witness in the world.

Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, vii.

⁷³⁵ Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy" in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996), 143-158.

⁷³⁶ Niebuhr recognized the danger of pretending that democracy is divinely ordained: "When the divine absolute is acknowledged, all human absolutes appear as dangerous usurpers of the Kingdom of God."

Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy", 149 & 151.

creation.⁷³⁷ Leading him to interpret the war in terms of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Niebuhr united Christ's humanity and divinity to affirm the work of the Trinity in redemption.

Niebuhr's Trinitarian view that creation is subject to salvation because of God's plan to redeem and restore creation led him to adopt a different approach to human relationships and society than social science. Establishing the Trinity as the norm of human relationships and the Church, Niebuhr emphasized how the Christian religion derives its moral obligations from an external source.⁷³⁸ Niebuhr grounds the Church's moral authority upon the Trinity to posit that moral imperatives are not subject to change over time because they are rooted in God's immutable nature. As we have seen, Niebuhr first posits that the Trinity has authoritative claim over the community because the nature of the Church stems from the life of the Triune God.⁷³⁹ By further claiming that the Church's ethical character rests upon the Church's relation to the Triune God, Niebuhr posits that human relationships within the Church are modelled after the unity and diversity of the Triune persons.⁷⁴⁰

Correspondingly, we have also seen how Niebuhr modified the social scientific concern with society by applying the term society to the Church.⁷⁴¹

⁷³⁷ Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion" & Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God".

⁷³⁸ Niebuhr stipulates that objectively binding moral obligations requires a prior faith commitment to Christ or a conversion experience, thus positing its imposition from an external source independent of the Christian community. Niebuhr, "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic", 8-9.

⁷³⁹ Niebuhr's conception of the Church as an eschatological community in Christ is inseparable from his reappropriation of the doctrine of the Trinity to the life of the Church, grounding it in the life of the Triune God. His corresponding depiction of the Church as social institution in culture calls for the Church to participate in the Triune mission of love by seeking justice and pointing to God's moral reign in history.

Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church", 372 & Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church", 7-8.

Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 371-384 & Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 507-521.

⁷⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 379-380.

⁷⁴¹ Niebuhr, "Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 58.

Seeking to supplement the Reformers' notion of the invisible Church as a "society of saved men", Niebuhr also depicted the invisible Church as a "saved society of men" to counter a purely individualistic approach.⁷⁴² While Niebuhr concurred with social science on the historical character of the Church, he saw the need to defend the Church's otherworldly character in secular culture:⁷⁴³

"First, the Church is an eschatological society, or, as we may better say in our times, it is an emergent reality, hidden yet real; and secondly, the religious institutions called the churches are subject like all the rest of this secular society of ours to a constant process of conversion."⁷⁴⁴

In depicting the Church as an eschatological society, Niebuhr attributes its otherworldly character to the Church being caught up in the life and the mission of the Triune God. In indicating how both the Church and secular society are subject to God's action to redeem and renew creation, Niebuhr concedes the pervasive reality of sin within the Church and its need for sanctification.⁷⁴⁵ This humble view of the Church alongside its historicity led

⁷⁴² Niebuhr applied the term society to the Church in his bid to supplement the Reformers' notion of the invisible Church because of the difficulty is posed for understanding the relation between the invisible and visible Church, "Insofar as it assumes the Church of faith, the invisible company of the elect, is made up of scattered individuals, it seems to be in downright error, misconceiving the nature of society and of the Church in particular, which is not simply a society of saved men but the saved society of men."

Niebuhr, "Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 58. See also Atsuyoshi. Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context: A Believers' Church Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 46.

⁷⁴³ *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) was a publication that demarcated Niebuhr's departure from a sociological approach to American Christianity because it did not attend to aspect of faith that stood independently of culture and were aggressive in influencing culture. Niebuhr declared his intention to look at history for a theological perspective that would account for Christianity's power over the culture, culminating in his acclaimed *Christ and Culture* (1951).

H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper., 1937), ix-x.

⁷⁴⁴ Niebuhr, "Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 59.

⁷⁴⁵ Toulouse traces Niebuhr's understanding of the Kingdom of God to his closer adherence with Calvin rather than Luther although both emphasized that all authority associated with the kingdom belong to God. Calvin however, "was more acutely aware than Luther has been both

Niebuhr to posit that the Church's mission in secular culture is through its participation in the Triune life and mission through its loving unity and acts of justice.⁷⁴⁶

6.3.3 Towards a New Reading of Niebuhr's Christ and Culture

The inseparable link between Niebuhr's Christology and pneumatology, and understanding of the Trinity that was established in his 1930s-1940s publications calls for a new reading of his *Christ and Culture* (1951). In particular, Niebuhr's recognition of the Church's twofold relation to Christ and to culture provides insight into his distinct definitions of "Christ" and "Culture" in *Christ and Culture*.⁷⁴⁷ Niebuhr defines "Christ" in this way:

"As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from the many powers which men use and on which they depend to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds."⁷⁴⁸

of the necessity of restraining evil and of the danger which lay in giving human agencies unlimited powers of restraint." Calvin feared that both church and state could attempt to lay up to much power for themselves, this each must be subject to the kingdom of God, which transcended both of them and live in view of the values associated with God's kingdom. Mark G. Toulouse, *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2006), 139."

⁷⁴⁶ Niebuhr, "Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 59.

⁷⁴⁷ In his critique of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951), Yoder in particular questions the basis of Niebuhr's definitions of "Christ" and "culture" because his reference point appears to be unclear. Yoder criticizes Niebuhr for his departure from Chalcedonian Christology which affirmed the unity of Christ's divine and human natures.

John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in Glen H. Stassen, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 31-89.

⁷⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28.

Here we see how Niebuhr does not use the title Son of God in the same manner as the New Testament emphasis on Christ's divine nature and messianic role, and his relationship to the Father. His appropriation of the Son of God title is informed by the New Testament but is more concerned with the personal appropriation of Christ by the believer in the Church. This is evidenced in Niebuhr's claim that Christ re-orientates "the many values of man's social life" towards God who is ultimate good.⁷⁴⁹

Niebuhr appears to build upon his value theory where he noted the re-orientation of values that occurs through the conversion experience that leads the believer to acknowledge God as infinite value. Here Niebuhr appears to suggest that there is a re-orientation of values that occurs because of the Church's hope in God's glory. This is substantiated by Niebuhr's focus on Christ's moral sonship whose person is "wholly directed as man toward God and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men."⁷⁵⁰ Niebuhr emphasizes Christ's mission of reconciliation to bring a broken world back to God that "comes from him in his Sonship in a double way, as man living to God and God living with men."⁷⁵¹ Here we see that Niebuhr's interpretation of Christ's moral Sonship unites Christ's righteousness in God's sight with God's loving presence through the Spirit. Reiterating the inseparable relation between his Christology and understanding of the Trinity, Niebuhr affirms the

⁷⁴⁹ Niebuhr's incorporation of value theory to develop an understanding of God emerged in the mid-1930s and he would develop this thought further in 1951 by appropriating it to human values and Christian values.

Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁷⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 29.

⁷⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 29.

Triune goodness of God that seeks to transform and incorporate believers into God's new creation.

Niebuhr's Christology that conveys how Christ accomplished the Triune mission of reconciliation led him to propose a definition of culture that makes room for human participation in God's renewal of creation.⁷⁵² Niebuhr's definition of culture as human activity and the result of such activity rests on his preceding definition of Christ as Son of God who reconciles men "towards God who is ultimate good."⁷⁵³ By positing that Niebuhr approached the interplay of divine and human activity in the context of Christ's mission of reconciliation, I reject the view that Niebuhr defined culture as the American secular culture he was situated in. In contrast, I propose that Niebuhr used the word culture to refer to the Church's common life and work as reconciled community through Christ. This is supported by Niebuhr's assertion that culture comprises of language, habits, ideas, beliefs and customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.⁷⁵⁴

This new interpretation of Niebuhr's definition of culture presupposes that his *Christ and Culture* (1951) publication builds upon his theological ethics of God's goodness that was developed from 1919-1950. Framed within this standpoint, Niebuhr's understanding of culture as human activity appears to be an extension of his view of the believer's response to God's goodness in Scripture, salvation and the Church. I posit that Niebuhr carried over his notion of the relational and social self that was developed in his theological

⁷⁵² Niebuhr, "Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," 59.

⁷⁵³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁷⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

ethics into his *Christ and Culture* typology. This argument accounts for Niebuhr's incorporation of Weber's ideal types and his view of the historical character and agency of the self in his typology to affirm individual moral agency and freedom within the social organization.⁷⁵⁵ Drawing upon his theological ethics that affirmed the sociality of the self through the God-man relation, Niebuhr developed his typology to address the question of the believer's moral agency and freedom within the context of the Christian life and the Church.⁷⁵⁶

The question of the believer's moral agency and freedom became pertinent for Niebuhr as he sought to articulate how Christians can live faithfully under Christ's authority in a post-Christendom era. Niebuhr first wrestled with how the Church should relate to culture in *The Church Against the World* (1935) where he argued for the American Protestant Churches to choose the frame of reference supplied by Western Christendom rather than secular American culture:

"The choice before the American Protestant churches is plain. They must choose between the above frame of reference and the frame of reference supplied by American culture. If they choose the latter they will forfeit their right to speak in the name of the Christian faith. In so far as they continue to use that name they will be false witnesses who have betrayed their trust and are misleading the people. The

⁷⁵⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Types of Christian Ethics," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, by Glen Harold Stassen, Diane M Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 15–29. See also D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Company Limited, 2010), 62 who identifies Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber's profound influence on Niebuhr's theology of culture.

⁷⁵⁶ Shriver notes how Niebuhr carried over his notion of the social self and a historically indebted self from *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) and *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941) into *Christ and Culture* (1951) Donald W. Shriver, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009),39.

Protestant churches will continue to merit confidence and support only if they choose the frame of reference supplied by the reality of Christendom."⁷⁵⁷

In this 1935 publication, Niebuhr laid out how choosing each frame of reference would lead to the Church's withdrawal from or accommodation to culture respectively. These opposing approaches resurfaced as the first two types in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951), identified as ways in which Christians have sought to live under Christ's authority while relating to culture.⁷⁵⁸ The first 'Christ against Culture' position advocated a radical separation between Church and world such that the believer's loyalty to Christ and the Church entailed a rejection of culture and society.⁷⁵⁹ Shaped by its assumption of Western Christendom as a universal frame of reference, Niebuhr criticizes adherents to this position for failing to extricate itself from the Western culture it was against.⁷⁶⁰ In contrast, the second 'Christ for Culture' position saw no tension between Church and world such that the Church's loyalty to secular culture trumped its loyalty to Christ.⁷⁶¹ Incorporating secular culture as its frame of reference, Niebuhr disagreed with how proponents of this position reduced the New Testament Christ to the fulfiller of society's hopes and aspirations.⁷⁶²

In the first two positions of his typology, I propose that Niebuhr's definition of culture in terms of human activity refers to the work of the Church as Western Christendom or the national Church in countries like Germany

⁷⁵⁷ Niebuhr, Pauck, and Miller, *The Church Against the World*, 119.

⁷⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11-13 & 32.

⁷⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ against Culture*, 45, 47-48.

⁷⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ against Culture*, 78.

⁷⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Christ against Culture*, 83.

⁷⁶² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 92 & 110.

and France. Although it appears that Niebuhr identifies culture with the social organization of the Church in these two types, he rejected both the institutionalization and nationalization of the Church. In contrast, he emphasizes how the three subsequent types represent the dominant position taken in Church history, dealing with the relation between God and humanity rather than God and the world.⁷⁶³ These three types are (1) Christ above culture; (2) Christ and culture in paradox; and (3) Christ the transformer of culture. This shift towards the God-man relation is consistent with Niebuhr's reinterpretation of the New Testament Christ as Son of God who reconciles men "towards God who is ultimate good" in his typology.⁷⁶⁴ In facilitating the shift from dealing with the God-world relation to the God-man relation, Niebuhr credits the majority of Christianity for maintaining the conviction about the universality and the pervasiveness of sin in the individual Christian.⁷⁶⁵

6.3.4 The Sinful Social Self in Niebuhr's Christ and Culture

Typology

In addition to agreeing with predominant Christianity on the sinfulness of the self, I argue that he carried over his notion of the social self in his theological ethics of God's goodness into his typology. As we recall, Niebuhr established the sociality of the self upon the believer's reconciled relationship with God and fellow believers.⁷⁶⁶ In the three sub-types of his Christ above culture

⁷⁶³ Niebuhr uses the phrase 'church of the center' to refer to the majority movement in Christianity that has refused to take 'either the position of the anticultural radicals or that of the accommodators of Christ to culture'.

Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 117.

⁷⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28 & H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁷⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 118.

⁷⁶⁶ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 371-384.

position, I propose that Niebuhr builds upon this notion of the social self to address the individual's moral agency and freewill within the social organization of the Church. Drawing upon Church history, Niebuhr defined culture in terms of human activity and the product of that activity in the context of the Protestant distinction between the invisible and visible Church. This proposal that frames my new reading is supported by Niebuhr's prior attempt to re-articulate and clarify the relation between the invisible and visible Church in "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" (1945). To address the failure of his Protestant predecessors to clarify the relation between the invisible and visible Church, Niebuhr in this publication approached the doctrine of the Trinity from the standpoint of man's existential crisis.⁷⁶⁷

Niebuhr's appropriation of the Trinity to re-articulate the invisible-visible Church distinction justifies reading his approach to divine and human activity in the context of the Christian life in the Church.⁷⁶⁸ This is evident in his "Christ above culture" and "Christ and culture in paradox" positions where Niebuhr credits his predecessors for proposing either a synthesis or a dualistic separation between the invisible and visible Church. Having implications for the interplay between divine and human activity, Niebuhr perceived how both positions failed to adequately address individual moral agency and freedom within the Church. For example, Niebuhr sees in the "Christ above culture" position the tendency to prioritize the visible over the indivisible Church because its adherents institutionalized Christ and the

⁷⁶⁷ Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 372.

⁷⁶⁸ The link between the Trinitarian framework of Niebuhr's theological ethics and his intention to address the Protestant invisible-visible Church distinction was first raised in his publication "The Gift of the Catholic Vision" (1948). Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 507–521.

gospel; and reduced the infinite and dynamic to the finite and material.⁷⁶⁹ This approach, however, challenges the notion of true moral agency because both God and the individual are both causes of free action. Support for this view is found in Niebuhr's assertion that God uses the best elements of culture to give people what they cannot achieve on their own.⁷⁷⁰ While this interpretation allows for culture to refer to the Church's common life and work, this human activity is difficult to distinguish from divine activity to renew the Church.

Conversely in the "Christ and Culture in paradox" position, Niebuhr indicates how its adherents made a simple distinction between the invisible and the visible Church. Grounded in the enduring conflict between God and humanity, Niebuhr criticizes this position for its tendency towards isolated individualism because it affirmed the God-man relationship to the exclusion of solidarity between believers.⁷⁷¹ Identifying Kierkegaard as adopting this position, Niebuhr states that "theme of isolated individuality is dominant... Hence cultural societies do not concern Kierkegaard. In state, family, and church he sees only defections from Christ."⁷⁷² In this position, culture as the Church's common life and work appears to be delimited the body of redeemed believers who maintain a "loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture."⁷⁷³ While acknowledging the Spirit-filled believer within the Church, Niebuhr identified this type's weakness for delimiting sin to social groups and institutions. According to Niebuhr, this type's overemphasis instead on the

⁷⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

⁷⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

⁷⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 157.

⁷⁷² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 183.

⁷⁷³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 149.

moral goodness of the Spirit-filled believer shaped its tendency towards antinomianism or cultural conservatism.⁷⁷⁴

In “Christ the Transformer of Culture”, the final position in Niebuhr’s typology, he credits the conversionist for affirming individual moral agency in the social context of the Church and culture. Overcoming the individualistic tendencies of the previous position, the conversionist sees individual moral agency as “a transformed human life in and to the glory of God”.⁷⁷⁵

Proponents of this position were able to affirm the sociality of the individual moral agent because it clarifies how the invisible Church as saved society of believers becomes the visible Church on earth through its witness to God’s grace and glory.⁷⁷⁶ This approach to the invisible-visible Church relation is possible because it sees all history as redemptive history, thus affirming culture to be simultaneously under God’s sovereign rule and judgment.⁷⁷⁷ In this position, culture refers to the Church’s reconciled life in Christ and its united participation in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation that is made visible in the world. I argue that Niebuhr in developing this position incorporated both the relational and social self that characterized his theological ethics of God’s goodness. Presupposing the believer’s acceptance of God’s goodness in salvation and the Church, Niebuhr sets forth an individual moral agency and freewill that is grounded in the God-man relation and Christ respectively.

6.3.5 Implications of a New Reading of Christ and Culture

⁷⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 187.

⁷⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 196.

⁷⁷⁶ Niebuhr, “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” 113.

⁷⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 191.

My exposition on a proposed new reading of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* typology focuses on showing how this publication builds upon the theological ethics of God's goodness that he developed from 1919-1950. I showed that Niebuhr incorporated his notion of the relational, social self to address the question of individual moral agency and freedom within the social organization. As we have seen, the last three positions in Niebuhr's typology renewed interest in his concern to better clarify the relation between the invisible and the visible Church. Niebuhr chose to incorporate the Protestant invisible-visible Church distinction in his categorization of the Church's place in the world because this has been the dominant approach in Church history.⁷⁷⁸ His interest in clarifying the practical relevance of the invisible-visible Church distinction accounts for his unique definition of Christ as Son of God and reconciler and culture as the Church's common life and work. These interrelated definitions allowed Niebuhr to depict the redeemed believer within the Church as a relational, social self who is free to respond to God's goodness.

Niebuhr's decision to deal with individual moral agency and freedom in the context of the Church as invisible reality and visible witness reveals his primary concern with Christ's role in the Church. Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* (1951) appears to arrive at the view that addressing Christ's role in the Church is required before determining the Church's posture toward the world. He suggests that Christ effects an internal reform through which believers exercise their freedom through the Spirit and live in loving unity with one another. This individual morality and the pattern of relationships within the

⁷⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 78.

Church is a crucial part of the Church's visible witness to an unbelieving world of God's goodness, his righteousness and love. Niebuhr's focus on Christ's role in the Church in *Christ and Culture* (1951) forms the basis for his subsequent publications *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960) and *The Responsible Self* (1963) where he goes further to clarify the Church's posture toward the world.

6.4 Conclusion: Niebuhr's Theological Ethics of God's Goodness

In examining Niebuhr's publications from 1919-1948 through a Christological lens, my thesis credits him for developing a value theory and theological ethics of God's goodness. Occasioned by the rise of American secularism in his context, Niebuhr's value theory and theological ethics sought to reconcile the otherworldly and this-worldly aspects of Christianity. This was evident in Niebuhr's emphasis on a faith standpoint that would mediate between an otherworldly God and a this-worldly human existence. As we have seen, Niebuhr dealt with the God-man relation by upholding the priority of God's goodness in the gospel, Scripture, salvation and the Church alongside the human response of faith and participation. His decision to frame the interplay between divine goodness and human response within a broader Trinitarian framework has implications for a renewed reading of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. I also credit Niebuhr for showing that while Christianity upholds the metaphysical claims of God as ultimate reality, it can benefit from social scientific methods in validating empirical evidence of ultimate reality.

Glossary of Terms

Absolute	A term used by Niebuhr to refer to God-in-himself and as the fundamental power of all reality. He describes God as “being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and all being, the ground of its “that-ness” and its “so-ness.”
Absolute within the Relative	A term coined by Niebuhr to describe the “real within the apparent, of the permanent character in changing relations”. Niebuhr sought to emphasize God’s unchanging nature as absolute being and good amidst the relativities of history and religion.
American Christendom	Attributed to the social gospel movement’s belief in the inseparability of Christianity and democracy such that both concepts served to validate and reinforce the value of the other.
American Empiricism	The origins of this movement can be traced to the profound influence that Albrecht Ritschl’s empirical theology had on the social gospel movement and its decision to incorporate modern social science for theology. The movement persisted in 20 th century American Evangelicalism and is marked by the belief that knowledge is informed by the senses and experience, rather than reason.
American Liberalism	The 19 th and 20 th century American liberal movement that H. Richard Niebuhr scholars associate him with include the social gospel movement and the modernist movement.
American Neoorthodoxy	Emil Brunner’s influence on American theology that launched a sharp attack on both fundamentalism and theological liberalism during the postwar period following World War II. The Neo-orthodox movement within postwar 20 th century American Evangelicalism united biblical scholars in their efforts to merge theological and biblical scholarship.
American Rationalism	Used narrowly to refer to the influence of the American Enlightenment on Troeltsch’s theory of religious knowledge that Niebuhr engaged with in the 1920s. Associated with Locke, Shaftesbury and Hume, the American Enlightenment movement grounded modern ethics upon the foundational of empirical psychology.

American Secularism	Refers broadly to theology's denial of an otherworldliness and the claim that knowledge of God is informed by sensory experience, rather than revelation. Niebuhr drew the link between the American empiricism movement's over-reliance upon social science and the rise of American secularism in his context.
Belief-ful Realism	A term used by Paul Tillich to refer to an attitude that takes seriously the stubborn facts of the situation, of man and of God; and it combines radical criticism with appreciation of the relative values involved.
Biblical and Historical Criticism	The strides made in modern biblical scholarship to justify the historical reliability of Scripture. Niebuhr primarily engaged with the historical-critical method and the form criticism movement.
Center of Value	A term used by Niebuhr to describe value relations, claiming that value is a function of 'being in relation to being' and that value relations among beings are re-construed when God is taken into account.
Christocentrism	A term coined by H. Richard Niebuhr scholars Diefenthaler, Shriver, Braaten and Werphowski to describe Barth's emphasis on the centrality of Christ within the faith of the Church because he sought to defend a biblical transcendence of God as Creator and Lord.
Christocentric Unitarianism	Refers to Barth's overemphasis on Christ as a singular person of the Trinity.
Christomonism	A term used by H. Richard Niebuhr scholars Kliever, Hoedemaker and Ford to refer to Barth's emphasis on the objective reality of God in the incarnate Christ by establishing Christ as the object of faith.
Critical Idealism	While Niebuhr associates this term with Kant and Paul Tillich, he establishes his adherence with Tillich's "belief-ful realism". Niebuhr incorporated Tillich's emphasis on attitude that takes seriously the stubborn facts of the situation, of man and of God; and it combines radical criticism with appreciation of the relative values involved.

Critical Realism	Uses this term to describe how the knower accepts on faith the independent reality of what is mediated through sense, thought it discriminates between uninterpreted and unintelligible impressions and verifiable, constant, intelligible content.
Disinterested Science (Pure Science)	Niebuhr considered the intellectual discipline of theology to be a “pure science” or a “disinterested science” because it is for the sake of God and for persons-before-God”
Historical-critical Method	Associated by Niebuhr with 19 th century liberalism, the movement, the movement sought to free Christianity from biblical literalism by awakening a new interest in biblical studies and the prophetic and apostolic legacies of faith.
Form Criticism	A movement in 20 th century biblical scholarship which claimed that the historical Jesus must be understood through the history and with the history of the apostolic community that loved and worshipped him.
Fundamentalism	A 20 th century American Evangelical movement which saw modern developments and scientific methods as incompatible with biblical revelation.
German Liberalism	Focused on the 18 th and 19 th century German liberal movement associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack
German Neoorthodoxy	The movement associated with Karl Barth that made rapid progress in continental theology during the 1920s and 1930s, having a strong influence particularly in Britain and America. Barth and his colleagues rejected the 19 th century anthropological, immanentist, optimistic theology and called for a renewed attention to God’s transcendence such that there was no ‘point of contact’ between human nature and God’s revelation.
German Rationalism	The German Enlightenment associated with Immanuel Kant who imposed a religious a priori as the starting point of theology and whose cognitive psychology identified the rational consciousness as the first fact of knowledge.

God's Goodness	Used to refer to God's moral character of righteousness and love that judges the self as judge and reveals our human value before God as universal valuer. Niebuhr consistently defends the computability of God's righteousness and love not only in his nature and action but also in the believer and the Church's response to and cooperation with God's goodness in our experience.
Historical Relativism	The original term coined by Ernst Troeltsch refers to the belief that the Christian religion is subject to the relativities of time and circumstance. Niebuhr modifies Troeltsch's historical relativism to claim that the historical limitations of all thought about God demand that theology begin with and in an historical community.
Historicism	Historicism" for Niebuhr was a worldview that entailed the historicizing of the subject: "But our historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object; man, it points out, is not only in time but time is in man."
Institutionalization	Used by Niebuhr to describe how the concept of the Kingdom of God became embedded within the Christian religion. Niebuhr attributed this form of institutionalization to German rationalism that replaced tradition, values and conduct with reason.
Kantian Enlightenment	Associated with the rise of modern civilization and Immanuel Kant. Kant emphasized the role of reason over revelation in his moral thought to subject moral commands to the rational will.
Kingdom Gospel	A term coined by Niebuhr to refer to the social gospel movement's belief that the good news of Christianity is the full realization of the Kingdom of God in Christ.
Moral Absolutism	Associated with the rationalism movement, particularly Kant and his belief in moral commands that are binding on all people (categorical imperative).
Moral Relativism	A byproduct of the empiricism movement to deny the notion of universal or absolute moral principles and to claim that moral standards and judgments are historically and socially conditioned.

Neo-Kantian Epistemology	Used to describe Troeltsch's theory of religious knowledge that incorporated his Kant's transcendental psychology to advocate a return to his rationalist thought. Kant's transcendental psychology identified the rational consciousness as the first fact of knowledge.
Neoorthodoxy	A 20 th century theological movement in both Germany and America that stressed God's transcendence, humanity's creaturely responsibility, sin and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's mediator of revelation and grace. Seeking to counter the prevailing liberal theology with the theological insights of the 16 th century Protestant Reformers, it was associated with Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, H. R. Mackintosh and Reinhold Niebuhr.
Objective Relativism	The view that human experience and knowledge are described in terms of a symbol-using organism with its environment.
Otherworldliness	The spiritual or eternal dimension of Christianity, used in the context of Niebuhr's belief that the Christian lives in two worlds, the eternal and spiritual and the temporal and physical.
Political Secularism	The view that the separation of religion and state is restricted to the political sphere and thus can acknowledge the legitimacy and practice of religious faiths.
Psychology of Religion	This form of psychology had its origins in William James who deemed the psychological approach as the basis of theology.
Rationalist Biblical Criticism	A movement that emerged in 18 th and 19 th century Germany which elevated reason above Scripture as its judge and critic, thus undermining the authority of God in Scripture and the belief that the biblical Word originates in God.
Relativism	The view that the individual's standpoint or perspective shape our understanding of historical events and the world. Defined by Niebuhr as a report of experience, rather than a theory of experience to emphasize how knowledge is subjective and partisan rather than objective and disinterested.

Religious a priori	The belief that religious concepts can be acquired independently of experience. Niebuhr traces the origins of this concept to Kant who identified the rational consciousness as the first face of knowledge.
Religious Relativism	A term coined by Niebuhr to delimit that an inquiry into the nature of the object of faith has to begin in a particular faith.
Secularism (Secularization)	In his earlier works from 1919 to the late 1930s, Niebuhr defined secularism as the denial of the otherworldly or spiritual aspects of Christianity to focus solely on the physical and temporal aspects.
Social Gospel Movement	As a successor of the social gospel movement, Niebuhr characterized the social gospel movement as a program of pure activism because it had lost touch with the faith and piety of early leaders like Rauschenbusch and Gladden.
Sociology of Action	A term originating with Max Weber who defined sociology of action as a “science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences”.
Sociology of Religion	This form of American sociology emerged out of scientific interests, seeking to address social problems by providing objective information. The social gospel movement incorporated American sociology of religion because it concurred with its ethical concerns.
Subjectivism	Niebuhr associated subjectivism with German liberalism, its origins in Schleiermacher’s theology which replaced God as the object of faith with religious consciousness as the object of confidence.
Theocentric	Refers to Niebuhr’s starting point in God the Father rather than with the Son when dealing with natural religion and Christian faith. His theological problem is focused on how God’s act in Jesus Christ leads to the conversion of faith and a new understanding of God’s power, unity and goodness.
Theocentric	A term used by H. Richard Niebuhr scholar

Relativism	Fujiwara to describe Niebuhr's modification of Troeltsch's historical relativism, such that statements about God are statements of faith that are not neutral or objective.
Transcendental Psychology	Associated with Kant, it was a form of form of cognitive psychology that identified the rational consciousness as the first fact of knowledge.
Trinitarian Ontology	Used in the context of this thesis to refer to the being and internal life of the Triune God in terms of the unity and diversity of the Triune persons.
Trinitarian Ecclesiology	Used in the context of this thesis to refer to how the mission of the Triune God provides a pattern for the Church's unity and participation in mission.
Ultimate Good	Uses the term to refer to God the transcendent one who is the source and end of all things, such that all that is, is good.
Ultimate Value	Not identifiable with a particular mode of being but is present whenever being confronts being, because it is a function of being in relation to being.

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