

McCoy on Keiser's Niebuhr: A Post-Critical Dialogue

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ABSTRACT Key words: Michael Polanyi, H. Richard Niebuhr, postcritical theology and ethics, response-relational ethics, postcritical spirituality, conversion, language, praxis

I respond to Charles McCoy's criticisms of my view of Niebuhr's theological ethics by arguing that "conversion," understood as tacit reorientation rather than explicit choice, does accurately depict Niebuhr's 1929 shift in perspective; that "language" emphasized as central to his ethics does in fact hold act and word together; that "praxis," while not a part of Niebuhr's conscious agenda, is inherent in his idea of response; and that Niebuhr's thought is revolutionary which could and should be developed, but by someone else, into a full-blown postcritical theological ethics.

When one has been so fully understood, one can only respond with silence--initially and finally--and with expression of gratitude. In between, however, I want to take up the proffered dialogue and respond to Charles McCoy's incisive and important criticisms, recognizing and honoring him as a fellow student of Niebuhr's, a "compresence" in Polanyi's postcritical world, and someone who has thought long and deeply about theological ethics. The issues he raises about my interpretation have to do with: conversion, language, praxis, and the postcritical revolution in theology and ethics in Niebuhr's work.

Perhaps "conversion" is a problematical word. If it is taken as an explicit decision or as a change from one explicit structure of interpretation to another, it is certainly misleading. Niebuhr's change of orientation was not a conscious choice. What he changed to was not an explicit framework but a direction, a manner of relating and working, and a way of being, indwelling, the world. Moreover, if conversion means simply a "turning about," his change was not, as this etymology suggests, a mere redirection on the same level in an opposite direction. It was rather a putting down of roots, or better yet, a discovering his rootedness in being. The turning was then away from the explicit detachments from the world of liberal idealism to the tacit embodiment of indwelling the social, natural, and spiritual environments of the world.

If then conversion is understood, not as a reversal on the explicit level, but as a discovery of a seed within the self that sends its roots down into the loam of the world and grows its trunk and branches into the light of day, it is, I believe, appropriate for understanding the last thirty-three years of Niebuhr's work. The development of his thought from this turning (deepening) point is an intricate branching, as McCoy says, an "unfolding" with insights emerging all along the way, but an unfolding, again as McCoy says, that involves "rethinking the entire fabric of theology and ethics" at each stage. Such rethinking--in T.S. Eliot's words, a "pattern new in every moment" ("East Coker")--is not the logical elaboration of a chosen, clear concept, but a groping and unfolding of the meaning of this seed discovered and germinating in his conversion. For this reason, I speak of the metaphor of responsibility as the culmination of his conversion in which he comes to his fullest understanding of its meaning and thus of the meaning of his mature thought. Such an unfolding with the intertwining of branches from the different themes and stages of his life--history, value, faith, feeling, and responsibility--has the dynamism of "reformation" as a "continuing imperative" (as he names his autobiographical essay of 1960), and as McCoy says, of inhabiting not a "palace" but

a “tent” (apparently Niebuhr’s living room, according to a fellow student who visited him in his home, had a feel of reconfigurable spaces rather than fixed immovable furniture).

Agreeing, then, with McCoy’s depiction of “the ongoing development and continuous rethinking that characterized Niebuhr’s method,” the question is whether the word “conversion” can represent this. McCoy implies that my specificity of locating the exact month of Niebuhr’s turning is an “[o]veremphasis on the early conversion” which obscures this unfolding. If the conversion is an explicit choice of an explicit framework so that subsequent work is logical deduction rather than creative emergence, this would be an overemphasis. But what I am naming and locating is not such a conscious thing; it is a paradigm shift, like Copernicus’ or Einstein’s and Planck’s, whose shift in orientation is fraught with meaning that will take a lifetime and more to make explicit. That I can pinpoint the time does not mean Niebuhr could have, although hearing it from another, upon reflection, he might have agreed.

I remember in my editing of Stanley Romaine Hopper’s papers, I wrote in my “Introduction” that the turning point for him into his mature view was in a certain essay. When he read my draft, he thought I had not gotten it right. But upon perusing his own writings, he realized I had in fact located the origin of his mature themes. This is to say, an outside but sympathetic interpreter can see things of which an author tacitly indwelling his own intellectual world is not necessarily conscious. I remember too, in the spring of 1962 at Yale Divinity School, walking down the stairs with Sidney Ahlstrom and at a turning in the stairs we met Mr. Niebuhr ascending. At this initial encounter with Niebuhr since his recovery from his first heart attack, Ahlstrom expressed joy at seeing him and then remarked he had recently been rereading *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* and had concluded that it had been written by a different person. Nodding, Niebuhr said something like, “I suppose that’s true.” He had, of course, written about the major change in his perspective after that book of 1929, but he located it more generally in the 1930s. He would not have been interested or able to be exact as I have been, about this shift in his personal depths in orientation to being, self, and God, since this transformation was something he was attending **from**. My attending **to** it, however, I do not believe, overemphasizes his conversion as a tacit reorientation from which his future thought unfolds and re-forms. While evangelicals, for whom it is a conscious decision to enter an explicit framework, employ the word at the center of their religious views, I do not think we should relinquish conversion to them but own it in its deeper meanings.

With this first issue, McCoy’s and my disagreement has been over the use of a word; with the second matter, our disagreement is over a perspective--over how important language is to the nature of the self in its agency and community. McCoy asks if my focus on language does not “obscure at times the centrality of human action and interaction in response to God’s action” by “forget[ting] that interpretation and language are functions of agents in community.” Should not Niebuhr’s treatment of language at the end of his life, McCoy asks, be understood as a late stage of thinking about Christian agency now in terms of its interpretive dimension? Otherwise, one falls into “the critical dichotomy between act and word,” as, he suggests, I do by almost eliminating the “active motif” with my “emphasis on meaning, metaphors, and the dialogical self.”

But I would say in response that the point of my focus on language is precisely to show how Niebuhr is getting beyond such a word/act dichotomy. The way he overcomes these is not by seeing language as an addition to agency, as McCoy suggests, but is by recognizing the inseparability of them--that word is act and act is word. Language is a function of agents in community, as McCoy insists, but the reverse is true as well--that agency in community is a function of language. As there is no language without agents in community so there are no agents in community without language. While there is much non-verbalized meaning in our lives--perceiving, making, moving, indeed the whole tacit

dimension--it all is pervaded and oriented by our capacities with language. As Polanyi says, learning language is "irreversible." Once we have learned it, the shape and process of our sense-making is forever affected. Language is a "higher" level of meaning that controls the "boundary conditions" of a "lower" level of meaning of our physical sensing and that provides a gradient that orients our tacit dimension towards verbal explicitness. This is, of course, not to say that all meaning gets drawn up into the explicit forms of language, for as William Poteat used to say in class, "meaning presupposes meaning"--language rests upon the unspecifiable and inherently unarticulable meaning rooted in our own bodies, the body of society, and the matter of the world.

As Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, Merleau-Ponty, Poteat, and Polanyi have shown, speaking and writing are action: they have their meaning in use by speakers--as forms of life, the illocutionary force of performatives, the gestural significance expressed from taking up a position in the world, emergents arising from the unreflected intentionalities of our convivial mindbody, and, for Polanyi, as gestalts emerging from the commitments and creative integrations of our tacit dimension. So also the actions we perform are words--if not explicitly said, then freighted with meaning potentially articulable. We would not spend the time we do interpreting human action of individuals and communities if we did not believe those actions were fraught with meaning of linguistic potential expressible in language. My agency is, therefore, pervasively not additionally linguistic. So also are my communities. McCoy's accurate chronicle of Niebuhr's development of the meaning of community from the social force of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, through the faith force of *The Kingdom of God in America*, the inseparabilities within history of reason and faith, individual and community, external and internal in *The Meaning of Revelation*, transcending the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith in *Christ and Culture*, onto a postcritical understanding of faith, value, and theological education are all now illuminated and constellated at the end of his life--as he explicitly realized--by the force field of language. Had he not found language at the core of human agency in community, and agency at the core of words, he could not have hoped for the transformation of society, as he says at the end of "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," through "resymbolization."

The third issue, praxis, is a disagreement over method and the self's relation to it. I would agree "that Niebuhr was not by nature an activist." I remember hanging around after a Common Room speech at Yale Divinity School in 1961 by William Sloane Coffin on his recent civil rights demonstration and incarceration in the South, and listening to Niebuhr ask him irenically some pointed questions about Coffin's aggressive behavior towards the commanding authority of the National Guard, punctuating his inquiry with "I am a moderate." As Niebuhr turned away unsatisfied with Coffin's response, Coffin reached out, grabbing him by the shoulder, and said "Wait! You're my mentor. What do you think?" While I no longer remember his exact words, Niebuhr's answer was an expression of his moderate stance: to change social injustice gradually rather than to confront it precipitously, prophetically.

I would agree with McCoy that praxis "was not on his agenda." Even though Niebuhr did care about justice and fittingness in the human community, he was not about to produce a plan for social action. Nevertheless, I would not agree that his method excluded him from doing it. What kept him from it was his own self-imposed unreconstructed idealistic liberal belief that self-assertion as such is sinful. He did not live long enough to feel the incompatibility of this with his emergent affirmation of response, which, while always reactive to actions already enacted and therefore never initiating in a way detached from a pre-existing context, can be energetically self-assertive in response to God's action upon it.

His method is to attend to the self amidst its response-relations, which extend spatially beyond every human

community to the cosmic community of being and temporally backwards and forwards to our human and cosmic origins and ends, and to attend to the present action of God upon the self within this relatedness. Recognizing this inherently relational nature of the self, Niebuhr's method calls for a social analysis of the complex human system we dwell within. He may have wanted to leave a power analysis of the social system to his brother--as he once wittily remarked to his students, according to Beverly Wildung Harrison, whom I quote: "Several of H. Richard Niebuhr's students have reported that when pressed to address the questions of political power or international power dynamics, H. Richard Niebuhr replied that he would 'leave that to Reinie'" (*Roots of Relational Ethics*, 157-58). Even so, there is nothing in his method to exclude such attention to political and socioeconomic power. Moreover, his method not only calls for interpretation; it calls for response to God's action in what is going on towards fittingness and ongoing transformation.

Nevertheless, while Niebuhr's method calls for response, which is action, the method cannot specify what particular response is fitting--only God can. The fitting response for an individual may be publically invisible yet active, or it may be visibly activist. Either, as a transformative doing within the relational weave of our social existence, affects the social system, and contributes, therefore, to praxis. Thus, while praxis was not on Niebuhr's conscious intellectual agenda, it is on everyone's human agenda, inasmuch as response to divine transformative action is central to his method. Specific directives are not part of Christian ethics, as McCoy says, but neither are they, contrary to McCoy, "the task of social ethics"; rather, they are what goes on within the interiority of each self as it responds to the particularizing action upon it of God. Unless the method of responsibility ethics leads to practice, we are left with the word/act dichotomy McCoy rightly eschews, for praxis is doing the truth of our words, enacting our words' forms of life that presage and effect the transformation of our oppressive systems.

On the fourth and final issue raised by McCoy, I would agree emphatically that "Niebuhr's work is no less grounds for a revolution in theology and ethics than was Michael Polanyi's in philosophy." I did think I had said enough in *Recovering the Personal* about Niebuhr's relationship to Polanyi to make clear Niebuhr's postcritical perspective. In my more recent *Roots of Relational Ethics* I intentionally sought to cast my net wider beyond postcritical and linguistic philosophy and neo-orthodox theology to the contemporary ethical discourse, and thought more would be reached, especially those readers whose various social ethics interrogate social oppression, if I focused my discussion in terms of "relational" rather than "postcritical" ethics. In this I hoped to show Niebuhr's fruitfulness for current ethical thought. While I agree more can be done in describing the postcritical revolution in Niebuhr's theological ethics and actualizing what he did not live long enough to develop, a comprehensive postcritical social ethics, I have no intention of undertaking this project myself.

In my writing thus far, I have been trying to understand my mentors (literally or figuratively) of the past generation--Niebuhr, Tillich, Hopper, Polanyi, and Merleau-Ponty. Now I feel led by divine action upon me and by pleas of my students, my colleagues, and my own children to express my own views rather than only to analyze those of others. I want to begin to speak, beyond analysis, with my own voice, out of my heart, what I have come (am coming) to understand about being religiously in the world. I seek, therefore, (as Polanyi expressed of his own purpose) "to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false" (*Personal Knowledge*, 214). It is time now to attend **from** Niebuhr, Polanyi, and these others, as well as from my commitments as a Friend, to articulate my own religious reflections. I intend to delineate a postcritical spirituality: by "spirituality" I mean any view and practice that affirms, as Niebuhr's does, direct experience of, or the immediate action by, the divine in one's own life--in which the theological, philosophical, and social ethical are integrated.

While I agree further analysis and construction of Niebuhr's postcritical point of view can usefully be done, I would hope my two books on Niebuhr could be an encouragement, even a "stepping stone" (to use Niebuhr's metaphor in *The Kingdom of God in America*, xvi) to someone articulating a full-blown postcritical theological ethics. I believe, however, this would involve serious work in economic, political, and social fields along with theological, philosophical, and ethical reflection. This is required to articulate a comprehensive understanding of our world that will be an effective way of transforming it towards a just, peaceful, and freely creative world beyond the subject-object dualisms and dominations. While such a work is beyond my abilities, I do hope in speaking my own mind and heart to contribute in some modest way towards it.