HENRY NELSON WIEMAN ON RELIGION AND REINHOLD NIEBUHR

by Daniel F. Rice

Abstract. Henry Nelson Wieman and Reinhold Niebuhr were theologically poles apart—Wieman a "new naturalist" and Niebuhr a "new super naturalist"—according to Wieman's nomenclature. Wieman devoted more time and attention to Niebuhr than Niebuhr did to him. The reason for this was the result of Wieman's sustained attack on the "new supernaturalism" with which he identified Niebuhr as one of the major American representatives. This article traces the background to Wieman's view of Niebuhr—Wieman's own views on science, on religion, and on Christianity—then proceeds to Wieman's analysis of Niebuhr's theology and his relation to the "new supernaturalism," concluding with Niebuhr's reply to Wieman.

Keywords: Reinhold Niebuhr; religion; Henry Nelson Wieman

Henry Nelsen Wieman (1884–1975) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) were theologically poles apart—Wieman a "new naturalist" and Niebuhr a "new super naturalist," according to Wieman's nomenclature. Wieman devoted more time and attention to Niebuhr than Niebuhr did to him. The reason for this was the result of Wieman's sustained attack on the "new supernaturalism" with which he identified Niebuhr and Paul Tillich as the major American representatives. Meanwhile Niebuhr, who lambasted naturalism in America, chose to focus on John Dewey, rather than Wieman, as his primary target.[1]

The late 1920s and 1930s were crucial years for both Wieman and Niebuhr. In 1927 Wieman was appointed Professor of Christian Theology at the University of Chicago where he remained until 1947. Niebuhr had joined the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, retiring in 1961. Among the books Wieman authored during those years were *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (1926), *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth* (1927), *Methods of Private Religious Living* (1929), *The Issues of Life* (1930),

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and *The Growth of Religion* (co-authored with Walter Marshall Horton in 1938). Over the same period Niebuhr published *Does Civilization Need Religion*? (1927), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), and *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937). In late 1939, Niebuhr delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh which, when published as *The Nature of Man* (1941) and *The Destiny of Man* (1943), became his most important and influential theological writings.

In 1937 Sweden's Uppsala University professor George Hammar stated that "the two most significant names of American theology today . . . are Henry Nelson Wieman and Reinhold Niebuhr." Hammar's claim, which appeared in his book *Christian Realism in Contemporary Theology* (1940), was based on his contention that a double shift had occurred in American theology associated with a "reaction against the subjectivistic and pragmatic trend of American liberal theology." He saw the results being a "religious realism which has crystallized around two contrary poles—a *dissolution* of liberal theology in the neo-naturalism of American empirical theology and a nascent *restoration* of theology in neo-supernaturalism"(Hammar 1940, 72). Wieman represented the former pole while Niebuhr exemplified the latter.

Background to Wieman's View of Niebuhr

Wieman on Science and Religion

Wieman's agenda was set forth in his 1926 book *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* where he envisioned a philosophy of religion based on empirical science. Such grounding would assure that religion "plant itself firmly on the data of sense else it . . . become the plaything of the sentimentalist and nothing more"(Wieman 1926, 5). Not only did he hope the scientific method would serve to rescue the Christian religion from both sentimentality and from the prison of an outmoded tradition (Wieman 1926, 59); he also firmly believed that, if the findings of science continued and the extension of the scientific method gained increasing influence over diverse areas of life, then there would be an increase in naturalistic religion. At the same time Wieman confessed that while it was science that was the dominant movement of the time, giving the age its "distinctive character," there was "much in modern life which is a continuation of the past and has not been greatly modified by science" (Wieman and Horton 1938, 247). Assuredly, religion was, for Wieman, the leading candidate.

Wieman's aim was the advancement of a scientifically based theology formulated entirely within the boundaries of the natural world. As time passed it became clear that Wieman had in mind a wide, organic view in which a science limited to mechanical relations would be replaced by a

more mature science that "passes over to a stage of development dealing with organic connections found throughout natural existence." He believed that "only then can science give sufficient room for the higher outreaches of the human spirit. Only then will we have a naturalism which can give ample room for the highest aspirations of love and faith, hope and beauty" (Wieman 1936a, 45). By 1946, while advocating a naturalistic view having "no recourse to any 'transcendental grounds, orders, causes or purposes beyond events, their qualities, and relations," Wieman insisted on taking "account of all the intricacies and subtleties—all the height, breadth, and depth of human existence—omitting, explaining away, flattening out, or truncating nothing" (Wieman 1946, 6) He stressed that

> When science and philosophy seek truth in disregard of that qualitative abundance which value demands, they run dry. They taper off into abstractions which, for a time, a few specialists may pursue with ardor but in which, in the end, even they lose interest. Truth as one component of value must serve qualitative abundance, even as abundance must meet the demands of truth. (Wieman 1946, 161)

Writing for the journal *Zygon* in 1968, Wieman made it clear that "we cannot take *religion* as it is and *science* as it is and put them together in co-operation to promote the good of human existence. Instead we must distinguish that form of religion which can co-operate effectively with science; and we must distinguish that application of science which can co-operate with this form of religious commitment. Otherwise the two cannot work together" (Wieman 1968, 32). What was required was "new religious reformation." In 1966 he provided a summation of his mature position on the subject:

> Science is the way we achieve knowledge and power; religion is the way we give ourselves in supreme devotion to the best we know. If knowledge and power are not merged with supreme devotion to the best we know, they will not be used effectively to serve the best we know. If supreme devotion is not guided, informed, and empowered by the most penetrating method of inquiry at our command, our devotion will stumble and blunder in relative futility. I think we are generally agreed that the resources of science and the resources of religion must be united if the human race is not to destroy itself or sink to desperate futility just when it reaches its highest peak of power. (Wieman 1966a, 125)

Wieman on Religion

Wieman's understanding of religion, as we have seen, moved within the context and framework of the natural world—the world as given. Aware that the term "religion" had different meanings, he described "religion in general" in terms of "reacting to something as though it were that to which all human life should be devoted." More specifically, Wieman insisted that the "religion of the sort we wish to advocate is dedicating life in supreme

devotion to that order of existence and possibility which provides the highest values which ever can be actualized." (Wieman 1930, 135) As Wieman saw it, only by "cultivating an attitude which issues in the passionate search for the utmost possibilities of value which the present state of existence may yield" (Wieman 1930, 252) can existence "be saved from its self-destructive and degenerative propensities and transformed to contain the fullest content of value that human life can ever embody"(Wieman 1966b, 384).

Wieman's naturalism, as opposed to most naturalists, was a "theistic naturalism." While preferring nontheistic humanism over traditional forms of theism, Wieman finally rejected humanism because it attributed salvation, understood as "transformation toward the greater good," to human power. Given his rather unique non-traditional form of theocentric religion, the question arose as to what sense Wieman gave to the term "God." In brief, Wieman saw God as that "which carries highest possibilities of values" (Wieman 1931, 106); as "the source of value—the process by means of which increased value is made possible"; as "the integrating process at work in the universe, as that which "advances qualitative meaning." For Wieman "growth of meaning" was something "ultra-human," although not in the sense of something supernatural nor meaning something outside of human life. Growth of meaning referred to the "transformation of the meanings [human beings have] into a richer, more far flung and more closely knit system of meanings" which "necessarily bursts through human control and lifts man to higher levels of meaning." Such "growth itself man does not do, although he undergoes it" (Wieman 1936b, 531). Indeed, "this growth of meaning in the world . . . is God at work in our midst"(Wieman 1935, 962).[2] Yet even while the "force of the superhuman growth of meaning and value" is at work shattering "old institutions, sentiments, procedures, ideals and habits," Wieman insisted that men must help clear the way until "old destructive debris is taken out or the way" Anyone who thinks that "God will do it all and man has nothing to do, is wrapped in a blanket of delusion" (Wieman 1935, 964).

Wieman saw "the central problem of religious inquiry" to be finding a way to bring "the whole of human life most completely under the control of that creativity which carries all the constructive potentialities or positive value residing in human existence" (Wieman 1966b, 393). God, for Wieman, is preeminently "Creativity" in the sense of being the structure enabling creativity in human life—a transcendent, changeless reality. God is also the "creative event"—the immanent reality that makes possible creative events. Creativity and the creative transformation it brings about in human life belong to God, not man. Both remain embedded in, and operate solely within, the natural world and bear no supernatural reference. According to W. Creighton Peden, Wieman was only referring here to the idea of God "as creative in the sense that God is the character, structure, or

form which enables the events of human life to be creative"(Peden 2009, 218). Creativity for Wieman refers to what a human being has been given, namely, "that uniquely developed valuing consciousness which is himself; and this is not produced by himself or by anything other than the creative interchange which is here called creativity"(Wieman 1966b, 395). Posing the rhetorical question "What, then, is God?" Wieman answered:

> It is that order of actual and possible structures of existence which includes the ultimate consummation which Jesus called the kingdom of God. It is not the total cosmic order. It is not the order of nature, taking nature in its totality. It is that order of structures of value, actual and possible, which will ultimately issue in the realization of the greatest value when we rightly conform to its requirements. That is what God is. (Wieman 1930, 221–22).[3]

Remaining entirely within his naturalistic framework, Wieman even made room for both God's "transcendence" and "hiddenness." He claimed that "when the naturalist says that God transcends this world he means that God is the uncomprehended totality of all that is best. This totality is not of this world in the sense only that it exceeds, and in many cases, diverges from and antagonizes, the goods and goals which are cherished in the minds of men" (Wieman and Horton 1938, 259). As for God's hiddenness, Wieman identified the domination of "self-concern" as the reason for our inability to discern God. What is required to overcome God's hiddenness is a fundamental redirection of our interest and transformation of our attention.

> When the naturalist says that God is here with us all the time in nature, and when he says that this deity is to be known in the way in which anything else in nature is known and appreciated, that does not mean that any man can lift his eyes and see God standing before him. Our interest must be redirected. The forms of our attentive awareness must be transformed, our desires must be turned toward other objectives, our whole personalities must be changed before the goodness of God can pour into human consciousness. (Wieman and Horton 1938, 437–38).

With his firm desire for a scientifically based religion, Wieman, in a 1954 letter to Ralph W. Burhoe, expressed his conviction that "the schools of religion which provide the accepted intellectual leadership of the church, such as Union Seminary in New York, and those connected with Yale and Harvard and now, perhaps, the Divinity School at Chicago, after recent changes, will not consider the scientific approach to religious questions." Such institutions, according to Wieman, were the bases for the "resurgence of orthodoxy" (Wieman to Burhoe, November 14, 1954).[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, who, in 1958, Wieman acknowledged to be "the most

influential religious thinker in our time in the United States" (Wieman 1958, 145) was among the major voices at Union Theological Seminary.

Wieman and Christianity

Writing to Charles Hartshorne in 1938, Wieman identified himself with those who were "deeply concerned to Christianize naturalism and naturalize Christianity"(Wieman to Hartshorne, January, 1938). By and large Wieman's naturalized theology had employed language that was deliberately remote from traditional Christian terminology. Yet in his 1939 article "Some Blind Spots Removed"—reflecting a decade of changes in his thinking—Wieman sought to align his view with traditional Christianity (Wieman 1939, 116). Admitting that he was using traditional Christian symbols more frequently than he had a decade earlier, he denied this indicated any turn toward orthodoxy on his part. Wieman based his decision on the fact that we share this particular history with its tradition and symbols. Insofar as "superstitions and superficialities have been cleared away from these ancient forms of expression, they carry a depth and scope of meaning which no other words can convey." In the chapter on "Religion" in his 1946 book *The Source of Human Good,* Wieman opened with these lines:

> The religion of Western culture is an inheritance from Christianity and Judaism; hence we have no vital access to the depth of any other living faith. Some few experts may achieve erudition about Buddhism, Confucianism, or the religion of the Australian aborigines; but even they learn only the observable facts. They cannot acquire the personal intimacies and vital resources of these other fellowships. Western man must find his strength in his own tradition—we have to accept this inescapable fact. (Wieman 1946, 263)

Wieman gave priority to the Jewish Christian tradition in the West rather than the Greek Christian tradition because of the former's emphasis on the "sovereign good" working "creatively in history" as opposed to the Greek tradition's emphasis on an abstract system of "Forms or a Supreme Form." However, in the naturalized version Wieman advocated,

> The active God derived from the Jewish tradition and the Forms derived from the Greek tradition are brought down into the world of time, space, and matter and are there identified as events displaying a definite structure with possibilities. When we insist that nothing has causal efficacy except material events, by "material" we mean not merely pellets of inanimate matter but also events that include the biological, social, and historical forms of existence. These, however, never cease to be material. Nothing has value except material events, thus understood, and their possibilities. (Wieman 1946, 8)

Wieman was willing to use traditional Christian words so long as they were employed in the radically changed context of his time. He maintained that "inasmuch as the ancient Christian words, when seriously and nobly used, were employed to designate what the users believed to be the most important realities for all human living, one can likewise use them in this way today" (Wieman 1946, 262). However wary Wieman was of religion based on sheer emotion, he knew that religious words "must incite to action, generate attitudes, and awaken sensitivity." Consequently, we cannot avoid turning to the symbols that have the power to "shape conduct, generate attitudes, and awaken responsiveness" (Wieman 1946, 263). It is precisely those religious symbols in common use for a long period of time, having "the emotive power required to orient human personalities toward the most important realities," that have come to us out of the Christian tradition (Wieman 1946, 264).

With the ground cleared, Wieman was willing (1) to use the word "sin" as pointing to our arrogance in assuming "that our own ideals, no matter how far beyond our attainment, can be identified with the infinite riches of God"; (2) to describe the "transforming good" in life as "the Grace of God"; (3) to see this divine grace "in Christ Jesus"—not of the person Jesus himself, but rather "the working of a process of history which used that personality . . . operating as the growth of a community which broke through all barriers . . . for the unlimited enrichment of life"; (4) to appreciate the "church" as "an association of people which transmits a way of living that is controlled supremely by the grace of God"; and (5) to use the term the "otherness of God" as the creativity that effects growth in concrete situations (Wieman 1939, 117, 118).

Wieman's aim to Christianize naturalism while naturalizing Christianity thus found a way to proceed. On the one hand, Christian words should be used "seriously and devoutly" since "there is no entry into the Christian way of living . . . or into the Christian community [or participation] in the stream of Christian history . . . [and] no purifying and redirecting of Christian life except through the use of Christian words." On the other hand, *"we must also assume the responsibility of determining their meaning . . . . with minds always ready to catch any intimation of a better understanding of what, in the light of modern thought and personal insight, the realities referred to may be*" (Wieman 1946, 267; italics added). Whatever the degree Wieman was willing to go in making his peace with traditional Christian language, there were definite limits. In response to a criticism Bernard Meland made of Wieman's tendency to universalize rather than discerning the distinctive witness to an ultimate good made in Christianity (Meland to Wieman, March 4, 1961), Wieman somewhat stridently replied:

> I do object . . . to saying that Christianity provides the best answer because Christianity has all the extremes of evil and error that any religion can have.

> Hence the word '"Christianity" should be used for the rare mountain peak of excellence appearing on rare occasion in the history of this faith. (I feel so strongly on this point that my typewriter begins to sputter when I try to write about it.) I recoil in revulsion at the bland and complacent reference to "Christianity" and "the Christian faith" and the "biblical faith" consistently made by all the theologians when it is obvious that each is talking about his own version of this multiform religion with its extremes of horror. (Wieman to Meland, March 11, 1961)

On the New Supernaturalism—Enter Niebuhr

There is scant evidence that either Wieman or Niebuhr figured significantly in the work of one another prior to Hammar's extolling them as "the two most significant names of American theology today."[5] When Wieman began focusing on a resurgence of supernaturalism Niebuhr's name started to gain attention.[6] It was this trend, labeled "neo-supernaturalism" by Wieman and associated with the "neo-orthodoxy" of Europe's Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, that brought Wieman to the point of launching a major critique of Niebuhr.

The attention Wieman gave to this trend grew out of his goal of bringing the scientific method into the service of advancing the development of what he regarded as a believable religion. By 1936 Wieman was insisting that "the struggle of the near future in the religious thought of America will not be between religious loyalties and scientific findings. It will be a struggle between naturalistic religion and a renovated supernaturalism that can swallow any scientific theory without the slightest indigestion" (Wieman 1936a, 43). In attempting to assess the likely direction religion would take Wieman assumed that

> It is highly probable that there will be strong surges and resurges of supernaturalism. This way of religious thinking and feeling has too strong a hold on the human heart to pass lightly away. These powerful rivals will be led by prophets having a wide influence. But these waves of renewed supernaturalism will not endue because they will come from the magnetic appeal of prophetic leadership and not from the gradual growth of basic presuppositions and methods. (Wieman 1936a, 45)

Wieman did not think that the then-reigning religious liberalism, however updated, could serve the interests of advancing a scientifically based religion. In 1938 he concluded that proponents of liberalism had undertaken "an urgent and inescapable task" seeking "to interpret the ancient faith to modern thought and modern thought to that faith." However, Wieman concluded that liberalism had taken on a task that "it could not carry through," and that the predictable "outcome of its labors" would be nothing less than "a 'secularized' Christianity." Lamentably, in the end "people could pertinently ask about liberal religion: 'What does religion

offer that one cannot get somewhere else?'" (Wieman 1938, 68). A decade later Wieman pointed to another major flaw, lamenting the tendency of religious liberals "to establish religion upon 'religious experience'"—producing "promiscuity in religious living by following religious experience rather than any definite and well-defined reality, clearly distinguishable from other entities, as the guide of life and recipient of devotion" (Wieman 1947, 6)

Wieman regarded the resurgent supernaturalism as a justifiable reaction to this ineffective and irrelevant religious liberalism. Citing Emil Brunner in the 1938 article "The New Supernaturalism," Wieman acknowledged the corrections theologians such as Brunner had made to the older orthodoxy—corrections such as not allowing "the inner life of religion and the life of its actions to be hampered and encased in the rational structures of thought which are alien to our age." Nonetheless, Wieman was convinced that this new supernaturalism would not "become the main trunk through which the unique power of Christianity grows in the future." It will fail because its successes have come at the cost of "the cutting of rationality from the religious endeavor to know and live for God"(Wieman 1938, 70, 71).[7]

Wieman, in his 1934 article "The Need of Philosophy," insisted that certain characteristics of his present age—social change, sophistication, and cultural problems—"make plain that we must have a religion adequate to our time." While recognizing that "no philosophy can be a substitute for [a vital] religion" or can "construct such a religion," Wieman believed that developing a philosophy of religion was "an indispensable aid in bringing such a religion to birth and the maturity" (Wieman 1934, 395). What was required at a time when traditional religion had become empty and unsatisfactory was a philosophy of religion that could critique the assumptions of religious devotion, re-examine its basic structure, and "abstract essentials distinguished from the passing forms of concrete life" (Wieman 1934, 379).

By the time Wieman published his contributing essay to the Beacon Press volume *Religious Liberals Reply* in 1947, Niebuhr had begun to gain serious attention from Wieman. In the aftermath of Niebuhr's books, particularly *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), and his major work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943) Niebuhr had become a dominant religious force in America. With faint praise, Wieman paid homage to Niebuhrian neo-orthodoxy for having rediscovered "something of tremendous importance, by way of traditional doctrine" that had evaporated with a vapid and ineffective liberalism. However, this new orthodoxy had proven "unable to state coherently what it is, by any exposition of the propositions of the doctrine" (Wieman 1947, 4). Consequently, while viewing neo-orthodoxy as a useful "way out" of liberalism, Wieman urged that we must now "escape from its domination"(Wieman 1947, 7).[8]

In 1938 Wieman concluded that the "fatal error" in neo-orthodoxy rested with its distortion of myth. While this new orthodoxy rightly discerned the power and importance of myth in interpreting supreme matters of concern for human life, it mistakenly viewed myth propositionally. It is likely no accident that Wieman's focus on myth came one year after the appearance of Niebuhr's chapter on "The Truth in Myths" published in a volume of essays honoring Douglas Clyde Macintosh (Niebuhr 1937). Niebuhr's basic contention in his essay was that there was "a permanent as well as primitive myth in every great mythical heritage" that "deals with aspects of reality which are supra-scientific" (Niebuhr 1937, 119). Wieman indeed referenced Niebuhr in his essay on "Neo-Orthodoxy and Contemporary Religious Reaction," which appeared in the collection of essays entitled *Religious Liberals Reply.* However, he did so indirectly by approvingly taking a quotation from Arthur E. Murphy, another contributor to the volume whose essay was devoted to "Coming to Grips with 'The Nature and Destiny of Man'." What Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian doctrine "seems to mean," Murphy wrote,

> is that these doctrines have some important element of truth in them but are not true in the form in which they were traditionally accepted, while any attempt to say what is true in them ends in logical incoherence. It ought to follow from this that Dr. Niebuhr cannot conceive them in any way that does not violate the principle of logic, and hence, on these crucial matters, literally does not know what it is that he believes, except that it is something strongly suggested to his mind as true by these traditional doctrines, but something which turns out, in every attempt to think it through, to be either false or logically inconceivable. (Quoted in Wieman 1947, 3)

Wieman believed "this [was] the strange predicament in which Neo-Orthodox thinkers find themselves." According to Wieman "myth, precisely because it is a myth, does not correctly describe the realities by which and for which men may live under its guidance when it is intrinsic to the life of a fellowship and a tradition." Myths are "non-cognitive, linguistic signs" presenting ideas that "are not correctly descriptive of the creative sources to which they guide human conduct and devotion" (Wieman 1947, 4). Myth, according to Wieman,

> is necessary in any area of life which engages the emotions and loyalties, and hence in religion. But its work is not that of giving us knowledge of reality which transcends the categories of reason. Rather its part is to render vivid and rich with feeling those realities which we know by the tests of intelligence to be of great importance. Reason and observation alone can give us the truth. (Wieman and Horton 1938, 430)

Knowledge, for Wieman, was clearly based on and confined to a naturalistic science. He saw naturalism as the view that "everything having causal efficacy, everything that can make a difference in this world is

necessary temporal" and "even if anything with power to change things was nontemporal the human way of getting knowledge by observing events would make it impossible ever to get any reliable knowledge of nontemporal power, cause or source" (Wieman 1951, 259). Consequently, "myth can no longer be used in those areas where intellectual understanding and construction are required to meet demands for which myths were never fitted. Here is where Neo-Orthodoxy fails." Its advocates

> are betraying the people and the cause of religion which they sincerely seek to serve. We must always have myth and intellectual understanding in dealing with the ultimate source of human good. Each must supplement the other, but the two should not be confused; one should not be applied where the other alone can serve. Neo-Orthodoxy has confused myth and intellectual understanding, and it tries to live under the guidance of an incoherent mixture of the two. (Wieman 1947, 13)

Focusing on Niebuhr Alone

Niebuhr occupied the center of Wieman's critical attention in 1956 by way of a March 3, 1953, invitation to contribute to a forthcoming volume on Niebuhr that Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall were editing for the Library of Living Theology (Kegley and Bretall to Wieman, March 6, 1953).[9] Wieman's chapter in that volume was appropriately entitled "A Religious Naturalist Looks at Reinhold Niebuhr." Although Wieman's assessment of Niebuhr's thought was highly critical, because of Niebuhr's recent strokes he did choose to soften the tone of his criticisms.[10]

Wieman began by identifying what he believed to be Niebuhr's central problem, namely, "to direct man's faith to what alone can give ultimate and indestructible meaning to life when the illusions are cast off which conceal the truth about man's predicament"—a predicament of facing "a state of existence in which no adequate meaning can be found in actual events" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 410). Viewing the various meanings found in life itself to be fragile and temporary, Niebuhr insisted on the need for a realm of meaning which transcended yet was related to temporal existence.

Wieman focused on two aspects he believed central to Niebuhr's position. First, Wieman indicted Niebuhr for appealing to faith instead of reason with regard to finding "any enduring satisfaction in the temporal process when freed from self-deception." Second, he accused Niebuhr of grounding faith solely on what Wieman called "pragmatic utility" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 411, 416).[11] According to Wieman, Niebuhr's insistence that we must find a transcendent realm of meaning to assuage our despair in discovering that the variety of meanings we find in our temporal world are devoid of ultimate meaning places Niebuhr squarely among the supernaturalists, however modified supernaturalist language had become.

The supernatural/transcendent issue came up two months prior to Wieman's informing Kegley of his willingness to contribute to the Niebuhr volume. In responding to a letter from Japanese professor Ichiro Hara asking for clarification of Wieman's position on the equivalency of "supernaturalists" versus "transcendentalists,"[12] Wieman answered that he, too, wished "to identify the two" and had "classed them together." However, Wieman pointed out that "these transcendentalists [such as Niebuhr] object to being called supernaturalists." The reason they object is that

> they repudiate a certain traditional form of supernaturalism, namely, the kind which thinks of God as a personality acting in a realm that is "outside" this world and yet is a sort of world parallel to this, from which God presumably dips into this one from time to time. This crude and self-contradictory way of thinking is rejected by these neo-orthodox. As I state in my article, they deny that it is possible to represent the Power of Being by any conceptualization whatsoever. (Wieman to Ichiro Hara, January 28, 1953)

Niebuhr's propensity to insist that a life worth living depended on an ultimate meaning found in some transcendent realm was, for Wieman, the basis of what he regarded as Niebuhr's refutation of reason, and thus, his fundamental irrationality. Wieman claimed that Niebuhr's solution to the human condition required that we "must either conceal the truth with illusions, or plunge to the depths of despair, or be possessed by a faith in the transcendent sovereignty of love" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 411). This solution, Wieman concluded, "can be reached only by way of faith and not by reason" and, "as we shall see, reason is definitely rejected not only as incompetent to reach this conclusion but as both corrupt and corrupting" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 412). This question of the nature and limits of reason was the center of Wieman's criticism of Niebuhr.

Wieman insisted that reason alone could distinguish true from false propositions. It did so by way of "(1) observing under conditions more or less controlled the consequences predicted by the implications of the proposition in question; and (2) relating by way of logical coherence the given proposition with other propositions likewise tested." Wieman found Niebuhr deficient in the rational endeavor of using "observation, inference, prediction, and logical coherence, for the attainment of knowledge and the solving of problems"(Wieman [1956] 1984, 418).

Wieman also faulted Niebuhr for holding the view that sin corrupted reason. He claimed that it is when reason is denigrated rather than being applied to the products of human creativity that "fictions are mistaken for facts, myths for historical events, fantasies for perceptions, visions for gods. All the wild illusions, insanities, obsessions, and horrors known to man take possession of him like evil spirits when the new creations brought forth by creativity are not subjected to the judgment of reason" (Wieman

[1956] 1984, 414). Two years later, in a chapter entitled "Reason, Faith, and Freedom," Wieman quoted from Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man* to the effect that "religious faith cannot be simply subordinate to reason or made to stand under its judgment." Seeing this as a "typical statement" of Niebuhr, Wieman again referred to the horrors of such a view stating that "the answer to this condemnation of reason is obvious . . . faith becomes demonic when it refuses to submit to these tests" regarding "true and false religious beliefs" (Wieman 1958, 145).

As early as 1938 Wieman had made this point by asserting that

> when the new supernaturalists repudiate in the field of religion every rational method by which to distinguish between truth and error, between reality and illusion, between good and bad, they open the gates to every form of bigotry, cruelty, and violence. In the last analysis there are only two ways by which an organized interest can support any claim against the assaults of those who do not accept it. One way is that of persuasion, reason, and the data of experience; the other way is that of dogmatic unreasoning enthusiasm, violence and cruelty. (Wieman and Horton 1938, 257)

Although Wieman identified Niebuhr with neo-orthodox figures such as Brunner and Barth, he singled him out for one outstanding trait, namely, Niebuhr's "pragmatism." Although he credited Niebuhr for "not trying to use religion for his own purposes" and with "doing the very best he can in service of the Christian faith," Wieman nonetheless indicted Niebuhr for abandoning reason for the corruptions of pragmatism. In brief, Wieman accused Niebuhr of holding a variety of beliefs on strictly pragmatic utilitarian grounds in order to save man from "skepticism," "nihilism," fanaticism", "pride," a "tragic view of life" and for "generating religious vitality" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 417). Wieman found the appeal to pragmatic utility as grounds for deciding what religious beliefs should be held utterly deplorable. He argued that Niebuhr's "method of pragmatic utility exposes religion to corruption worse than anything else can do"—presenting "rational absurdity" as "useful in generating religious vitality" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 417).

Wieman feigned a defense of Niebuhr from the charge that he was too pessimistic. With tongue in cheek, Wieman claimed Niebuhr was the extreme optimist in anticipating the mere approximations of self-sacrificial love in this life to reach a state of perfect love "beyond history," ending sardonically with the words "What more can you ask of any sane optimist?" Obviously, Wieman found this optimism unwarranted on the grounds that Niebuhr, in fact, did "not recognize anything in human life which might produce" such approximations of perfect love (Wieman and Horton 1938, 422). Niebuhr's God seemed to have "actual presence and power," not in life's daily process, but only "at the ultimate source and the ultimate outcome of human life and history, except for the presence of

Jesus Christ"—and even in Christ, quoting Niebuhr, God was "powerless in history" (Wieman and Horton 1938, 424).

Niebuhr, in his limited responses to his critics in the Kegley-Bretall volume, included Wieman among those with whom he had "the most substantial differences." In replying to Wieman's criticism, he suspected that Wieman "would be ready to admit that he disagrees not so much with my particular interpretation of the Christian faith as with any classical statement of that faith, which he views from the standpoint of what he defines as 'religious naturalism'" (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 522).

Overall, Niebuhr expressed his view of Wieman as follows:

> [Wieman] believes in God. That is, he believes in a "process" which he calls "God." He is a very religious man; and he has a religious attitude toward the process. I should prefer less reverence toward the process for it is in fact ambiguous; and there is no room in it either for the human or for the divine person. Professor Wieman identifies this process with "nature," and that is only because all modern naturalism defines every form of reality as "nature." (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 523).

Although Niebuhr was wrong in his claim that Wieman equated the divine process with nature, he went on to make the point that the prevailing naturalism as represented by Wieman ends up with a culture which

> prides itself on its "empiricism," obscures and denies every "fact" which does not fit into its frame of meaning. The frame of meaning is determined on the one hand by the concept of "nature" or the "temporal process," and on the other hand by the so-called "scientific method" which ironically enough is meant to ascertain the "facts." Unfortunately, there are some "facts" which escape the "method." The irrationality of this cult of "reason" is that it merely denies the reality of any fact which does not fit into its conception of rational coherence. (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 524, 525).

Six years earlier, in 1949, Niebuhr had cited Wieman as a "modern philosopher of religion who, in common with most religious naturalists, has sought to reinterpret religious faith in terms of [a] new dogma of redemption" that envisages "an ultimate triumph of the rational over the irrational." Niebuhr found this creed in a passage from page 336 of Wieman's book *The Growth of Religion* where Wieman claimed that "God is growth of meaning" and that since "meaning grows when connections do," the way to God comes by an attempt to "seek out and foster mutually sustaining and enriching connections between activities which make up his living and those of persons and groups and physical nature round about him." Niebuhr concluded that Wieman's statement summarized "the creed succinctly" (Niebuhr 1949, 67, 69). What naturalists such as Wieman had inadvertently done, according to Niebuhr, was to incorporate into their understanding of science very unscientific presuppositions containing the notions of the idea of human perfectibility and the idea of progress.

Niebuhr saw these as characteristic illusions of the modern world. In uncritically accepting the view that "evil and illusion" are "derived from the ignorance of a mind involved in nature and, from the impotence of a will, involved in natural necessity" Wieman ends up failing to grasp how "the possibility that increasing freedom over natural limitations might result in giving egoistic desires and impulses a wider range than they had under more primitive conditions seems never seriously to disturb the modern mind." (Niebuhr 1949, 67, 68).[13] Niebuhr's criticism of all forms of rationalism aimed at showing how, when reason ends up being the source of virtue, the result is that evil is erroneously equated with the sub-rational vitalities of the self.

Niebuhr denied Wieman's charge that he disparaged reason. He attempted to clear up Wieman's "misconception" by claiming he had "never maintained that the corruption of sin is 'in reason'." Rather, sin "is in the self and that a self-centered self is able to use reason for its own ends, which is why there is no protection in reason as such against sin" (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 523). Naturalists of all stripes fail to "understand the distinctive character of the human person, particularly, its radical freedom of the person over natural necessity." Consequently, they "do not understand why coherence should not be a final test of truth" (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 523).[14]

For Niebuhr, in viewing the Christian faith as a crude, pre-scientific way of seeing the world, naturalists such as Wieman attempt to construct a more adequate, that is, rational conception of God and the world by "defining either the temporal process itself as God, or that part of it which is value-creating." While agreeing that such a picture is more "'rational' than the Christian picture in the sense that its coherences are neater and that its mystery has been abolished from the realm of meaning" Niebuhr insisted that "all significant truths and facts about man and God, about the nobility and the misery of human freedom, and about the judgment and mercy of God, are left out of the picture" (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 524–25).

Unfortunately, Niebuhr provided only a tepid response to Wieman's assault on his alleged "pragmatic utility." Niebuhr phrased his reply by saying that "Professor Wieman is also in error in suggesting that I have a purely 'utilitarian' attitude toward faith. He thinks this is dangerous, though he is not warning against the particular 'utility' which interests me. I confess that I do not quite know what he means by 'utilitarian.' Is it, for instance, 'utilitarian' to use an instrument for the achievement of truth?" (Niebuhr [1956] 1984, 523). What is fair to say is that Niebuhr's pragmatism was far broader in scope and application that Wieman's view suggested. Niebuhr was not appealing to "rational absurdity" as grounds for religious belief. Instead, the faith he professed was the basis from which he sought to illuminate the complexities of experience. Indeed, Niebuhr was consistent in maintaining that "no religious faith can maintain itself

in defiance of the experience which it supposedly interprets" (Niebuhr 1952, 6).

An unfortunate occurrence in the Wieman/Niebuhr story occurred soon after the Kegley-Bretall volume on Niebuhr was published. In 1957, Niebuhr turned down an invitation to contribute an essay for the anticipated fourth volume on Wieman that would be published in 1963 by the Library of Living Theology under the title *The Empirical Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman.* Niebuhr was one of thirty-six individuals invited to contribute. On the un-alphabetized list in the Wieman Papers Niebuhr's name is listed first. Niebuhr declined the invitation a week later on February 20, 1957. Although no reason was given for his decision, it most likely had to do with his rapidly declining health, previously referred to as the basis for Wieman's choice to tone down his attacks in his contribution to the Niebuhr volume.

There were two additional events that figured into the Wieman–Niebuhr relationship. The first involved a 1961 colloquium on Niebuhr held in New York; the second a 1962 invitation to Wieman to write the article on Niebuhr for an encyclopedia being planned by the philosopher Paul Edwards that was published in 1967.

Wieman was an attendee at the October 20, 1961, Reinhold Niebuhr Colloquium held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The featured speakers were Paul Tillich, John C. Bennett, and Hans J. Morgenthau. Wieman did not address Niebuhr directly. However, in the discussion sessions following each speaker, Wieman posed questions to both Bennett and Morgenthau that focused on Niebuhr. Wieman told Bennett that he missed "in Niebuhr a clear formulation of a standard for judging right and wrong and in indicating the direction for which history and society should move . . . a standard that is universally applicable" (Landon 1962, 91–92). In responding to Morgenthau, Wieman again repeated his basic criticism, namely, that to him "Niebuhr is less clear and articulate on the general principles that should guide our lives than is desired" (Landon 1962, 115–16). Niebuhr did not respond to Wieman's criticisms. Nonetheless, after Niebuhr responded specifically to the featured speakers, he did speak to the issue raised by Wieman in a reply directed at another attendant, the economist and social theorist Eduard Heimann. Niebuhr said,

> I am a pragmatist who tries to be guided in pragmatic judgments by the general principles of justice as they have developed in Western culture. But I know of no principles which could guide us in choosing between various emphases on various competing or complementary principles, according to the weight they are given by historical contingencies. I know of no general principles, Christian or otherwise, which will solve the cold war and the nuclear dilemma. I agree with Morgenthau that if this should be the responsibility of philosophy, it is certainly not the task of political philosophy. A Christian engaged in political philosophy can do no more

> than seek to prevent premature solutions of essentially insoluble problems, hoping that time will make some solutions possible tomorrow which are not possible today. (Landon 1962, 122–23).

One year later, in 1962 Paul Edwards, the editor-in-chief of his new encyclopedic adventure, invited Wieman to write the proposed article on Niebuhr for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* which was eventually published in 1967.[15] In his article Wieman reiterates his earlier criticism of Niebuhr:

> Reason is an instrument, says Niebuhr, which can be used for either good or evil. One evil use of reason is to impose rational coherence upon reality and to reject as unreal what cannot be fitted into that coherence. But Niebuhr is mistaken in thinking that one who insists on subjecting every affirmed belief to the tests of reason is thereby claiming that reason comprehends all reality. To the contrary, such a person fully admits that unknown reality extends beyond his knowledge, but he refuses to conceal his ignorance by superimposing religious beliefs where knowledge cannot reach. Niebuhr defends such beliefs because they relieve anxiety by providing courage and hope. (Wieman 1967, 503).

During an exchange of letters with Niebuhr's colleague John C. Bennett over Wieman's upcoming article on Niebuhr submitted to Edwards, Wieman wrote: "I have studied Niebuhr very earnestly because I truly think he is one of the very great men of our time. I have always admired him and have learned much from him. But one can admire and learn and still not agree on all points" (Wieman to Bennett, February 11, 1963). In this tone, Wieman summarizes his view of Niebuhr for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by saying that "With his highly developed rational powers and critical intelligence, Niebuhr has sharply distinguished between problems subject to rational treatment and religious beliefs than cannot be rationally defended," giving us "what at times seems to be two Niebuhrs: one, the naturalist struggling with the problems of our existence with all the tools of human reason; the other, the mystic upholding a superstructure of religious belief beyond the tests of reason. Whether one of these, or both, will prevail in the course of history, only time can tell." Regardless of the outcome, Wieman was convinced that "the impact of Niebuhr's thought and action on our civilization will continue in one form or another for a long time" (Wieman 1967, 504).

Notes

All references in the article relating to correspondence between Wieman and others are from the Wieman papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL.

1. For a discussion of Niebuhr and Dewey on naturalism see "Conflict over Naturalism, chapter 8" in my book *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 93–114.

2. Wieman later stated that the criteria for "any reality that can be called God" in "the religious sense . . . must be, and can only be, what rightfully commands the supreme devotion of man." This must be "characterized in three ways. It must be superhuman, it must be the best

there is, and it must be the greatest power for good." By "superhuman" Wieman meant "it must have power for good which is greater than the intelligently directed efforts of men," Also "God must be the best reality there is in existence" and "must be something *in* the universe, namely that Something, which exercises greatest power for good," concluding that the reality that fits all the requirements "is unlimited connective growth" (Wieman and Horton 1938, 350, 351, 352).

3. Wieman felt it necessary over the years to defend himself against charges that he was espousing a pantheistic view. In response to Robert Calhoun, five years after answering his rhetorical question as to what God is, Wieman asserted: "I am not saying that God is the working of the whole universe. There is no touch of pantheism in my idea of God. God is in the universe but not identical with it, and is clearly to be distinguished from the rest of reality, even from human minds. This view which I am upholding represents God as more nearly 'the Absolute Other' than most views which are upheld by people who claim that I teach only the immanence of God and neglect his transcendence. God is so much 'other' than we, and in that sense so transcendent over us, that I do not yet see how to identify him with mind or even mind plus. God is more than we can think, but his working is manifest and inescapable. We know God by rational knowledge; and when we commit ourselves to God, this knowledge becomes faith." (Wieman 1935–1936, 778).

4. Wieman to Burhoe, November 14, 1954. In responding to Burhoe's request that he support Burhoe's project for establishing an Institute for the Study of Science and Religion, Wieman could think of only two schools he thought would be interested—"the Iliff School of Religion connected with Denver University . . . and the School of Religion at University of Southern California in Los Angeles," stating that Burhoe "will know better than I whether the Unitarian schools, Starr King, Tufts, Meadville, will be interested."

5. Wieman was certainly aware of Niebuhr, however. In his collaborative book *Normative Psychology of Religion* Wieman, at the end of his chapter "The Psychological Problem of Present Religious Living," while never citing Niebuhr in the text lists as "collateral readings" chapters 1, 2, 7, and 18 of Niebuhr's *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934); Niebuhr's *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927), chapters 2 and 3, for his chapter "Marks of Religious Behavior" and chapter 8 in the same book for his chapter 12, "Social Reconstruction"; and chapter 3 of the same book for his chapter 26, "Religions Shaping History."

6. In his co-authored book *The Growth of Religion* (1938) Wieman, in the discussing transcendentalism in the Western tradition, wrote: "So after the Sophists comes Plato. After Hume and Berkeley come Kant and Hegel. After Scheiermacher and Ritschl and after 'the theology of religious experiences' come Barth and Brunner, Tillich and Niebuhr" (Wieman and Horton 1938, 247). Again, in a subsection of the chapter "The Human Predicament" dealing with "Religious Obstruction" in his book *The Source of Human Good*, Wieman cites Paul Tillich as the "outstanding representative" of those interpreting Christianity in such a way as to require directing human commitment to "something beyond the reach of Reason, not merely beyond its present grasp." In a footnote in the subsection immediately following "The Reach of Reason" Wieman writes that "Reinhold Niebuhr, George Thomas, Theodore Greene, Pitt Van Dusen, Edwin Aubrey, and many others, as well as more extreme leaders like Barth and Brunner, go along with Tillich on this issue, although they differ in many respects" (Wieman 1946, 33, 33 note 1).

7. Wieman's notion that neo-supernaturalism will not be the "main carrier" of a viable religion is repeated in his *The Growth of Religion* (Wieman and Horton 1938, 255–56).

8. Wieman saw neo-orthodoxy as "a stage through which we had to pass to recover from a situation that might otherwise have been hopeless. It is like the fever of a diseased organism; it is a form of pathology, but if it does not continue too long or go too far it enables the organism to throw off the poison infecting it and thereby return to normal health. On this account some of us have welcomed neo-orthodoxy even while we opposed it. We have learned more from it than from any other religious teaching of recent date and are deeply indebted to its outstanding leaders. But the time is shortly coming when we must get rid of it if we can. A fever may be deadly when it passes beyond the period and intensity of its corrective function" (Wieman 1947, 4–5).

9. On March 16, 1953 Wieman wrote back to Kegley, stating: "I shall be very glad to make a contribution to the book on Reinhold Niebuhr's theology. While I do not agree with Niebuhr I have great admiration for him and have learned much from him."

10. After receiving Wieman's contributing essay, Kegley commented that Wieman had "clearly . . . attacked him [Niebuhr] in a perceptive way," adding, "I hope he won't have the final stroke we fear when he reads this, and other essays, but that he survives to write his Reply to Critics" (Kegley to Wieman, October 17, 1953). Several days later Wieman confessed that after seeing Kegley's "reference to the effect which harsh criticism might have on Niebuhr when sick, I reread my essay and have decided to remove the more devastating assertions. In fact I have already made the changes" (Wieman to Kegley, October 24, 1953). Robert Bretall, co-editor of the volume on Niebuhr, also wrote: Wieman agreeing that reducing the harsh tone would be wise. Bretall wrote: "I believe that you wanted to go thru the essay and soften certain words and phrases, in somewhat the same way you have changed the last paragraph. I agree that this would be wise, and [Daniel Day] Williams felt definitely that it would be. The criticisms come out clearly enough, I believe, in any case, and are perhaps all the more persuasive for being a little understated" (Bretall to Wieman, December 7, 1953).

11. Wieman's charge is that in Niebuhr we have the "pernicious" view that what we are left with is the position that religious belief must be determined according to one's own personal judgment without the tests of reason. Wieman contends that "the only remaining way to determine what is true and what is false in religion is the pragmatic utility, made famous by William James in his *Will to Believe*. . . . Niebuhr uses this method, although he may not be conscious of doing so; and he does not hedge it about with protective devices set up by James" (Wieman [1956] 1984, 416).

12. The letter, dated January 28, 1953, came from Japanese Professor Ichiro Hara. Professor Hara stated that it had been his "opinion that 'supernatural' and 'transcendental' are almost synonymous to one another and so the neo-orthodox position has seemed to me *supernatural*. Do you think a neo-orthodox a *naturalist*?" (Ichiro Hara to Wieman, January 28, 1953).

13. Niebuhr concludes that "This modern creed has distilled a great illusion from an important truth. The truth is that both nature and historic institutions are subject to development in time. . . . The illusion which it derived from this truth was the belief that growth fulfilled the meaning of life, and redeemed it of its ills and errors. The illusion rests upon two basic miscalculations. Modern culture, despite its ostensible interest in man's relation to nature, consistently exaggerated the degree of growth in human freedom and power. To this error of overestimating the measure of human freedom it added the second mistake of identifying freedom with virtue" (Niebuhr 1949, 69).

14. Wieman would repeat that criticism again a few years later in an encyclopedia article written for the philosopher Paul Edwards. In that instance Wieman had asked Niebuhr's colleague John C. Bennett to comment on his upcoming submission. Bennett's letter to Wieman read: "I do not see how you can say that Niebuhr's belief is unchecked by reason if you have read the chapter on Coherence etc. ("Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith") to which I have referred. Niebuhr is always using reason to check the uses of faith and the elaboration of faith. He does believe that the ultimate affirmations of faith are beyond reason but whenever anyone deduces something from these affirmations that relates them to experience Niebuhr uses reason rigorously to check the result. He is critical of rationalism but he is always asking how far religious ideas are consistent with the persistent realities of experience" (Bennett to Wieman, January or February, 1963). Niebuhr's article "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith" appeared in *The Journal of Religion*, July 1951 and was republished as chapter 11 in Niebuhr's book *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953, 175–203).

15. Edwards said to Wieman, "I am writing to invite you to contribute the article on Reinhold Niebuhr. I have read with great admiration your article in the Niebuhr volume of the Kegley and Bretall *Library of Living Theology*, and I feel that we could not find a better man to do the article on Niebuhr for our encyclopedia. Since we are hoping to dispense with the flat, colorless writing that so often distinguishes (or fails to distinguish) reference works, we are encouraging our contributors to express their own views, the one stipulation being that critical comment should best follow the exposition" (Edwards to Wieman, September 12, 1962).

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