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THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL SIN AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF SOLIDARITY: REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND MODERN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Recent Catholic social teaching's treatments of social sin and its proposed remedy, neighbor-love conceived as solidarity, represent genuine advances in this modern Christian tradition. This essay asks what Niebuhr's ethical analysis might add to, or question about, these Catholic interpretations. After briefly describing how these themes are enunciated in post-Vatican II documents, and Niebuhr's approach to like issues, I identify several challenges, cautions and additions that Niebuhr might offer to Catholic leaders seeking to understand social sin and to promote solidary action. Suggesting the merits of a more 'Niebuhrian' Catholic social ethic, and a more 'Catholic' Niebuhrian realism, I argue that articulating a Catholic social agenda with a Niebuhrian perspective can address weaknesses that undercut each tradition's ability to motivate and sustain effective work for justice. Both traditions also need to better connect social ethics and spirituality, and more systematically account for the social-theoretical assumptions their moral discourse depends upon or implies.

KEYWORDS

Catholic social thought, common good, Reinhold Niebuhr, social sin, solidarity, structures of sin

*Recent Roman Catholic Social Teaching on
Structural Sin and Solidarity*

For over a century, modern Roman Catholic social teaching has offered official commentary on contemporary social problems.¹ As Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, this literature has sought to connect ‘the praxis of the reign of God with public analysis and participation’, in a religious yet public voice.² This tradition has been criticised for ‘over-optimism about human nature and the historical possibilities of justice’; tendencies to think hierarchically about authority; and neglecting structural dynamics such as racism, sexism and classism.³ But modern Catholic social teaching also comprises important resources for situating religion and theology in the public sphere: ‘an internal pluralism that incorporates both evangelical and “common morality” approaches’;⁴ ‘a strong connection drawn among religious commitment, theology, and advocacy’, and an evolving emphasis on a universal common good understood in variegated, locally diverse, and multicultural terms.⁵

Seeking a robust Christian understanding and praxis of the common good in an increasingly connected-yet-divided world, Catholic teaching since Vatican II (1962–65) has incorporated new terms: ‘social sin’, and ‘solidarity’, guided by a ‘preferential option for the poor’. Significantly, each of these notions has trickled up into official parlance from movements and reflection in sites across the globe where the poor or marginalised have engaged in gospel-inspired struggles for justice.⁶ Each concerns the realities and responsibilities of group life amid the interdependencies and disparities of a globalising, late-modern world. And each concerns matters that animated the work of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Social Sin, Structures of Sin

Catholic social teaching since the 1960s has spoken explicitly of sin as social, especially during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). Writing in 1984, for instance, John Paul enumerates social evils that include the squelching of basic human rights; religious, cultural and racial

¹ See, e.g., David O’Brien and Thomas Shannon, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); Kenneth Himes (ed.), *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005). All official documents are cited from the Vatican website, www.vatican.va.

² Lisa Sowle Cahill, ‘Theological Ethics, the Churches, and Global Politics’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35.3 (2007), p. 392.

³ Cahill, ‘Theological Ethics’, pp. 392–93.

⁴ Cahill, ‘Theological Ethics’, p. 393, citing Kristen Heyer, *Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), pp. 185–88.

⁵ Cahill, ‘Theological Ethics’, p. 393.

⁶ Migrating from the grassroots into official teachings, some argue, has domesticated and deradicalised these themes. See, e.g., Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891–Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), pp. 181–88.

discrimination; violence and terrorism; torture and repression; stockpiling of arms; and an 'unfair distribution of the world's resources and of the assets of civilization' that aggravates the gap between the rich and poor.⁷ The 'overwhelming power' of these problems bespeaks a world 'shattered to its very foundations' by sin, division and alienation.

Many long for reconciliation and healing, but truly effective efforts at social reconciliation must 'reach—in order to heal it—that original wound which is the root of all other wounds: namely sin'.⁸ Because 'sin is an act of disobedience by a creature who rejects, at least implicitly, the very one from whom he came and who sustains him in life', it is a self-defeating, even 'suicidal' act. As Genesis 3–11 illumines, through sin the self's 'internal balance is destroyed' and replaced by contradictions and conflicts.⁹ Inevitably, distorted relationships ensue.¹⁰

Sin, in this Catholic view, is irreducibly personal. However influenced by external conditions and circumstances, the individual freedom and accountability at the heart of human dignity remain the source and object of sin proper. 'There is nothing so personal and untransferable in each individual as merit for virtue or responsibility for sin.'¹¹

What, then, is 'social sin'? John Paul considers four different meanings of the term. In the first place, social sin connotes the innumerable ripple effects of every individual sin that occurs 'by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete'. Here is the obverse of the spiritual solidarity of the communion of saints: the mystery of 'a communion of sin'. Every soul that lowers itself through sin, writes the pope, drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In this sense, 'every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin'.¹²

Second, sin is social insofar as it entails the direct mistreatment of others, in opposition to Jesus' command to neighbor love. Here, social sin applies to 'every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual'. Acts or policies that contravene the rights, dignity, or proper freedom of persons are socially sinful in this sense; as are sins of omission or commission 'against the common good' by leaders, citizens, workers or family members.

Third, social sin may refer to unjust relationships between groups and communities. These situations involve collective dynamics which, when entrenched, are often experienced as anonymous forces. When negative social dynamics become experienced as impersonal forces, inscrutable

⁷ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), #2, hereafter cited as *RP*. Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004; Washington DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), #115–119.

⁸ *RP*, #3.

⁹ *RP*, #15.

¹⁰ *RP*, #15.

¹¹ *RP*, #16.

¹² *RP*, #16.

in their causes, operations and effects, they can be called 'structures of sin'.¹³ But here, the pope stresses, the term 'sin' is used strictly analogically. To forget this obscures the moral accountability of individuals who cooperate with or benefit from these sinful patterns, and the responsibility of all to ameliorate or transform them. A final interpretation completely divorces sinful social structures from participants' decisions or intentions, blaming institutions or systems, not individuals, for social evils. This is an understanding of social sin that Catholic teaching firmly rejects. John Paul emphasises that every situation of social sin is 'the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins'.¹⁴

Undergirding this discussion of social sin is a Catholic anthropology that locates moral responsibility in persons, and an implicit social theory which, despite a penchant for images of organic unity, remains 'actionist' rather than 'structuralist': groups never exert agency completely apart from the intentions and decisions of members.¹⁵ Over time, collective patterns can become ingrained, and operate largely outside conscious advertence. But the moral responsibility of those who participate in, benefit from, or perpetuate these patterns is never fully abrogated. Accordingly, changing sinful structures requires illuminating sufficient numbers of individual minds, and converting sufficient numbers of individual hearts.¹⁶

In 1996, the Pontifical Council on Development used this nascent vocabulary of structural sin in its document concerning world hunger.¹⁷ The Council's analysis of hunger's causes notes the intertwining of finitude and sin in unjust economic and political structures.¹⁸ Ignorance concerning the common good, combined with its abuse through the idolatrous pursuit of profit and power, breed 'structures of sin'—'all those places and circumstances in which habits are perverse' and sustain vicious patterns that are extremely difficult to resist.¹⁹ Economic structures of sin 'deliberately steer the goods of the earth away from their true purpose, that of serving the good of all, toward private and sterile ends in a process which spreads contagiously'. 'Greed, pride, and vanity blind those who fall prey to them ... to the limitations of their perceptions and the self-destructive nature of their actions.'²⁰ At the root of economic 'non-development' or 'mis-development' is a 'lack of will and ability to freely serve humanity, by and for

¹³ See Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), #36, hereafter cited as SRS.

¹⁴ *RP*, #16. Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern) (1987), #36, n. 65.

¹⁵ Christine Firer Hinze, *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 15–17, esp. p. 16, n. 5.

¹⁶ *RP*, #16.

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for Human and Christian Development/'Cor Unum', *World Hunger, A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity*, Vatican City, 4 October 1996. Accessed 2 April 2009 at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_04101996_world-hunger_en.html

¹⁸ *World Hunger*, #10.

¹⁹ *World Hunger*, #25.

²⁰ *World Hunger*, #25.

each human being, which is a fruit of love', a lack that runs through every level of the 'entire complex situation' of world hunger.²¹

Response to Social Sin: Solidarity as Fact, Norm and Virtue

How can social sin be resisted or ameliorated? Recent Catholic teaching has responded to this question by sounding the theme of solidarity, described variously as a fact, a social principle or norm, a human virtue, and a Christian calling.

Solidarity denotes, first, the *fact* of human interrelatedness, rooted in Christian anthropology and manifested in experience. *De facto* human interdependence is the precondition for both social sin and sinful structures, and for their opposites.²² Solidarity as *norm* bespeaks the obligation to take appropriate responsibility for the relations in which one is enmeshed. In late modern circumstances, discerning and responding to normative implications of *de facto* solidarity are complicated and demanding prospects, too often honored in the breach.²³

Enacting solidarity as a social principle by which institutions are ordered to the common good requires practices and patterns of action—solidarity cultivated as a moral *virtue*.²⁴ This virtue's heart is a disposition to acknowledge and to take active responsibility for the common good.²⁵ For Christians, solidarity is a form of the calling to love, expressed socially in actions for the neighbor and the common good.²⁶ *Gaudium et spes's* insistence that the human person 'can never discover oneself except through a sincere gift of self' affirms an inextricable bond between personal flourishing and neighbor love; this is the bond solidarity honors. In all the ordinary circumstances of daily life, solidarity's chief concern is to be with and for those most in need: the poor, the afflicted, the marginalised, in a difficult-to-learn praxis of humble presence and collaboration. And as Christ's example teaches, the path of solidarity inevitably entails suffering, including the crosses 'which flesh and the world inflict on the shoulders of any who seek after peace and justice'.²⁷

John Paul II's 1987 encyclical, 'On Social Concern', contains the most extensive official treatment of solidarity to date.²⁸ Here solidarity is described as not simply compassionate feelings, but 'a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good . . . to the

²¹ *World Hunger*, #10.

²² *Gaudium et spes* ('Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World') (1965), #40–#45 (hereafter cited as *GS*). Cf. *GS*, #27.

²³ *GS*, #4, #5.

²⁴ M.V. Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, An Attitude, a Duty? Or the Virtue for an Interdependent World?* (American University Studies Series VII, 204; New York: Peter Lang, 1999), argues that solidarity is a particular form of general justice.

²⁵ *GS*, #30.

²⁶ *GS*, #24.

²⁷ *GS*, #38; see also #30, #32.

²⁸ *SRS*, #37–#40.

good of all and of each individual, because we all really are responsible for all'.²⁹ Solidarity is 'the social face of Christian love',³⁰ impelling Christians to stand beside the poor, and to work with others to redress unjust structures. 'Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice'.³¹ Christians today must 'become a church of and for the poor . . . while keeping in mind the common good'.³² Drawing into official doctrine the liberationist theme of the preferential option for the poor, the pope seeks to soften its conflictual implications by stressing solidarity as collaboration among rich and poor, and among the poor themselves.³³ But he leaves no doubt that solidarity demands major changes of perspective and commitment, especially for persons in more advantaged circumstances.

Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden, but an opportunity for showing kindness and a chance for greater enrichment. Only such an awareness can give the courage needed to face the risk and the change involved in every authentic attempt to come to the aid of another.³⁴

For those currently enjoying greater power and resources, solidarity demands changes that will come at a price.

It is not merely a matter of 'giving from one's surplus', but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalised to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen . . . requires above all a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies.³⁵

²⁹ *Ibid.*, #39; cf. *Compendium*, #193. Since 1990, Catholic teaching has also connected solidarity with ecological concerns. See, e.g., Elizabeth Johnson, 'An Earthy Christology', *America* 200.12 (13 April 2009), pp. 27–30.

³⁰ *SRS*, #40.

³¹ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), #58, hereafter cited as *CA*.

³² *CA*, #58. Cf. Bilgrien, *Solidarity*, 149.

³³ Donal Dorr criticises Pope John Paul II's account of solidarity as insufficiently prophetic, and 'somewhat bland, since he offers no strong social analysis and less theological emphasis than liberationists do on the role of the poor in God's liberation'. Donal Dorr, 'Solidarity and Human Development', in Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (eds.), *The Logic of Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 141.

³⁴ *CA*, #58. Cf. *World Hunger*, #25.

³⁵ *CA*, #58. David Hollenbach, *sj*, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1979), p. 204, captures the radical and conflictual implications of such a commitment to the common good in three 'strategic moral priorities': '1) The needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich; 2) The freedom of the dominated takes priority over the liberty of the powerful; 3) the participation of marginalised groups takes priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them'. Cf. David Hollenbach, 'Globalization, Solidarity, and Justice', *East Asian Pastoral Review* 43.1 (2006).

Yet here too, John Paul qualifies the radical implications of this claim, emphasising, in line with his predecessors, that justice will be achieved not by overturning all current economic or social structures, but by re-orienting them to their authentic purposes in service of the common good.³⁶

In sum, recent Catholic teaching advocates solidarity as the primary weapon for confronting and dismantling the destructive social structures that deny well-being and survival to so many today.³⁷ Policies and institutions oriented by solidarity can be rightly called ‘structures of solidarity’,³⁸ or ‘structures of the common good’. Through them, solidary patterns can counteract and repair harms and divisions caused by social sin.³⁹

*Living High and Letting Die:*⁴⁰ *Solidarity without Traction*

Among most Catholics in the affluent West and North, however, reception of recent church teaching on social sin and solidarity has been inconsistent, superficial or non-existent. This lack of traction threatens to render Catholic rhetoric on these matters hypocritical, even perverse. As Mexican liberation theologian Javier Limon warns, in a world where millions have less than the minimum needed for survival, proclaiming hope to those experiencing suffering can itself be immoral if those proclaiming it simultaneously accept, through action or omission, the ‘untimely death of the great majority, which ... is the greatest and most mortal contemporary sin’.⁴¹

What explains this apparent moral torpor among sincere Christians in comfortable circumstances? Philosophers Peter Singer and Peter Unger suggest one reason: a common tendency to feel morally excused—and to excuse others—from obligations to aid (even at minimal cost) those experienced as geographically or socially distant, or whose distress is muffled by informational ambiguity or experiential indirectness.⁴² Arguing that there is no authentic moral difference between deliberately walking by a child drowning in a shallow pool, and ignoring a charitable solicitation for \$25 that would certainly save the lives of a dozen starving children in another

³⁶ CA, #58.

³⁷ SRS, #40.

³⁸ *Compendium*, #193.

³⁹ ‘Conversely, as soon as groups of men and women begin working together in order to take due account of the need to serve the whole community, and each individual member of it . . . a positive effect gradually improves the material, psychological and moral conditions of their lives. This is really the “obverse” of the “structures of sin”. One might call them the “structures of the common good”.’ *World Hunger*, #25. Cf. Robert F. Kennedy’s similar, memorable contention, ‘Day of Affirmation’ Speech, Capetown, South Africa, 6 June 1966, accessed at <http://www.rfksa.org/speeches/speech.php?id=1>

⁴⁰ Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Javier Jimenez Limon, ‘Suffering, Death, Cross, and Martyrdom’, in I. Ellacuria and J. Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p. 707.

⁴² Unger extends Peter Singer’s arguments on this point in *Living High*, chs. 1, 2.

country, these authors press a point especially germane for Christians who grant sacred authority to scriptural narratives like the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37), Lazarus and Dives (Lk. 16:19–31), and the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46). In the failure of so many to acknowledge a positive obligation to help those in vital need, even at little cost, Unger and Singer implicate circumstantial, intellectual, emotional and decisional factors.

Catholic social teaching echoes this philosophical analysis, observing that social virtue requires lived circumstances wherein persons are made conscious of their own dignity and that of their neighbors, and people are motivated and equipped to freely embrace their calling to love of God and neighbor. This freedom can be undermined by both acute deprivation and excessive advantage.

For freedom is often crippled by extreme destitution, just as it can wither in an ivory-tower isolation brought on by overindulgence in the good things of life. It can, however, be strengthened by accepting the inevitable constraints of social life, by undertaking the manifold demands of human relationships, and by service to the community at large.⁴³

John Paul II contended that consumer culture fosters dispositions and practices—of having over being, individualism over community, and power- and security-seeking over open-handed and -hearted generosity—that oppose authentic fulfillment and breed injustice. A consumerist ethos of over-work and over-spending also eats up the time, attention and energy needed to honor social interdependencies. In affluent cultures paradoxically burdened by both excess and ‘never enough’,⁴⁴ solidarity finds little ground in which to take root.

Non-impovertised Catholics’ tepid response to these teachings itself manifests a structurally sinful situation that is difficult to overcome. Christian solidarity must above all, writes Limon, be active solidarity with the victims of humanly-caused social and historical injustice. Limon warns that such intransigence stands in direct contradiction to the demands of Christian solidarity which must, above all, be active solidarity with victims of social and historical injustice. He concludes, pointedly, that ‘if solidarity among human beings does not include the victims, it becomes perverted into a pact or an interested deal between the evildoers among themselves’.⁴⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr’s work sheds its own light on the realities of social sin and the practical failures of solidarity that educe Limon’s biting words. To whet Catholic social principles against a Niebuhrian perspective can create

⁴³ GS, #31.

⁴⁴ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 54, notes this irony: For the rich, space is overcome and time is always full and ‘short’. For the poor, space ties one in place; time is often empty and may drag on.

⁴⁵ Limon, ‘Suffering’, p. 707. Cf. CA, #57.

sparks, but it can also sharpen Catholic understandings of social sin and of hazards that line the road to solidarity.

Engaging Niebuhr's Legacy

How might Niebuhr assess modern Catholic rhetoric concerning solidarity and social sin, and the lack of reception of this teaching among economically-advantaged Catholics?⁴⁶ The answers hinge upon Niebuhr's distinctive interpretations of humanity as created, fallen, and redeemed; of the differing impacts of grace and sin in history; of the moral disparities between individuals and groups; and—in light of all this—of the principles that ought to guide Christian approaches to contemporary political and economic life.

Catholic social teaching portrays human beings as dignified, personal, social, free, sin-wounded, but graced moral agents. In an anthropology more indebted to Augustine of Hippo than Thomas Aquinas, Niebuhr paints a dialectical picture of humanity as composed of forms and vitalities both material and spiritual, and as immersed in and yet transcending nature and history, both to indeterminate degrees. Existentially suspended between freedom and finitude, humanity finds itself in a state of anxiety which each individual inevitably, though freely, resolves in sinful ways. Genesis 1–2 depicts mythically the normative condition of humanity as the complete harmony of life with life grounded in bonds of perfect trust in and obedience to God. The 'fall' in Genesis 3 tells of the rupture, confirmed in the heart and action of every human being, whereby the anxiety of finite-yet-free humanity is falsely resolved by forsaking theocentric right-relatedness for an egocentrism that short-circuits genuine fulfillment, and whose destructive effects seep into every aspect of life.

Christ's redeeming work turns the tide on this tragic story, but its full healing impact, especially for social relations, lies beyond history's vicissitudes. Here is Niebuhr's paradoxical understanding of humanity as simultaneously sinner and saved, enmeshed in, yet transcending, a history both fallen and graced. Human beings are perpetually, dialectically, suspended—'vertically' between spirituality and temporality, 'horizontally' between individuality and sociality,⁴⁷ impelled to tack ceaselessly between sinful extremes as they navigate the dramas of history. Within history, each human life, to some degree, proceeds at others' expense. To live, inevitably, is also to sin. No aspect of the person or of human relationships escapes sin's taint.

This is the powerful vantage point from which Niebuhr critiqued competing views of history and of society, both Christian and secular. In the

⁴⁶ This essay does not treat Niebuhr's explicit statements about Catholicism, the contexts of his criticisms, or the evolution of his later, more appreciative stance. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, 'A View of Life from the Sidelines', *Christian Century* (19–26 December 1984), p. 1195.

⁴⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), pp. 48, 53.

tradition of the nineteenth-century ‘masters of suspicion’,⁴⁸ Niebuhr’s ‘negative apologetic’ exposed flaws and failures in dominant worldviews past and present, as each fell short of properly accounting for the dynamics of freedom and finitude that mark the human situation.⁴⁹ Only a biblical-grounded understanding of human nature and destiny, he insisted, yielded a reliable understanding of and moral approach to personal and social life.

Collective Egotism and its Tragic Effects

Robin W. Lovin describes Niebuhr’s Christian ethics as reversing the traditional relationship between personal and collective moral life. For Niebuhr, it is in politics—understood broadly as all activities by which communities direct and order their collective lives—‘above all, that the lessons learned about human finitude and the role of conflict in the search for justice have to be applied’.⁵⁰ Gordon Harlan likewise portrays Niebuhr’s work as dominated by one persistent concern: ‘to clarify the resources and insights of the faith in such a way that they may be savingly related to the structures, dynamics, and decisions of large social groups’.⁵¹

In Niebuhr’s biblically-based view, human beings need, tend to, and are deeply formed by community. ‘The highest reaches of individual consciousness and awareness are rooted in social experience and find their ultimate meaning in relationship to the community’.⁵² In history, individual and collective centers of vitality elaborate and interact endlessly, in creative and destructive ways. Like John Paul II, Niebuhr further contends that individuals are never completely absorbed into the collective; the transcendence of selves over communities locates authentic moral agency in persons, not groups. Communal life is ‘a vast series of encounters between human selves and their interests’.⁵³ Humans’ indeterminate (and morally ambiguous) self-transcendence makes political and social structures necessary to direct potentials and protect dignity; but those same structures constantly threaten to defeat their purposes by dissolving into anarchy or hardening into tyranny.

Niebuhr’s conviction that sin has particular relevance for social life rests on the contrast he draws between the moral capacities of individuals and groups.

⁴⁸ Robin W. Lovin credits Niebuhr with introducing a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ into American Protestant social ethics. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁹ On Niebuhr’s ‘negative apologetic’, see Daniel James Malotky, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr’s Paradox: Groundwork for Social Responsibility’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 (2003), pp. 101–123.

⁵⁰ Robin W. Lovin, ‘Christian Realism and the Successful Modern State’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 20.1 (2007), p. 56. Also, Lovin, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr: Impact and Implications’, *Political Theology* 6.4 (2005), pp. 459–71.

⁵¹ Gordon Harlan, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. vii.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Darkness*, p. 50; also pp. 51–59.

⁵³ Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Christian Faith and Social Action’, in J. A. Hutcheson (ed.), *Christian Faith and Social Action* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), p. 241.

The thesis of his early work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, became a hallmark of his political realism: '[A] sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups', and 'this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing'.⁵⁴ This is so because groups lack the intellectual or moral self-transcendence of their individual members.

Their limited capacities for self-reflection and self-criticism restrict groups' moral behavior primarily to the pursuit of survival and power.⁵⁵ Worse, a group (family, class, nation, corporation) can co-opt members' morally-praiseworthy loyalty and altruism into the service of collectively selfish or destructive ends. Groups themselves are incapable of self-sacrifice; leaders, obligated to advance their members' collective interests, never have warrant to altruistically override them.⁵⁶ In group life, then, possibilities for moral heroism are virtually nil, but the potential for injustice much greater. Theologically, Niebuhr interprets group egotism, typically expressed as will to power, as human pride's ultimate attempt to escape the finitude and contingency of its existence. A much more potent source of injustice than individual pride, 'the very essence of human sin is in it'.⁵⁷ This makes the political realm, distinctly, 'a realm of sin'.⁵⁸

Niebuhr contends that group self-interest (most commonly expressed in quests for security or domination) is a fact that Christian ethics ignores at its peril. Group egotism is most commonly expressed in various quests to amass or protect security and/or domination. Given this ineradicable dynamic, societies can aspire only to a rough and precarious justice by placing 'centers of power' (such as the state) within 'balances of power', whereby other groups can check power centers' self-aggrandising tendencies.⁵⁹ This makes possible 'tolerable harmonies' among competing bodies and interests. Vigilance is required, lest these arrangements dissolve into disorder and anarchy, or ossify into tyranny. In this regard, Niebuhr commended American constitutional democracy for embodying the wisdom that, 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, 1960), p. xi.

⁵⁵ See Henry R. Davis and Robert C. Good (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), pp. 84–92.

⁵⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, 1964), p. 288.

⁵⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1964), p. 213.

⁵⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1934), p. 247.

⁵⁹ 'It is the business of politics so to organise the vitalities of human existence that a "commonwealth" will be created out of the conflicting forces and interests of human life, a task which has never been achieved in history without setting force, as the instrument of order, against force as the instrument of anarchy.' Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Force and Reason in Politics', *Nation* 150 (10 February 1940), p. 216. Cf. *Nature and Destiny*, II: 256–68.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, p. xiii.

Christian Realism as Critique

This theologically-framed picture of 'not-very-moral man and his even-less-moral societies' fuels Niebuhr's critiques of Christian social agendas that underestimate the impact of sin on group life, or ignore the fact that God's perfect justice and mercy embodied in Jesus Christ must always operate more 'above' (as judgment) than 'within' (as grace) the structures of nations and empires.⁶¹ To speak without qualification of advancing Christian love in the social arena is a category mistake which can render Christian social agendas ineffective, or worse. Though himself indebted to liberal Protestantism,⁶² Niebuhr lambasted liberal Christians on this count. 'The pronouncements of church bodies and the preachments of the pulpit still tend to smell of sentimentality in our day because the law of love is presented without reference to the power of the law of self-love.' Self-love's overriding influence in social life makes coercion necessary in the service of justice. Christians who value only uncoerced goodness fail to 'take into account that we need a great deal of second-rate goodness to get along with one another'. Laws and sanctions must counteract both individual and group selfishness; Niebuhr mentions taxation and social security systems that compel citizens to serve their neighbors more than they otherwise would.⁶³

Yet love is not wholly irrelevant to Niebuhr's social ethic, a point lost on some of his interpreters. Niebuhr never abandoned his early description of the Gospel law of love as an 'impossible possibility' that exposes the partiality of every achievement of justice, but simultaneously discloses possibilities for, and motivates action toward, better approximations.⁶⁴ His Christian realism unmasked egotism, hypocrisy and injustice, the better to identify ways to combat them. In social life, love plays for Niebuhr a role analogous to Reformation uses of the law: the 'law of love' condemns all human efforts as unworthy, inspiring contrition and humility (first use). In sinful society, the law of love legitimates recourse to coercion in order to restrain sinners and curb injustice (second use). Yet insofar as the law

⁶¹ See, e.g., Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, II:71–72, 98–99.

⁶² See, e.g., Larry Rasmussen (ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (London: Collins, 1989), editor's introduction, pp. 25–26, and Robin W. Lovin's analysis of the views of Stanley Hauerwas and Langdon Gilkey on Niebuhr's liberalism in 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Impact and Implications', *Political Theology* 5.2 (2004), pp. 459–71, and Lovin, 'Reinhold Niebuhr in Contemporary Scholarship', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.3 (2003), pp. 497–502.

⁶³ Reinhold Niebuhr, 'The Spirit of Justice', *Christianity and Society*, (Summer 1950), reprinted in D. B. Robertson (ed.), *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), p. 26.

⁶⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), p. 19. '[Jesus'] Kingdom of God is always a possibility in history, because its heights of pure love are originally related to the experience of love in all human life, but it is also an impossibility in history and always beyond every historical achievement.' Also, p. 85: 'Yet the law of love is involved in all approximations of justice, not only as the source of the norms of justice, but as an ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered.' Cf. *Nature and Destiny* II:246–47.

of love is *possible* impossibility, Niebuhr gives it a further role, suggesting Calvin's third use of the law as a pedagogue, leaven, and lure by which, within sin-riven history, greater approximations of love may be attained.⁶⁵

His keen mind, dialectical and paradoxical sensibilities, and 360-degree hermeneutic of suspicion made Niebuhr a formidable intellectual pugilist, skilled at landing blows against contending positions of every stripe.⁶⁶ History's ambiguous dramas and dynamisms, he was convinced, require an ethical posture that is attentive, flexible, and poised to respond resiliently to unpredictably shifting circumstances. Because all social arrangements and actions carry an alloy of sin, ideological suspicion, humility and contrition are required virtues for Christian realists,⁶⁷ who must continually negotiate more tolerably just social arrangements, while steering clear of prideful and slothful extremes.

Uses and Abuses of Niebuhrian Realism

If recent Catholic teaching has failed to motivate large-scale solidary action for justice, Niebuhr's Christian realism has logged failures of its own. Niebuhr's ruthless analysis of sin has at times discouraged ameliorative efforts, or encouraged consequentialist strategies that collapse the dialectics between sin *and* grace, love as relativising historical approximations of justice *and* spurring justice-seeking—dialectics pivotal to Niebuhr's responsibilist ethic. The fact that political scientist Hans Morgenthau could read Niebuhr's primary contribution as revealing the supremacy of self-interest in politics is partly due to Niebuhr's inadequate account of the links between love and social practice.⁶⁸ Too often Niebuhr's 'moral ideal—the law of love— remains stubbornly disconnected from his pragmatic approach to solving specific moral problems'.⁶⁹

Larry Rasmussen praises Niebuhr for taking 'a theological anthropology—existentialist neo-orthodoxy—and transposing it into a brilliant theology of history',⁷⁰ then masterfully rendering this theological vision into a 'working

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Edward Downey, 'Law in Luther and Calvin', *Theology Today* 41.2 (July 1984), pp. 146–54, accessed at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1984/v43-4-article1.htm>. Arguably, Niebuhr's more paradoxical Lutheran sensibilities prompted him to emphasise the first two uses, but never to the extent of ignoring the third.

⁶⁶ Yet Carl Rogers, among others, declaims the lack of humility in Niebuhr's rhetoric, and questions Niebuhr's claim that the chief human flaw is inordinate self-love. 'Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Self and the Dramas of History: A Criticism*', *Pastoral Psychology* 9.5 (June 1958), pp. 15–17.

⁶⁷ D. Stephen Long, 'Humility as a Violent Vice', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12.2 (1999), pp. 31–46, criticises Niebuhr's political renditions of humility and contrition, arguing that, unless embedded within a substantive faith community, humility is reduced to intellectual suspicion of every political 'answer', and contrition to sorrow for mistaking any political theory or arrangement as fully correct.

⁶⁸ Lovin discusses this in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, pp. 9–11.

⁶⁹ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', pp. 101–102. Malotky defends Niebuhr against this interpretation.

⁷⁰ Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 37.

philosophy of public life'. Yet some see a fateful gap between the linchpin of Niebuhr's neo-orthodox anthropology—the claim that the individual heart is the privileged and necessary place for life-transforming encounter with God—and the dynamics of collective life, where Niebuhr believed 'saving illumination, via judgment, repentance, mercy and grace' was *least* likely to occur.⁷¹ In *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr fashions trenchant 'religio-psychological insights on selfhood and self-knowledge, which might then illuminate collective human action'.⁷² But, Rasmussen concludes, Niebuhr's lack of an explicitly worked-out *social* theory undercut his efforts to relate biblical faith to group life.⁷³

In a related vein, Daniel Malotky argues that 'because Niebuhr's paradoxical construction seems to deny to us the material or imaginative capacities' to attain the harmony that the law of love envisages, it threatens to leave us with 'a rudderless pragmatism that easily spirals into consequentialism'. This concern is borne out in the primacy of self-interested *Realpolitik* that has marked some renderings of Niebuhrian political realism.⁷⁴ Yet, Malotky contends, in Niebuhr's realism,

freedom always harbors the potential for transcending our boundaries, because we are never in a position of mistaking our current perspective for a view of the whole. . . . Niebuhr only requires us to acknowledge that any new position we may take will also be marked by historical limitations.⁷⁵

This does not eliminate a 'concrete conflict between our freedom and finitude in any given *situation*', but agents who recognise this tension can better resist idolatrous attempts to escape it.⁷⁶ Acknowledging the paradoxes at the heart of human existence strips away the illusion that perfect justice is attainable, but 'leaves us with the means for maintaining our moral bearings'.⁷⁷ We are left with 'no easy answers', but with the possibility of a chastened, self-critical and self-correcting ethic, where falling short is expected but the urgent work of approaching justice is ongoing.⁷⁸

Writing from a feminist perspective, Rebekah L. Miles supports Niebuhr's paradoxical vision but faults him for missing the degree to which—in addition to freedom—finitude and boundedness are loci for human fulfillment. A basic feminist insight, that 'we are formed in freedom and bound in love as we care for others and are cared for by them' leads Miles

⁷¹ Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 38.

⁷² Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 39.

⁷³ Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 39.

⁷⁴ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', p. 110; Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', p. 114.

⁷⁶ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', p. 114.

⁷⁷ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', pp. 119, 122 (quote on p. 122).

⁷⁸ 'The paradox of the self defines both the possibility and the tragedy at the heart of the moral life.' Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', p. 122.

to conclude, 'bonds form freedom, and freedom transforms bonds; bonds free, and freedom binds'.⁷⁹ This trajectory in Niebuhr's ethics is suggestive for discussions of solidarity's requirements and limits, and intersects with Catholic feminist scholarship that regards embodiment as crucial for understanding and combating unjust social patterns.⁸⁰ Feminists and liberationists have also challenged Niebuhr's overriding emphasis on sin in social life as pride, to the exclusion or marginalization of sin as sensuality or sloth—the self-centered flight from being all that one can be, or doing what one can and ought to do. Whereas pride, the sin of power-graspers, gravitates toward vicious offenses against prudence and justice, sensuality, the sin of those who flee from responsibility, is more often characterised by offenses against fortitude and temperance. Particularly for addressing the moral lassitude of affluent Christians toward solidarity's obligations, Niebuhr's treatment of sin as sensuality merits further consideration.⁸¹

Social Sin and Solidarity in Niebuhr's Perspective

Significant differences obtain between Niebuhr's social ethics and Catholic social teaching—in method, theological anthropology, social-theoretical suppositions—all with corresponding implications for practice. Perhaps because these differences co-exist with strong family resemblances, re-examining Catholic notions of social sin and solidarity from a Niebuhrian vantage point suggests fruitful questions, fresh emphases and possible enhancements. I will mention three ways in which Catholic teaching may benefit from Niebuhr's contributions, two ways that Catholic teaching might strengthen Niebuhrian realism, and conclude by arguing that both traditions need better connect their ethical discourse to social theory on one hand, and spirituality on the other.

Social Sin

First, Niebuhr's work challenges Catholic teaching to take fully into account sin's tragic and ubiquitous effects, especially in the social realm. To Catholicism's tendency to approach social sin and its redress in comparatively linear, ameliorative and irenic terms, Niebuhr's dialectical and

⁷⁹ Rebekah L. Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 158, 156.

⁸⁰ See, e.g., Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, 'Justice, Gender, and Care for the Frail Elderly,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Theology* 9.2 (1993), pp. 127–45; Christine Firer Hinze, 'Dirt and Economic Inequality: A Christian-Ethical Peek Under the Rug,' *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (2001), pp. 45–62.

⁸¹ Niebuhr discusses sin as pride and sin as sensuality in *Nature and Destiny of Man* I:186–202, 228–40. Feminist critiques date from Valerie Saiving's 1960 essay, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 25–42, through, e.g., Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*. Adapting Niebuhr's sin as sensuality to critique consumerist culture's capacity to inhibit solidarity will advance and expand these earlier discussions.

paradoxical understanding of humanity and history provides potentially corrective contrasts. Areas for productive interchange with Catholic thought include Niebuhr's depiction of history's drama and unpredictability; his proto-Foucauldian description of society as a complex field of struggles for power and self-interest; and his depiction of groups, less as organisms sharing a common good, than as distorted by the 'common bad' of group egotism (an egotism that comprises the effects of members' inattention and ignorance due to finitude, their culpable flights from understanding and responsibility, and their selfish grasping after power, possessions, and profit). More consistently than Catholic thought, Niebuhr tracks the way sinful self-interest clouds awareness of structural sin, confounds efforts to understand it, and removes the motivation to combat it. Niebuhr's observations concerning collective egotism's capacity to ensnare well-intentioned persons and altruistic actions in distorted social patterns can help Catholics better analyze and address dynamics such as patriarchy, nationalism, tribalism, and ethnic and racial division.

Niebuhr's hermeneutic of suspicion also presses Catholic social thought to sharpen its ideological acuity and its prophetic voice. His commitment to unmasking the complicated workings of sin in all quarters of collective life, including the church, urges a virtuous suspicion toward even their own best-articulated teachings and best-intended efforts to redress structural evil. Niebuhr's dramatic, tragic view of history and society, where the effects of sin as sloth and sin as pride multiply like the weeds among the wheat, underscores the need for Catholic justice agendas to incorporate (1) avenues for self-critique and for course adjustments as circumstances change or new knowledge is gained; (2) checks and balances to power—including the power of those who lead solidary efforts; (3) effective mechanisms of accountability; and (4) avenues for repentance and reconciliation in the cases where justice-making efforts fail, hurt, divide or oppress.

Solidarity

Second, Niebuhr's ethics suggest a realistic reframing of Catholic solidarity in terms of the 'impossible possibility' of the law of love in history. Recall that Catholic social teaching speaks of solidarity as fact, norm or social principle, moral virtue, and Christian virtue. Solidarity as fact is echoed in Niebuhr's treatment of the profound interdependence of selves and groups in history and society. However, Catholic descriptions of solidarity as norm (responsibility for the common good in light of factual interdependence) as moral virtue (the corresponding disposition and incarnational commitment to work for the common good) and as Christian virtue (the social face of Christian love whereby far and near neighbors are seen and treated as fellow children of God, and *imago dei*) each represent specifications of the law of love for present-day circumstances. As such, solidarity falls under Niebuhr's category of 'impossible possibility'.

As impossible possibility, the 'law of solidarity' stands in judgment over each of its concrete approximations, exposing the sin that laces even the most laudable social agendas. Positively, Christian solidarity entails altruistic practices whose goal is fully just social relations. This goal is never fully realizable under the conditions of fallen history, yet the law of solidarity lures and compels action toward it. Catholics who fail to grasp this dialectic gloss over solidarity's prophetic sting (a sting that exposes injustice, disabuses ineffectual utopianism, and spurs conversion) as an emergent norm for twenty-first-century praxis.

To re-describe solidarity in this way does not excuse Christians from pursuing it. Rather, these Niebuhrian tropes underscore the challenges and costs that solidarity dedication to the common good entails. They also invoke the prophetic realism of Catholics' own recent tradition, exemplified by people like Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who insisted that 'one who is committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor'.⁸² Romero also warned, 'A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth—beware!—is not the true church of Jesus Christ'.⁸³ Dorothy Day's famous observation that 'love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams',⁸⁴ also bespeaks this Catholic prophetic realism.

'Living High and Letting Die' Reconsidered

Third, Niebuhr offers tools that may help Catholics confront the scandalous problem of 'living high and letting die' among advantaged individuals and groups in a globalising world. Niebuhr's ideologically-sensitive lens is especially useful for analyzing affluent Catholics' mediocre reception (matched, it must be said, by Catholic leadership's less-than-insistent proclamation) of teachings on social sin and solidarity. A Niebuhrian gaze helps uncover subtle ways that sin insinuates itself into individual psyches and structural dynamics, including the dynamics of church teaching and practice. More pointedly and frequently than recent papal writings, Niebuhr would call to task materially-comfortable Catholics for failing to undertake what Jacques Maritain has called 'the sufferings due to solidarity'.⁸⁵ Niebuhr's hermeneutic of suspicion exposes both Catholic defenders of

⁸² As quoted by Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford the night before she and four companions died while working for the poor in El Salvador, December 1980. See 'Maura Clarke and Companions, Martyrs of El Salvador' (December 2005), at <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/25anniv/dec2/MauraClarkeandCompanions.pdf>.

⁸³ Archbishop Oscar Romero, homily, 22 January 1978. Quoted in 'Romero's Wisdom', U.S. Catholic.org, 25 February 2009, <http://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2009/02/romeros-wisdom>.

⁸⁴ Day drew this oft-repeated line from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, as Catholic Worker Jim Forest recounts in 'A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day's Witness to the Gospel', <http://www.incommunion.org/forest-flier/jimssays/a-harsh-and-dreadful-love/>.

⁸⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 208.

an unjust status quo, and the sentimentality or hypocrisy of 'liberal' or 'progressive' Catholics who tout teachings on social sin and solidarity, but to little practical effect. Niebuhr's analysis also challenges radical or liberationist Catholic tendencies to presume the innocence of injustice's victims, or to advance transformational agendas that ignore sin's persistence. All such betrayals of Christian realism, Niebuhr would warn, put Catholic social efforts in danger of foundering, either on the slothful Scylla of fragmentation, dispersion and futility, or on the prideful Charbydis of rigidity, presumption, and hypocrisy.

Structures of the Common Good and Virtue Ethics

Contemporary Catholic social thought also offers gifts to Niebuhrian realism. First is Catholicism's willingness to envisage social structures as capable of being 'structures of the common good'. Sin's social workings and ripple effects are never wholly unaccompanied by those of grace. Injected into a Niebuhrian ethic, this viewpoint can buoy work toward substantive, if ever-fragile and ambiguous, social advances. Second, Catholicism's developing treatment of solidarity as a virtue emerges from a tradition that emphasises communities of character, discernment and practice. This Catholic virtue theory augments a Niebuhrian picture of solitary selves navigating the dramas of history with images of communal boats, whose occupants row together to find and catch currents moving in the direction of the common good.

Conclusion: Social-Theoretical and Spiritual Ballast

Both Niebuhrians and social Catholics seek to wed a persuasive anthropology with prophetic and realistic social analysis, in ethical discourse that grounds and inspires justice-seeking action. Yet to do this, both traditions must more adequately incorporate social-theoretical and spiritual resources into their treatments of societal sin and its redress. On the Catholic side of this effort, scholarship flowing from the path-breaking work of Catholic philosopher Bernard J. L. Lonergan, SJ, and social theorist René Girard⁸⁶ especially recommends itself. From different directions, Lonergan and Girard marshal philosophical, social-theoretical and theological resources to illuminate the psychosocial complexities of group life. Each probes destructive social patterns with great acumen, and identifies trajectories for addressing them. Besides such refined understandings, building better bridges

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957, 1992); the work of Lonerganians Robert Doran SJ and Kenneth Melchin, *Living With Other People* (Ottawa, Ontario: Novalis, 1998); René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), Petra Steinmair-Posel, 'Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis', *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14.1 (2007), pp. 1–12, and works on Girard by Wolfgang Palaver, Raymond Schwager and James Alison.

between theory and committed action remains a pressing need. To move solidarity from idea to practice, justice-seeking communities require both intelligent social analysis and sustaining spiritual and moral disciplines. Here, contemporary Catholic social teaching encounters its pre-eminent ecclesial and public challenge.⁸⁷

Adopting these priorities can lead Niebuhrians and social Catholics to sharper social diagnoses, improved rhetorical efficacy, and enhanced odds of sparking and sustaining fruitful action on behalf of justice. Though their conversations may be contentious, Christian realists' and social Catholics' distinct strengths can work together to the benefit of their shared concerns. Confronted by the unjust suffering of our neighbors, continuing this dialogue and debate is worthwhile; connecting ethical discourse with sturdy practices of solidarity, essential.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2004).