

Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*
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The Sinhalese are by nature one of the friendliest people in the world but [they] can be easily but diabolically misled by Sinhalese racialists, who whip up hatred against the Tamils..

(Paul Caspersz, *Selected Writings 1945 – 2005*. Satyodaya, Kandy, Sri Lankan, 2005, p. 35.)

As I say in my essay, *Reign of Anomy*, most of my friends were and are Sinhalese: “Though it may appear paradoxical, I must also say that they were and are not “Sinhalese friends” but friends who, among other characteristics far more important to me, happen to be Sinhalese.” The comment by Paul Caspersz above and my own observation and experience, lead me to pick up some points from *Moral Man & Immoral Society* by Niebuhr (1892-1971): American, Protestant theologian, moral philosopher and political analyst. The book first appeared in 1932 but page reference here is to the 1960 (New York) edition.

During the succession of anti-Tamil riots, culminating in the pogrom of 1983, many a Sinhalese I knew related a *private* story of help rendered to hapless Tamil friends, often at great personal risk to themselves and their family. As in most such cases, such action affirmed human relations and humane values. In saving others, they saved some part of their valuable, inner, self. But there was no **public** outcry against these acts of violence perpetrated on defenceless civilians. As I write (April 2009), several individuals have, with admirable honesty and courage, highlighted the present appalling human tragedy of children, women and men – trapped and traumatised, injured or killed - on a sliver of land. But, again, there is no **group** outcry, no mass taking to the streets in outraged protest. *Germany and the Second World War*, (Volume 1X/1: German Wartime Society, 1939-1945), a publication of the Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam, Germany (2009) acknowledges that Nazism cannot be blamed only on a fiendish minority: it was the result of a certain politico-social “climate”, a fundamental aberration on the part of large sections of society. Only a few beacons of truth shone in the darkness of denial and lies; of

exclusion, injustice and violence. In terms of group attitudes and conduct, so it seems to be in blessed Sri Lanka. The question Niebuhr asks is why our behaviour as members of a collective is much less moral (less sympathetic and just) than our conduct as individual human beings. Niebuhr explores this phenomenon, showing its complexity and eschewing facile antidotes.

Niebuhr suggests that our conduct as individuals is influenced by reason and an understanding of the needs and feelings of others. He describes this trait as “self-transcendence”, that is, our ability to transcend our selfish self. But when caught up in a group, these ‘other-than-self’ attributes are vitiated, if not entirely destroyed. When within a group, there is little of reason to guide our conduct, less check on our impulses, less capacity for transcendence. Accepting generalisations (and myths) which, though an oversimplification, are very potent, our behaviour as a group is a shame to our ethics as individuals. In other words, as members of a group, we are ready to act in ways in which we, as individuals, would not. The tragedy of human history is that we have been unable to match our collective (group) behaviour to the ideals we cherish as individuals (p. 9). Though we are individuals, we are also members of a society, a nation, a state. Inescapably, we exist within a group, and our group behaviour leaves much to be deplored and regretted. Indeed, our group-behaviour can encompass the unjust, the cruel, the horrific.

Niebuhr argues that patriotism (since it confines concern and care to the group to which one belongs) is at root a limitation of human imagination and sympathy. The sentiment of narrow patriotism can reach such a degree of potency that the state is given *carte blanche* to use all the power at its disposal (p. 92), irrespective of the damage, destruction and tragedy it wreaks on others. The democratic method of resolving conflict, though it seems peaceful, can, in reality, be coercive since it depends on the vote of the majority. As members of a group, we accept (consciously or unaware) contemporary beliefs, assumptions and viewpoints (p. 246). Disappointed with what he has achieved in his own life, an individual may identify with the power-ambitions of his group (p. 18), and in that identification seek pride and compensation – never mind if my daily life is hard, if not wretched. There is no ethical action without self-criticism, but to criticise oneself there must be detachment and the ability to transcend one’s self. This transcendence is difficult to achieve at the group

level. Though one can be critical of, and at the same time be committed to, a group, criticism is discouraged, being mistakenly seen as evidence of a lack of loyalty.

The damage caused by group action, or in the name of a group, is far greater than damage done by individuals. Social conflict caused by “the disproportion of power in society” will not result in justice so long as the disproportion of power remains (p. xvii). But it is difficult to remove disproportion of power because “group egoism” is resistant to all moral and inclusive social objectives. The rationalist stresses a lack of understanding of the feelings and needs of others, while the religious individual emphasises selfishness as the root of social injustice. The latter fails to perceive the elements of injustice and (covert) coercion which are present in society. Because he does not recognise the injustices which a so-called peace can hide, he does not understand the impulse to break the “peace” on the part of members of another group. These injustices “are not easily recognised because they consist in inequalities which history sanctifies and tradition justifies” (p. 233). We fail to realise the power, extent and persistence of group egoism in human relations, bearing in mind that relations between groups are predominantly not moral but political, that is, having to do with power.

Niebuhr cautions that violent resistance will accentuate animosities and prejudice. On the other hand, the absence of resentment at, and resistance to, injustice simply means either a lack of intelligence or of moral vigour (p. 249) or both. Writing in the first decades of the 20th century, Niebuhr cites the discrimination which African Americans then suffered on a daily basis. However many individual whites identify themselves with the African American cause, white America, as a group, will not grant equal rights unless pressured to do so (p. 253). Martin Luther King, in a famous letter to his fellow priests (written from prison in Birmingham, dated 16 April 1963) cited Niebuhr:

“Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.”

So how does one proceed? Can human beings ever achieve that degree of reason and sympathy which will enable them to see and understand the interests of others as vividly as they recognise and respond to their own? Niebuhr does not provide facile solutions or hold out easy hope but neither does he advocate giving up the effort, the struggle. “The conclusion which has been forced upon us again and again in these pages is that [...] equal justice is the most rational ultimate objective for society” (p. 234). Indeed, *if there isn't equality, then there cannot be justice*. (One is reminded of George Orwell's satiric comment: all are equal, but some are more equal than others.) Equality is a higher social goal than a “peace” that has been imposed by force (p. 235). In so far as reason tends to dismantle unjust power, it makes for the diminution of the strength of the stronger, and adds to the strength of the weaker. The most perfect justice cannot be established if the moral imagination of the individual does not try to understand the needs, interests and feelings of his fellow human beings (pp. 257-8). That we will ever achieve perfect justice is an illusion but, nevertheless, the illusion (and goal) is a very valuable one because “justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul” (p. 277).

Niebuhr does not simplify or sentimentalise. On the contrary, he shows the near-impossibility, given our group attitudes and conduct, of achieving justice for all. Yet he insists that the effort must not be abandoned. It might seem crazy (“madness”) to aim at perfection but, even if we fail, we will still have arrived at a better – more humane and just – order of things than obtains in the sorry present. The hell or the heaven we experience in life is often of our own (human) making. Barack Obama (then a Senator) on the back cover of the new edition of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, 2009), describes Niebuhr as one of his favourite philosophers. Reinhold Niebuhr, writes Obama, recognises that much evil exists in the world; he acknowledges the almost insurmountable difficulty of combating inequality and injustice, and yet insists that we cannot give in to cynicism and inaction. As President Obama suggested during the recent (April 2009) G20 meeting in London, many may be blamed (for past action and present consequence), but it is now the responsibility of all of us to try to help build a better, more just, future.

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