CHRISTIAN CRITICISMS OF MARXISM

INTRODUCTION

Marxism is a world view that is based on atheism. This has meant that it has been critical of religion, and the advocates of religion have been opposed to Marxism. The views of two important thinkers will be studied in order to establish the basis for discussion of these contentious issues within this article. However it is the view of the author of this article that the contrast between religion and that of Marxism has been unnecessarily polarised. It could be argued that both the proponents of religion and Marxists often have common criticism of capitalism because of its justification of inequality and alienation. The major difference occurs on the issue of revolution and the possibility of coercion being utilised in order to bring about a new type of society. The proponents of the Christian religion would suggest that the aim of the Kingdom of God does not imply the role of coercion in order to realise this aim and instead it is about the generation of the influence of the spirit and an emphasis on peaceful change. Whilst Marxists would reply and suggest that Christianity often provides support for the existing system and is indifferent to the radicalising role of politics. But Marxists are considered to be about the importance of obtaining political power, and are intolerant towards any kind of opposition. In contrast, religion is said to be inherently conservative and is opposed to the rights of oppressed minorities. There seems to be nothing in common between the standpoint of religion and Marxism.

Before this issue is addressed in detail it is necessary to discuss some common criticisms of Marxism. Firstly, does it uphold a dogmatic view of history that implies that communism is inevitable? The suggestion is that Marxists uphold intolerance because they are convinced that their standpoint will be confirmed by historical development. In reply to this point, Marxists are able to outline how the various types of society that have existed up the present have been based on the role of the exploitation of producers by a wealthy economic ruling class. This situation has created social tensions, but empirical reality itself is very complex and provides no convincing expression that communism will be inevitable. Instead this possibility depends on the ability of the subordinated class to be able to overcome the influence of the ideology of the ruling class, and therefore be able to act as a collective force capable of transforming society. These possibilities also require the development of a Marxist party that is able to influence class struggle in the direction of socialism. None of these aspects are inevitable, or an expression of supposed historical necessity. Instead history has been very complex and open-ended. The outcome of social tensions cannot be considered to be certain and inevitable. Primarily the crucial aspect to be addressed is whether the subordinated class is able to acquire a high level of class consciousness. This point has proved to be problematical. Contingency is the most important aspect of contemporary history.

Secondly, is the aim of revolution distorted by the power imperatives of the role of a Marxist party? This question is influenced by the historical experience of the revolution in Russia and the formation of a single party state. Marxists should learn from this experience and develop their principles in a manner that upholds the role of democracy within the future society. In this manner the problem of power will be addressed and hopefully resolved in terms of the creation of a pluralistic society that is not distorted by the omnipotence of power by a single party. Furthermore, in this society there will be freedom of worship and restrictions on the right to express opposing views will be rejected.

However, Marxists have an important question for Christians. The history of Christianity has resulted in an accommodation to the Kingdom of Caesar in the name of deference to the earthly authority. This has led to the adaptation of Christianity to the various unjust social regimes that have been dominant. This is precisely an important reason why political doctrines like Marxism have emerged in order to facilitate change. The question arises as to whether it is possible to develop at least some sort of understanding about the possibility of common opposition to the limitations of capitalism and therefore express the ability to promote common objectives? The problem that will be encountered in this regard is that some Christians will contend that their conception of the Kingdom of God is not about political intervention. Instead it is about the transformation of the individual, via the influence of the Holy Spirit. Hence the goal is not about earthly power, and instead their aims are inherently of a spiritual character. However, it is possible for Marxists to recognise that the aim of promoting class consciousness involves developing the morale and virtues of self-sacrifice within the subordinated class. This process of change amounts to an enhancement of the spirit of the exploited, even if the aims are directly political. Hegel was right to connect the promotion of the spirit with historical development. Such a standpoint is not necessarily idealist, because the aim of the enhancement of class consciousness is the practical transformation of society. The task of opposing the influence of bourgeois ideology indicates the importance of generating the resolve or spirit of the working class to be able to be able to tackle the problems involved in the process of changing the character of social reality. Hence the secular aim of a mass movement of the subordinated class may not be identical to the religious intention to promote the Kingdom of God, but it could be argued that the aspirations of the Christian and political forces coincide in terms of the intention of promoting the ability of the spirit or consciousness to be able to motivate a transformation of society in these terms. Hence the material interests of the subordinated class could connect with the spiritual aims of the religious. Thus the rationalism of reason, in terms of social objectives, also has a profound spiritual or emotional aspect. The result is the development of class cohesion in order to generate social transformation.

If this spiritual process is connected to the class struggle it could mean that change is orderly and is essentially peaceful. What will be crucial to this development is the connection of the promotion of class consciousness with the highest generation of moral values. In this manner it is possible that the very advance of class struggle could occur in the most orderly, disciplined and peaceful terms. This prospect would not mean the dilution of the militancy of the mass movement, but instead its activity would be more effective in terms of the generation of a greater determination which is aligned to the practical expression of a spirit of change. In this context the emphasis on material improvement within the present system would be replaced by the hope that a new society could be created and realised. Deference to capitalism in terms of making humble demands on the system would be replaced by the confidence and assurance that it is possible for the subordinated class to become the major basis of the priorities of a new and more equal society. Thus the continual enhancement of the role of the spirit means that the process of transition to communism is occurring in a definite and resolute manner. The issue of what is the kingdom of God would become related to the activity of human beings on earth. However, many Christians would still object and claim that their approach is not based on the importance of earthly power and social objectives. The problem with this standpoint is that it demands perfection from human beings. In contrast, Marxism still upholds the view that human practice can transform society, but this process will be reinforced by the generation of the spirit. Certainly, this conception of the spirit will be philosophically inspired and have secular objectives, and so in this manner will represent a rationalist spirit of reason and improvement, but it will share religious affinities in terms of an emphasis on the spiritual transformation of the individual and their perspective that a society without materialistic priorities can be constructed. This approach may not overcome the differences between Marxism and religion in terms of their core beliefs, but it can indicate that an emphasis on the role of the spirit can suggest that demarcation is not as immense as originally envisaged.

It could be argued that the above view makes unnecessary concessions to the religious view. In actuality, it attempts to connect the views of the philosopher Hegel to the process of the possible development of the class struggle. The revolutionary character of the role of the spirit is connected to the necessity of solidarity and co-operation between the members of the subordinated class if they are to be able to overcome the domination of the capitalist system. What is envisaged is the virtues of morality, determination, and collective activity, in order to promote the possibility to realise the tasks of the class struggle. Marxists ask of Christians – can you support the aim of a better society, whilst Christians in the name of the Holy Spirit ask Marxists to repudiate the aim of power in favour of egalitarian objectives. Unity can be realised in these terms.

NICOLAS BERDAYAEV AND HIS CHALLENGE TO MARXISM

It would seem that Berdayaev has little in common with Marxism. He emphasises an ideology that expresses the importance of the individual personality and its relationship to community, and seems to be opposed to the collective emphasis of Marx. (1) Personality is not defined in terms of its relationship to nature, or society, and does not express the philosophical importance of reason. But it is creative activity and represents the role of the spirit. However, personality is not individual and instead is universal, but it is not collective. While opposed to the nation or state, it is not egotistical. The tragic aspect of personality is that it is generally not realised in history because of the domination of processes of objectification which mean that the personality is subject to the restraints of society. In this context there will be many situations in which humanity is not able to realise its personality, but the basis of freedom is the role of God: “But God as subject, as existing outside of all objectivisation, is love and freedom, not determinism and not domination. He himself is freedom and bestows freedom only.”(2) This view does not mean that God is omnipotent, but instead that God is part of the world and its suffering. Thus God expresses the attempt to overcome suffering and realise freedom. Such an approach is not based on a process of teleology which is a denial of the ability of the spirit to act as subject, and the striving for freedom does not occur at the level of society which is the denial of the importance of personality. The act of revolution may be motivated by attempting to overcome social injustices, but it is also adversely effected by its own myths which mean that success in its own terms is problematical. The point is that the attempt to realise the collective will is not more effective than the promotion of personality. Berdayaev does not consider that the advance of civilisation will result in human emancipation, and instead it promotes individualism and the rejection of social goals. But the most problematical aspect of human history is the role of the state and nation. The importance of nations leads to war and its ideology is based on ego-centrism and contempt for the people of the world. The bourgeoisie is based on the emphasis on material success and subjection to property, and this situation is symbolised by the important role of money.

Hence this criticism implies that in order to emancipate the role of the personality it is necessary to be opposed to the domination of capitalism and its tendency to promote nationalism and war. Such a view would imply that despite being critical of the collective approach of Marx, Berdyaev would be sympathetic to the emancipatory objectives of the process of revolution. He is aware that revolutions may be flawed, but what is the alternative in order to liberate the role of the spirit? But his answer is to imply that revolution is an act which is not able to overcome any of the limitations of existing society: “Revolution is irrational by nature. Elemental and even mad forces operate in it, forces which always exist in the human masses but which are restrained to a certain degree and up to a certain moment....Here we met with the chief paradox of revolution. Revolution is irrational. It gives rise to irrational instincts and yet it is always subject to rationalistic ideologies....In the future reason must triumph. But reason triumphs thanks to the revolt of irrational forces.”(3) Thus it is being argued that the Marxists perspective of revolution being realised in terms of the implementation of some coherent and reasoned understanding of historical progress is a myth. Instead revolution is an act of revenge on the ruling class and based on the instincts and emotions of the people. This situation is not conducive to the creation of a society that is better than what has existed in the past. Instead the leadership of the revolution are motivated by fear of the old ruling class and primary devoted to establishing a new repressive power structure. This possibility is enhanced by the impulses of hatred of the old rulers within the masses of the people. Thus whilst the aim of the revolution may have been to emancipate society from exploitation and repression, it has led to impulses of revenge within the new rulers and the people that ends all aspects of freedom and instead results in terror. It is argued that the new repressive methods are justified by the end of the new society, but: “The future in which the exalted end was to be realized never comes. In it there will be again those same repulsive means. Violence never leads to freedom. Hatred never leads to brotherhood. A general repudiation of human dignity because of a single hostile part of humanity will never lead to the universal affirmation of human dignity.”(4) Terror is the logic of revolution, and so Berdayaev concludes that it must be sinful. The disruption of revolution means that it cannot realise its aims of emancipation and instead it is irrational and undermines the development of the human personality. But this does not mean that counterrevolution should be supported.

The problem with this view is that it implies that only human perfection is preferable to the flaws of the secular character of human activity. Berdayaev does not recognise that revolution was generated by the limitations of capitalism and instead he implies that it was the elite act of fanatical people with the support of emotional masses. This is a caricature of a process based on the increasing support for revolutionary Marxism and the radicalisation of the mass of the people. But primarily Berdayaev does not outline how human progress can be realised in an alternative and more constructive manner. Thus what does the universalisation of the human spirit mean? How is the Kingdom of God realised? His emphasis is about the flaws of the various projects for human emancipation, but his own approach is vague. He is able to outline the problems of the ideologies of secular change and therefore contend: “The spell and slavery of collectivism is nothing else than the transference of spiritual communality, fellowship, universality, from subject to object, and the objectivization either of separate functions of human life or of human life as a whole.”(5) But how is it possible to realise the aim of personality? He is not able to address this issue adequately because he is against any suggestion that what is involved is a perspective for power. He implies that the aspiration of the personality is opposed to any conception that what is involved means the realisation of power, and to that end he is against the application of a collective will. But this means that he is defining what is meant by personality in terms of also rejecting any relationship to practice. Personality is an ideal condition that is expressed in a mysterious manner. In contrast revolution is a definite act of humans despite its possible limitations. The only alternative of Berdayaev is to imply that personality should be supported in principle against expressions of collective power: “The church, the state, the nation, the class, the party, may be converted into a tyranny of the community. But the community always presupposes of personality that it will expand effort and energy in conflict. An isolated personality can with difficulty struggle for its life.”(6) Such a contrast provides no definite criteria for how the personality is able to overcome the limitations of collectivism. He outlines how the role of the social group undermines the expression of personality, but his only alternative is to suggest in a vague manner that there is no contradiction between this aspect and co-operation. However, such an ambiguous views does not provide us with any greater knowledge as to how this relationship should be formed without becoming an expression of collectivism. Instead what is being justified is the principle of personality and its relationship to the social: “Collectivism is always possession by the false idea of abstract unity and totalitarianism. Such a unity is the slavery of man. The emancipation of man presupposes not the unity but the cooperation and love of the various elements. A spiritual federalism ought to be established in opposition to spiritual centralism.”(7)

This standpoint is rigid and dogmatic. Why is not possible to establish an acceptable form of collectivism that still upholds the role of the individual personality? This relationship can be established in terms of the importance of genuine democracy and accountability within any mass movement. Indeed this connection would be the preferable expression of how any genuine opposition to capitalism should be established. Instead of recognising this possible dynamic, Berdayaev can only outline in a vague manner how the role of the personal is also social. But in making this claim he is also insistent that this implies opposition to any form of collectivism. Hence in a confusing manner he is in favour of the role of the community and the social, but is against the importance of the collective. This rigid view means that his ability to outline a perspective of social emancipation is seriously undermined. He even considers that the role of unity is problematical. The result of his approach is to emphasise the individual aspects of personality.

Berdayaev contend that socialism represents the claims of society instead of personality. He suggests that collectivist socialism represents enslavement, and is instead in favour of personalist socialism. But crucially he does not outline what this means. He does contend that this form of socialism means self-government and the rejection of capitalism. Furthermore, he is in favour of a type of organisation in which the role of the proletariat and wages has been transcended. Instead: “Everyone who works will have equipment for production. But it is a spiritual movement in the world which ought to do away with the psychological and ethical category of the proletariat. Not the proletariat who is a heritage of evil and injustice from the past, but the integral man ought to stand out in his full stature.”(8) The class distinctions of bourgeois and proletariat will be replaced by a class society in which all people are workers in terms of different occupations, but the emphasis is on the realisation of personality. This means the individuality of people is realised in terms of the expression of the merits of their occupation and there will be no poverty. In order to establish this type of society requires a process of change instead of the compulsion of revolution: “The social question will be decided by molecular processes in the life of the people which brings the tissue of society to a new birth. It will be decided from below, not from above, as an effect of freedom, not by the act of authority.”(9) Hence the role of personal creative initiative will still be part of this society, but this does not mean domination of the means of production. Instead modest aims will characterise the process of economic activity.

Thus the aim of Berdayaev is the classless society. In that aim he is in agreement with Marx. But it could be argued that it is naïve to imply that all workers will be able to control their own means of production, or have limited forms of economic property. This situation could imply that inequality is created by the ability of individuals to establish increasing control over property and productive resources. This situation would undermine the aim of establishing a classless society. However, Berdayaev is also outlining in an important manner how the worker should have the ability to define their own relationship to property. What is being omitted in his approach is the role of workers management of production and co-operative forms of economic activity. This would enable the workers to have access to and control over production in a collective manner, which is also able to enable their individual potential to be developed. The point is that without the domination of capital it should be possible for workers to generate the initiative that enables them to produce in conditions of real freedom. In contrast, Berdayaev's conception of economic individualism could if carried to its logical extreme generate the limitations of a property owning society. There is tension between means and ends in his approach. However, the major problem in his approach is that he is not able to suggest how his personalist society is to be realised. He has rejected revolution as being irrational and counter-productive, but he also has no faith in the role of democracy. Instead in a vague manner he relies on the conception of a spiritual act of transformation, but what does this mean? He conceives of the necessity of spiritual revolution, which involves aspects like love and creativity. But what does this mean in terms of overcoming dominant power structures? In relation to this question he has no important perspective and instead he asserts dogmatically that the Kingdom of God can be realised in conjunction with this spiritual revolution. This standpoint is based on faith and cannot be connected to any process of actual change within society. In contrast the strategies of Marxism would still seem to be superior because they are connected to an understanding of material and empirical developments within society. It can also be argued that it is possible to overcome the limitations of past revolutions in relation to the ability to assimilate the lessons of past events, and therefore promote what could be a more popular, democratic and peaceful process of change.

In other words, it is Berdayaev's approach that is primarily dogmatic when compared to Marxism because he can only conceive of an exclusive process of spiritual transformation of society. But Marxism can conceive of different strategies of change, and is able to appreciate the difficulties involved in trying to bring about the success of revolution. Berdayaev is aware of the problems connected to the potential for spiritual transformation, but he cannot envisage its ultimate failure. Marxism is able to outline the choice between socialism and barbarism, but Berdayaev can only envisage the victory of the role of personality: “Personality lives through the whole history of the world, as its own history. Man ought to rebel against the slavery of history not for the sake of finding isolation within his own self, but in order to take this into his own infinite subjectivity, which the world is part of man.”(10) Thus the ought is conflated with reality in terms of the inherent triumph of the personality. This is a dogmatic conception of history which is more rigid than the open-ended and flexible interpretations of history made by many Marxists.

In a book about Russian Communism, Berdayaev seems to become more sympathetic to the role of revolution, which is considered to be an integral aspect of the Russian national character.(11) But this view was utilised in order to understand the revolution as the expression of the will and leadership of Lenin. Lenin had an elitist view that the act of revolution and organisation of the new state should be under the control of a party elite. In this context the role of dictatorship and coercion are important in creating the new society. This means that revolution is a sin which is characterised by chaos and violence, but it is also a judgement about the limitations of the old order, and was related the expression of discontent of the workers and peasants. Thus: “The revolution unshackled the strength of workmen and peasants for the making of history. This gave communism its dynamic strength. An enormous vital power which had been hitherto unsuspected was revealed in the Russian people.”(12) The impetus to revolution was also related to the world war and the failure of the bourgeois government to end it, but the ultimate outcome is to undermine the promise of a classless communist society and instead install a repressive state. Hence the character of Russian communism is a distortion of the aspiration for truth and righteousness, and this means that Communism is opposed to the ideals of Christianity and instead aims to impose a different form of thought based on atheism. But Soviet Communism has not overcome the repressive limitations of the Christian Church in Tsarist Russia, and instead continues its sinful relationship to society. Communism cannot create a new type of society based on improved human beings because it is still influenced by the methods of tyranny and coercion.

The problem with this analysis is that whilst Berdayaev knows what he is against, it is not made explicit how the alternative will be realised. Consequently it seems that revolution was an historical inevitability that occurred because of the inclinations of the Russian temperament. This implies that the destiny of Russia is truly tragic, and that it was likely that a sinful event would occur. Indeed this standpoint is confirmed when he implies in another book that the present period is one without either hope or progress.(13) He defines the present period as one of spiritual decadence and not its ascendency. If this was truly an expression of historical reality it would be difficult to establish how it would be possible for improvement to occur. This pessimistic conclusion is the result of the fact that Berdayaev knows what he is against, but it is more difficult to outline how an alternative can be realised. Instead he concludes in the most pessimistic terms that: “Modern history is an enterprise which has come to grief; it has not been glorified man as it led him to hope: the promises of humanism have not been fulfilled. Man is tired to death and is ready to rest upon any type of collectivism that may come, and human individuality will vanish once and for all. Modern man cannot stand up against his own loneliness and his own dereliction.”(14) Indeed he considers that the cultural, spiritual and philosophical decline of humanity is a long term process, and even blames the role of Protestantism for this development: “The revolt and protest inherent in the Reformation led to the evolution of modern history towards the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century, towards rationalism, the revolution and its ultimate effects, positivism, socialism, anarchism.”(15) This gloomy analysis does not contrast it with any suggestion of the spiritual advance of humanity, and in this context Marxism is the logical outcome of this process of decline of culture. This means history is based on the emphasis of the collective at the expense of the individual. But in a dogmatic manner, he asserts that the only alternative to the ascendency of rationalism and collectivism is a spiritual revival. (16) But this perspective takes the form of an irrationalist view that what will occur is conflict between the Anti-Christ and a religious revival. Communism is described in the following terms: “He is in the power of an unknown master, of a superhuman and inhuman force that grips the society, and does not want to know truth, the holy truth of God.”(17) The problem with defining history in these terms is that it seems that the major opponent of true religion is the role of Communism. Berdayaev can also contend that he is against capitalism and democracy but his emphasis concerns overcoming communism and socialism.

Indeed he contends that socialism is effectively the outcome of capitalism and does not differ from it in substantial terms: “Socialism is only a more consistent development of this system, the definitive victory and diffusion of principles latent in it. Socialists take over from bourgeois capitalist society its materialism, its atheism, its cheap prophets, its hostility against the spirit and all spiritual life, its restless striving for success and amusement, its personal selfishness, its incapacity for interior recollection. Waning of the human spirit and disappearance of spiritual creation wait alike on capitalism and on socialism, and from this point of view they are seen to be the fine flower of a long process of separation of man from God.”(18) In this extreme conclusion, he does not seem to have any toleration for any form of socialism which is considered as being opposed to the importance of the spiritual. In these rigid terms he is reluctant to consider whether socialism could be more principled than the elitist system which has developed in Russia. Instead he contends that socialism cannot be reconciled with the spiritual. But this lack of compromise is connected to his generally pessimistic understanding of history. The only alternative is the unrealistic view that it is possible to return to a more small scale and rural form of economic activity. Historical simplicity is his only response to the complexity and rationalism of both capitalism and communism. In this context he maintains that it will be possible to spiritualise private property, but he ignores the uncomfortable fact that if private property is generalised the economic tendency will be for it to become concentrated within the control of a few wealthy individuals.

He also argues that imperialism and nationalism can be replaced by a spiritual revival, but there is no policy as to how this possibility is to be realised. Instead it is like the justification of small scale property, the aim of peace is presented as a good idea. The question of overcoming the causes of war is not discussed. Thus it is asserted that: “The modern world, rent by violent quarrels of countries, classes and individuals, prone to suspicion and hate, is yet drawn from every side towards a universal unification, to a conquest over that national exclusivism which has been responsible for the fall of nations.”(19) There is no suggestion as to how this aim is to be realised, and the question of the relationship of war to capitalism and imperialism is not elaborated. Instead the only perspective that is outlined is that of a spiritual revolution and the aspiration to realise the Kingdom of God. But how can we overcome what is admitted to be a rejection of spiritual aims by humanity and the related influence of capitalism and socialism? In order to justify his perspective, Berdayaev maintains in an unlikely manner that people are rejecting democracy and politics in favour of spiritual values, and he implies in an equally vague manner that people will work out their forms of economic and political activity. He maintains in a rigid manner that earthly goals are an illusion and that instead: “But freedom of spirit, liberty to choose his path has been given to man. Christians must will the creation of a Christian society and culture, putting before all things the search for the kingdom of God and his justice.”(20) Thus there is nothing in history or social reality that upholds the realisation of the spirit, instead it is an issue of the ability of humans to make choices. But this point could be made about any political creed or adherent of a given social system. In this context, Berdayaev has not established a coherent perspective which indicates how and why in terms of the character of reality it is possible to strive for his aims. Indeed he would dismiss this argument as representing a teleological view which justifies the conception of necessity. However, instead he upholds what is essentially a voluntarist view that defines possibility and potentiality in terms of the vague autonomous ability of human to support religious choices such as the kingdom of God. But this view is actually contradicted by what he outlines as the importance of the influence of sin within reality, such as in relation to the role of capitalism and socialism.

Berdayaev argues in favour of a spiritual re-birth as the alternative to the sinful limitations of the upheaval of revolution. Only this perspective can result in a better type of society. The basis of this view is that the very persecution of the Orthodox faith by the state will promote the possibility of spiritual renewal. But it could be argued that the actual result of this persecution was to either create pressure for conformity with the state, or alternatively to develop conservative opposition. The only credible basis of the renewal of society would be a new revolution in order to end the influence of the power of the elite. Berdayaev's own view is elitist because he dismisses the importance of democracy and trying to establish the will of the majority. Instead he is effectively supporting the rebellion of the elect followers of Christ. The point is that if there are limitations to democracy, instead of advocating its effective demise, it is instead necessary to support its renewal and reform.

Berdayaev outlines what seems to be an important criticism of Marxism. He outlines how Marxism is based on the view that: “Socialism is messianic. There is only one elect class, the people of the covenant, the proletariat. It alone is free from the original sin which vitiates all history and all the so-called bourgeois culture, the sin of the exploitation of man by man and class by class.”(21) It is very possible for Marxism to justify this form of understanding of history, and therefore to describe the proletariat in these terms. In actuality, the proletariat has no historical mission, its exploitation by capitalism is not likely to result in opposition to capitalism. Instead it can attempt to reform society, or even aspire to achieve individual self-advancement. However, the very limitations of capitalism mean that the possibility of working class opposition is also possible. But this opposition does not mean that history is ending in communism. Instead the question of the character of power is contingent and specific. The outcome of social tensions will not necessarily result in communism. Instead capitalism is the system that can effectively resist attempts at its overthrow. However, this flexible view does not make spiritual transformation more likely. Berdayaev is upholding his own version of a messianic standpoint in terms of the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. This is not likely to occur because social reality seems to confirm the view that God cannot intervene within history. Only the conscious choices of humanity, which are themselves contingent and diverse, can influence its development. In this sense there is no explanatory superiority between either religion or Marxism. Instead the issue is resolved in terms of what approach can realise a higher level of popular support. In that context influence is connected to the role of public opinion.

Berdayaev maintains that Bolshevism was elitist because it was always based on ruling over the working class rather than expressing the interests of an actual proletariat. There is some substance in this criticism but the alternative is not to reject Marxism, but instead to outline and defend a conception of socialism that is truly democratic in the form of establishing the possibility of rule by the working class. This is not an unrealistic option, in contrast to the logic of Berdyaev views. He contends that socialism is effectively an ideological deception which cannot be realised. In actuality only the character of political practice will resolve this issue. We cannot utilise the experience of the Russian revolution in order to decide categorically that socialism is unrealistic and impractical. Instead only the outcome of an unknown and uncertain historical experience will be able to decide the answer to this question. What we do know is that capitalism does not have the ability to resolve the unrest within society. Instead it is based on an exploitative relationship between capital and labour. However, Berdayaev may be proved justified if the reaction to this situation takes a spiritual form. What would be most effective would be to develop the unity of the spiritual and political in the name of socialism. This is the option that is generally rejected in relation to the absolutism of Berdayaev. The problem is that because of the vague aspects in his approach it is difficult to develop a definite and practical strategy for changing society. Instead we know what he is against, but what he is in favour of is more obscure. In contrast, Marxism is still superior in terms of its strategic clarity despite a tendency towards dogmatism.

The point being made is that it is possible to create a type of Marxism which is not based on a messianic view that defines the working class as a chosen people with an historical mission to transform society in terms of the realisation of communism. Instead the working class should be understood as a subordinated class which is dominated by capital. (22) The political conclusions of this perspective are not certain or an expression of teleological destiny. Instead it is quite feasible that the working class is not able to overcome, and indeed may not be willing to oppose the role of capital within the relations of production. What is necessary is a socialist offensive against the power of capital, but this may not occur, and it could be argued that this task is too ambitious for the working class to contemplate. All we can establish within empirical reality is that the hegemonic power of capital results in exploitation. The implications of this situation are uncertain, and cannot be resolved by the workers accepting some type of revolutionary historical role. Instead all that can be suggested is that capital cannot overcome the reasons why class struggle may occur. What this situation means historically is uncertain. But Berdayaev is not able to comprehend society in these empirical terms, instead all that he can argue is that without the realisation of spirit as personality means that society is based on sin. The suffering of humanity will continue until the aspirations of personality is realised. This does imply that Christians are chosen, or have a messianic role, to establish the influence of personality within society. Consequently history has a telos to promote the kingdom of God. Christianity has so far failed within history because it has adapted to the state. Hence it has become alienated from its true messianic vocation. The problem with this perspective is that history is not teleological. This is because the impetus to realise the promotion of economic development within history has no sense of political progress. Hence society has been ruled by elites who represent the ability to control the economy. There is no precedent that establishes that the subordinated class, such as peasants or workers, will be able to end the situation of exploitation within the process of the development of the productive forces. Thus the only constant factor within history has been an inconsistent situation of technological advance, but even this possibility is assimilated into the aim of ensuring the control of elites over the economy and society. The only possibility to challenge this situation has been that of revolution. Thus revolution is not sinful or in some sense counter-productive and likely to fail. Instead it is the hope that what has been the logic of history will be transformed in terms of the interests of the subordinated. Unfortunately this promise of revolution has been betrayed because the temptations of economic and political power has proved to be attractive to the parties which have led the revolutionary process. In this context, the development of the economy continues to be promoted in terms of the interests of a new ruling class. This elite exploits the producers. But despite these failures revolution continues to be the only feasible method by which the hierarchy of economic domination can be ended. In contrast, Berdayaev's perspective of the realisation of the personality seems to be vague and ineffectual. For example, he denies the necessity of collective struggle in order to realise the aims of the spirit and personality. Instead he can only outline an ambiguous struggle by united individuals in order to realise his perspective. This approach still seems to be unrealistic when contrasted with the strategy of class struggle. It is true that class struggle within capitalism may never be successful, but it is as least more practical and plausible than the approach of Berdayaev, who accepts the actuality of revolution and yet criticises it as sinful. This confusion is not overcome by his own dogmatic call to establish the kingdom of God.

However, in his book: 'The Destiny of Man' Berdayaev seems to have adopted a more sympathetic view of the role of revolution. He comments: “Revolutions have a purifying and regenerating effect quite apart from the malicious and vindictive acts performed by their leaders and the masses. They have enormous spiritual consequences for national life and bring about a religious regeneration. They do not as such create a social order based on freedom and justice, but they get rid of many old wrongs, of much injustice and falsity. They re-shift the social layers and call to creative work men who had been repressed in the past and had no chance of occupying the foremost places. A revolution not merely destroys the old political order of the state but enables the state to put an end to the tyranny of some social classes over others.”(23) Thus Berdayaev accepts that revolution can result in social progress, even if does not realise its overall aims of ending inequality and injustice. Thus he accept that: “The right of revolt is morally justifiable when the wrongs of the old regime have grown outrageous and its spiritual foundations have crumbled away.”(24) It would seem logical that this standpoint would imply that the revolution was in some sense supportable, but this is not the conclusion that he establishes. Whilst being against counterrevolution, Berdayaev also contends that the revolution of based on the false philosophical premises of rationalism and its demand for a strict regulation of society which means that spirituality will be repressed. The character of revolution is based on the combination of elite rationalism and mass irrationalism and chaos. Thus he maintains that: “From the moral point of view our attitude to revolution is bound to be very complex. Christian morality is opposed to the revolutionary ethics which is based on vengeance, envy, malice and violence. A revolution unites and organizes the most vindictive, envious and embittered elements of a nation. This is what gives it victory. It is the law of every revolution. Revolution is by its very nature devoid of grace and is a symptom of man being forsaken by God. Divine Providence acts in it, but its ways are so mysterious and unfathomable. That they may lead through a complete separation from God. From the moral point of view revolutions must be condemned because they create the type of man possessed by vengeance, malice and thirst for violence....Religiously and morally we must take upon ourselves the blame for revolutions and regard them as part of our own destiny.”(25)

In other words the emotional aspects or revolution cannot be constructive and instead are only capable of ending the old order. Hence this means that revolution is an expression of the spiritual decline of the people, and in this manner represents a sin which expresses this situation of the malaise of the condition of Christianity. Such a situation would seem to imply that only the restoration of the old order can be constructive, but inconsistently Berdayaev does not make this conclusion. Instead he considers that counterrevolution cannot resolve the situation of dislocation and mass vengeance. But what is not explained is how can the forces of spirituality assert themselves in this situation of chaos? He does not explain his perspective in this sense. Instead he merely passively contends that it would be wrong to favour either revolution or counterrevolution. But the political logic of his perspective would suggest that he favours opposition to revolution because it is opposed to the values of personality which he considers to be primary and important: “Revolutions are inspired by the desire to struggle against tyranny, by ideals of liberty and instinctive love of it, but when they take place freedom is forgotten and a new and worse tyranny is created. The forces of revolution are opposed to the value of personality, of freedom, of creativeness and, indeed of all spiritual values. The most terrible thing is that revolutions suppress and destroy personality, the source of moral judgements and actions, and therefore free and original moral judgements become impossible.”(26)

This comment would imply that revolution should be opposed because it can only result in the undermining of the influence of spirituality. Instead in a dogmatic manner revolutions are considered to be events that are inevitable because of the decline of the importance of religion and spirituality. The limitations of the old order means that revolution becomes the only basis to resolve outstanding economic and political issues, but in an irrational manner. What would be more constructive and principled would be opposition to revolution, and the related assertion of an alternative of spirituality, instead of the passive and abstentionist position that is adopted. In actuality, Berdayaev is accepting that his standpoint is neutral, he is critical of both the forces of revolution and counterrevolution. But what is his alternative? He is not able to outline an independent policy that would express the possibility for Christianity to assert itself in the sinful situation of revolution. This indicates a lack of leadership, and instead whilst being eager to criticise the limitations of revolution, his approach has no practical implications. He knows what he is against, but we are not able to establish an alternative. Instead his actual perspective is an ideal conception of society that has little connection to actual events. The question remains: How do we establish the influence of personality in a sinful world?

Berdayaev outlines an ontology of what personality would mean in terms of its connection to the important role of labour. He maintains that: “Labour is transfigured and enlightened when it is experienced in spiritual freedom as redemption of creativeness.”(27) But this understanding is not outlined in terms of what this means practically in relation to overcoming the alienation and exploitation of the capital-labour relation. Instead in a vague sense he argues that his perspective means that labour becomes individual and is not regulated by society. But this aim is unrealistic because many types of products required by consumers require the application of collective and mass work. In actuality he is proposing to return to an ideal world of simple commodity production and independent craftsmen. Such a situation could only be possible for small groups of workers, and the majority would have to still be based on large scale types of production. Hence the actual and relevant question is how can the liberation of the co-operative character of labour be realised? The principle of personality does not seem to answer this question.

Berdayaev comments that “The struggle against the injustice of capitalism is first of all the struggle for the economic rights of the individual, for the concrete rights of the producer....Liberation of labour is the liberation of personality from the oppressive phantasms of the bourgeois capitalist world, from the oppressive power of herd-life. The moral purpose is, however only partly realizable, for the tragic conflict between the individual and society cannot be finally solved within the confines of our sinful world.....Personality is essentially social and its partial de-socialization, attained through liberating it from the tyranny of the herd, enables it realise its social and cosmic vocation in spiritual freedom.”(28) This implies that establishing the individual character of labour is also a spiritual task. Hence this would imply that the former aspect is not likely to be realised without the role of the latter. But this approach is not outlined in terms of its practical difficulties in relation to the task of generating sufficient goods in order to provide for the needs of society. Thus the limitations of individual production in this regard are not addressed. Instead it is defended as the most effective means to realise spiritual values. In this manner the role of the ideal is imposed onto empirical reality. Furthermore, this perspective is defended in terms of the rights of private property as against the emphasis on the social character of production under socialism. He contends: “But at the same time there is something essentially right in private property; it is connected with the principle of personality and....if a man is deprived of all personal power over the material world of things, of all personal freedom in his economic life he becomes a slave of society....If the community or the state is the sole owner of material goods of every description it can do what it likes to the individual....Economic dependence deprives man of freedom, whether it be dependence on the capitalists, or upon the community and the state.”(29)

This is a fair comment but it does not resolve the outstanding economic problem of how to generate sufficient goods in order to realise the material interests of society. In this context the answer cannot be resolved by regression to an outmoded and limited form of individual production. Instead the right to be a private producer must be combined with social forms of production that do not encourage the consolidation of exploitation of the producers. This can be realised in terms of workers management of production, which Berdayaev does not consider to be an option compatible with spiritual freedom. He is against capitalism and the utilisation of property in order to exploit the workers, but his alternative is the unrealistic view that all producers can become independent private property owners. This should be a right of any socialist society, but only cooperative production can met the needs of society. Berdayaev outlines how the self-limiting rights of property is what is most compatible with the spiritual principles of personality. This may be a valid point, but it is implied is that only small scale production is compatible with Christian principles. This ignores the uncomfortable fact that under capitalism small scale production becomes large scale and under the control of monopolies, and also that this development is rational because it expresses the ability to meet the needs of society. Hence the answer to the exploitation of the capital-labour relation must be the creation of a higher form of social production that does not undermine the interests of each individual worker. This possibility can be realised if the workers themselves are able to control the character of property in terms of their control of production. In other word it is possible to reconcile the interests of the individual with the necessity of collective production under socialism. In contrast, tough economic reasoning is not applied by Berdayaev's conception of personality.

However in a sense he cannot be blamed for his flawed reasoning because he concludes that the Russian revolution has led to the realisation of state property, which is developed at the expense of the interests of the individual: “The falsity of communism and its tyrannical character is due to the fact that it does not rise superior to the conception of the absolute right of property, but merely wants to transfer this right to the community or to the state. The collective social unit is the absolute owner, feudal lord, capitalist and banker. It is the most merciless of owners recognizing, no tribunal, no authority, no higher power of any kind. The individual is completely enslaved by the herd and deprived of spiritual freedom, of the freedom of conscience and thought. Property in the sense of an attitude to the material world of things is always bound up with herd-life and may become a means of enslaving personality. Man may be enslaved by both his own property and by the property of others. But property is also a source of man's free activity in the social world and, as it were, its continuation in the cosmos.”(30) In other words the answer to the state system of production in the USSR is to establish the primacy of individual forms of production. In this context, the issue of economic growth is being subordinated to moral principles, but the problem with this view is that the question of how to create sufficient goods is not being resolved. Instead theory does not result in practical resolution of an acute economic problem. However, Berdayaev is right to insist that state ownership is not the emancipatory answer to all these issues. In this context he has made an important argument in favour of independent and individual production. What is omitted from his analysis is recognition of the type of democratic socialism advocated by people like GDH Cole which does uphold the principles of the dignity of labour. In this context it is possible to reconcile the interests of the individual producer with social goals. But, in relation to the USSR it was true that the social imperative was utilised in order to deny the rights of the individual, and this was the basis to justify forced collectivisation of agriculture.

Berdayaev concludes this aspect of his analysis by maintaining that: “The social problem itself can only be solved if there is a spiritual regeneration.....The social question is inevitably a question of the spiritual enlightenment of the masses, without which no justice can be achieved.”(31) This standpoint would seem to be an expression of classical religious idealism, and so has little importance for a Marxist approach. However, if we recognise the influence of bourgeois ideology and its emphasis on values of egoism we can understand how relevant the view of Berdayaev is. What has to be admitted is that the question of developing class consciousness has an irreducible spiritual aspect. If we are to develop the aspects of co-operation and solidarity within the working class it will be vital to enhance what could be defined as its spiritual attributes. This recognition does not mean that a religious approach is required, but instead that the moral virtues of altruism and mutual support are in some sense a promotion of what could be defined as spiritual. Furthermore, it could be argued that it is the very character of capitalism which generates spiritual problems such as the justification of selfishness and a lack of empathy. Instead of ignoring issues of morality and spirituality, it would be more constructive for Marxism to reject its previous indifference to these questions which have been considered to be the expression of the views of religion. The point is that the very possibility to promote class struggle may be connected to overcoming limitations in relation to the apparently mystical and yet relevant issue of spirituality.

Berdayaev is ambiguous about technical progress, which he recognises is important for economic improvement but he also indicates that it can undermine the realisation of spiritual goals. In relation to his approach he cannot resolve his dilemma because his emphasis is on the spiritual superiority of small scale and individual production, which implies technological stagnation. The only basis to resolve his tensions is to outline the possibilities for a type of large scale production which would not undermine the interests of the individual. In this context the approach of guild socialism is the most promising. However, in the last analysis the perspective of Berdayaev is unrealistically idealist in that it implies the intervention of God in order to resolve political issues. He comments: “A perfect society is only thinkable in a perfect cosmos and means the transfiguration of the world, a new heaven and a new earth, the New Jerusalem and the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is not a social and political system in the conditions of our earthly life and time.”(32)

The major problem with this perspective is that Berdayaev cannot connect explicit social and material reasons in relation as to why it is possible to realise the Kingdom of God. Instead his approach is based on the necessity of divine intervention. Hence his approach is dependent on the role of the influence of the cosmos, and there is no objective basis for this development. However, in a vague manner he implies that the development of support for a religious type standpoint will bring about the realisation of the Kingdom of God. The lack of realism in his approach would seem to suggest that Marxism is still more realistic because its approach is based on the social and material importance of economic and political questions. This does not mean that Marxism is more successful or popular than various forms of religion, obviously it is not, but is still able to articulate strategies for changing society. In contrast, the tendency for religion, is to accommodate to existing forms of power. It is not able to elaborate an approach that would connect religion with the aims that are generally upheld by socialism.

Nevertheless, the merit of Berdayaev's approach is to at least suggest that a type of socialism should be implemented within society. There is a progressive aspect to his approach in that he is defending an alternative form of socialism when compared to that advocated by Marxism. His approach is most comparable with that of Proudhon, and has similar limitations, but at least he recognises that capitalism should be superseded. Thus his differences with those of Marx are at least about what represents the most emancipatory alternative to capitalism. He is aware that capitalism represents the erosion of the human personality, and so is against the spiritual values that he supports. However, what he does not discuss is whether the standpoint of Marxist socialism can be made compatible with his spiritual values. The major reason why he does not consider the possibility of such an affinity is because he rejects the creative potential of the working class to promote the formation of a socialist society. Instead his emphasis is about what the individual can express and realise in terms of control and utilisation of personal property. The fact that collective production is required in order to meet the material needs of society is not discussed by Berdayaev. Thus he outlines an ideal form of economic activity and so does not discuss whether it is able to realise the aims of consumption and other requirements. Consequently he elaborates a form of economy that is compatible with his standpoint of personality, but this is not connected to the question as to whether such an economy is able to meet the material interests of society. Thus his approach can be justified in theoretical terms, and even outlines some of the limitations of Marxism concerning its conception of socialism, but he is not able to also defend his alternative in practical terms.

Despite his limitations, Berdayaev has elaborated a perspective that is against capitalism and war, and does not support counterrevolution against revolution. However, he is very critical of Marxist revolution and considers that it was inevitable that it would result in a totalitarian tyranny. Thus Berdayaev is able to establish what he is against, but what he supports is more vague and hypothetical. The problem he has is that whilst the forces of religion are generally conservative, he is trying to defend a progressive alternative to capitalism. He is generally in favour of socialism, but the forces of Christianity prefer to defend secular capitalism against atheistic Marxism. Hence his perspective is not connected to any movement, and instead he was essentially articulating his own form of personalist socialism. But what is important in his approach is the overall argument that the aim of replacing capitalism would be immensely enhanced by the role of the spiritual. This does not mean that Marxism has to reject its revolutionary objectives, instead they could be expressed in terms of the promotion of class consciousness and the generation of the solidarity necessary to realise the objective of communism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Nicolas Berdayaev: Slavery and Freedom: Geoffrey Bles, London No date

(2) ibid p83

(3) ibid p192

 (4) ibid p195

(5) ibid p201-202

(6) ibid p202

(7) ibid p204

(8) ibid p214

(9) ibid p219

(10Ibid p267

(11)Nicholas Berdayaev: The Origin of Russian Communism, Geoffrey Bles, London 1937

(12) ibid p137

(13)Nicholas Berdayaev: The End of Our Time, Sheed and Ward London 1933 p12

(14) ibid p15-16

(15) ibid p30

(16) ibid p64-65

(17) ibid p88

(18) ibid p93

(19) ibid p99

(20) ibid p119

(21) ibid p182-183

(22)Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin Press, London 1995

(23)Nicholas Berdayaev: The Destiny of Man, Geoffrey Bles, London 1937 p209

(24) ibid p210

(25) ibid p209-210

(26) ibid p211

(27) ibid p214

(28) ibid p216

(29) ibid p217

(30) ibid p220

(31) ibid p224

(32) ibid p231-232

REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE CONCERNING SOCIALISM

Another important Christian commentator about Marxism and socialism is Reinhold Niebuhr. His views are outlined in his work: 'Moral Man and Immoral Society'. (1) The starting point is similar to the approach of Marx when he comments: “Human society will never escape the problem of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods which provide for the preservation and fulfilment of human life.”(2) Hence contrary to the spiritual principles of Berdayaev, Niebuhr is prepared to outline an approach that is based on the importance of the role of material interests and the connected struggle to overcome the unequal distribution of goods. He is upholding the view that dominant ruling classes have developed over the centuries which have been orientated towards the denial of the rewards of labour because of unjust economic and political systems. This means that he accepts the important view that the development of technology has not led to the logical amelioration of the problems of the subordinated classes within the economic relations, and has instead resulted in the intensification of the domination of those forces that have controlled the utilisation of technology in their own interests. However, this does not mean that he concludes in pessimistic terms that this situation cannot be overcome. Instead he argues that: “Man is endowed by nature with organic relations to his fellowmen; and natural impulse prompts him to consider the needs of others even when they compete with his own.”(3) Thus he actually argues that man is not necessarily defined by sin but instead he has a progressive and cooperative aspect that could realise the possibility of a society based on equality and social injustice. Therefore it has been various forms of class society that have undermined this possibility, but this is not a natural expression of the human condition. There is the possibility, defined by the very ability of people to work together within the economy and society, to create a more just type of society. But he also asks the question as to why this egalitarian society has not been created. This is because humans have also accepted the importance of competition, which means they oppose each other as individuals. There are conflicting impulses within human activity and consciousness: “While it is possible for intelligence to increase the range of benevolent impulse, and thus prompt a human being to consider the needs and rights of other than those to whom he is bound by organic and physical relationship, there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which makes it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves.”(4)

The dilemma for the supporters of a more egalitarian society is that the impulse for social goodwill may not be as great as the egotistical striving for individual advancement. This is not an argument against socialism, but instead it outlines this aim in terms of these conflicting impulses and tendencies which have historically opposed the possibility for collective action in order to transform society in more just terms. This point has been historically underestimated by Marxism which equates the collective character of the working class with the potential for socialism. Such a perspective may not be untrue, but it has to be placed within the context of what Niebuhr is suggesting is the fact that humans often prefer to try to improve their own situation as opposed to uniting with others in order to transform the character of society in egalitarian terms. This contradiction means that socialism cannot be the inevitable historical outcome of capitalism. Instead its possibilities depend on whether it is possible to promote the role of co-operation instead of individual egoism within society. The problematical issue is that: “Divergence of interest, based upon geographic and functional differences within a society, is bound to create different social philosophies and political attitudes which goodwill and intelligence may partly, but never completely harmonise.”(5) Thus the dilemma for any advocate of social change is that there are contrasting tendencies which undermine the impulses for common action in order to realise a utopian society. Indeed the problem has often been that within history it has been these aspect of individual improvement which have frequently proved to be more significant than the generation of common unity in order to realise social justice. This situation has not been changed with the development of democracy because the majority have often voted in favour of the status quo. Democracy itself has proved to be the means to resolve social conflict.

What Niebuhr is suggesting is that the forces for change are often reduced to being a minority, and therefore this means that change could become an expression of opposing the democratic will. The problem is that the majority of society often votes in favour of a type of society that upholds the power and domination of elites. This means the revolutionary standpoint is an expression of rejection of democratic opinion. However, what democracy also obscures is the implicit role of coercion in order to uphold the domination of elites. Niebuhr is outlining the problems that democracy poses for any advocate of change. Democracy can be a political system in which the interests of a minority are upheld by the means of formal majority rule. The real majority represented by the standpoint of socialism can be reduced to a minority position because it is not able to obtain popular support. Instead people continue to uphold the interests of a ruling class and its domination by means of formal majority votes. The actual relations of coercion and power are obscured in this manner. Hence the character of the political system acts to enforce the situation of individual egoism and domination within economic relations. There is a strategic impasse in this situation which has led Marxists to reject the flaws of bourgeois democracy. But this means that revolution becomes to be considered as an expression of opposition to democracy. Such a revolution would mean that the socialist regime would lack democratic credentials. Hence the capitalist system of reaction is upheld by the biased character of democracy. There seems to be no manner in which this strategic impasse can be resolved unless an unexpected victory in the democratic elections is gained by the socialist parties. This prospect does not seem to be likely given that people prefer to vote in favour of parties that advocate that the system should not be substantially changed.

But Marxists would also argue that the very dynamic process of class struggle can establish new forms of democracy which express the aims of a mass movement, such as Soviets in the Russia of 1917. These institutions provide an articulation of the role of an active and dynamic form of democracy which is able to undermine the formal role of bourgeois democracy. But the legitimacy of this new form of democracy can only be temporary and at some point has to be replaced by acceptance of the institutions of universal suffrage. This was the mistake of the Russian revolution in that the Constituent Assembly was dissolved and instead the limited role of the Soviets justified what became a flawed process of democracy based on one party rule.

Hence Niebuhr is outlining important economic, social and political reasons why the impulse for cooperation represented by socialism are unlikely to be realised. The dilemma is that whilst the moral argument for socialism as the expression of cooperation and equality is important, it is not practically feasible because the forces in favour of reaction seem to be more powerful and influential. In the last analysis people prefer to aim for individual gain within the system rather than developing solidarity in order to bring about social change. This perspective is connected to an historical analysis which indicates that various systems of power and elite economic and political domination have been common and widespread. Niebuhr does not dispute that in the modern era the capitalist class has the major form of power, and that this situation is not modified by the democratic system. Hence the problem has been that the situation of unequal economic domination has led to power for elites, and they have carried out wars and imperialism in order to further the interests of nations at the expense of others. In the last analysis, the aims of socialism are undermined by the fact that the impulse for cooperation is not as important as the intention to establish new forms of power and domination for what would be a new elite: “There is, for instance, as yet no clear proof that the power of economic overlords can be destroyed by means less rigorous than communism has employed; but there is also no proof that communist oligarchs, once the idealist passion of a revolutionary period is spent, will be preferable to the capitalistic oligarchs, whom they are to displace. Since the increasing complexity of society makes it impossible to bring all those who are in charge of its intricate techniques and processes, and who are therefore in possession of social power, under complete control, it will always be necessary to rely partly on the honesty and self-restraint of those who are not socially restrained. But here again, it will never be possible to insure moral antidotes sufficiently potent to destroy the deleterious effects of the poison of power upon character.”(6) Thus the problem is that the role of power within society has traditionally led to the domination of elites and in this manner undermined the collective aspirations for a better society. It would seem to be logical that Niebuhr would conclude that the central historical question would imply that it is necessary to concentrate on trying to promote a type of society in which the role of power is regulated and modified in terms of the interests of the majority. Unfortunately he considers that this is impossible. Instead he concludes that: “But meanwhile collective man, operating on the historic and mundane scene, must content himself with a more modest goal. His concern for some centuries to come is not the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster. That goal will seem too modest for the romanticists; but the romanticists have little understanding for the perils in which modern society lives, and overestimate the moral resources at the disposal of the collective human enterprise so easily, that any goal regarded as worthy of achievement by them must necessarily be beyond attainment.”(7)

Hence Niebuhr has outlined an understanding of history which is not based on the imposition of religious principles onto reality and instead has important similarities with that of Marx. But there are significant differences in that he is pessimistic about the emancipatory possibilities of the role of collective action. He does not consider that this aspect is able to overcome the unequal character of the role of power, and the connected development of elites who control society. Consequently instead of defending a utopia that does not address these issues of power and elitism he suggests that a more modest standpoint be adopted. The problem with his approach is that the role of unequal power within society cannot be resolved, and instead he must be defending some new type of this social formation. Hence he implies the role of power cannot be replaced by the genuine classless society because of the deficiencies of the collective will. But the problem is that his modest approach means that he effectively justifies a type of unequal power structure that will not be able to establish social equality. This could mean that all the problem of the previous forms of society become reproduced and upheld by the role of a new elite. In other words he is effectively suggesting that there should be the rule of an enlightened elite, which will use its power in a modest manner. This standpoint is what is genuinely unrealistic. Instead of this problematically modest conception of society, it should be possible to develop a standpoint in which the collective will of society is genuinely realised. This process may be difficult, and problems could occur. But the alternative is that inequality and the rule of an elite will develop. The limitation in Niebuhr's position is that he considers that human nature is permanent and is flawed by selfishness and egoism. He does have a standpoint which implies that the will-to-power is a permanent feature of society. Instead of this pessimism we can maintain that the development of collective struggle is possible against dominant economic power. This means that the outcome of this development could be the realisation of collective power. It would be unrealistic to imply that power itself could be ended by social change, but this does not mean that the collective will cannot be realised. Niebuhr has outlined the importance of egoism and power imperatives within society, but he concludes in a pessimistic manner that solidarity is also difficult to realise. Marxists would still reject this pessimistic view and instead contend that the realisation of a collective will is possible. This perspective need not imply that social goals will be logically impractical and difficult to realise. Instead it will be possible to bring about the end of the domination of capital over labour in the form of industrial democracy. These measures could be complemented by the realisation of a welfare state. Indeed, this goal has to some extent already been realised under capitalism. The point is that so-called human nature can undergo radical changes if expectations of advance and progress become part of the popular will. In this context the role of a Marxist party will be to promote the ability of people to participate in the changing of society. It will be a betrayal of its character, if this party becomes primarily concerned with its own power imperatives. This development has never occurred in history, but this does not mean that such a possibility cannot be realised. We do not have to be content with the modest goals being justified by Niebuhr.

But at least the superiority of Niebuhr's standpoint is that he does not impose religious principles onto reality. Instead his argument has empirical type reasoning and justification. In this manner he is outlining an approach that has validity in terms of its relationship to actual history. Also despite qualifications he is also in favour of the realisation of social justice. In this manner his standpoint has similarities with Marxism. However, his approach is also ambiguous about the overall conclusions of Marxism and its emphasis on the collective potential of the working class. But despite these tensions his standpoint represents generally progressive impulses and opposition to capitalism. The major problem with his approach is that he considers that selfishness is likely to undermine any tendencies for individuals to combine as a collective. Instead the collective is effectively defined by its dilution into various rival individual tendencies within society. Marxism would not deny this tendency within society, but would also argue that the proletariat has the potential to overcome these traits and instead become united because of its common situation of being exploited by the forces of capital. The problem with this view is that it has only been expressed in exceptional situations within history. Indeed it could be argued that the very collective impulses within the working class are differentiated because of workers being divided into different workplaces and separated by the importance of distinct occupations. Hence collective action only occurs in terms of this sectional division, and so the workers are never united totally into becoming one mass movement with shared objectives based on opposition to the domination of capital. As a result of this situation Niebuhr is effectively right to suggest that the interests of the capitalist elite will benefit because of the differentiation within the working class.

But he also argues that humanity has the ability to overcome this apparently self-defeating situation. The capacity of humans to reason means that they are able to realise high levels of rationality. This enables humans to realise impulses of sympathy and compassion with other humans. We can imagine the plight of the suffering of others, and this means that we have the potential to go from a situation of empathy and translate this into practical terms of common action against injustice. This development can be defined in moral terms of feelings of benevolence, kindness and unselfishness. Thus: “The measure or our rationality determines the degree of vividness with which we appreciate the needs of other life, the extent to which we become conscious of the real character of our own motives and impulses, the ability to harmonise conflicting impulses in our own life and in society and the capacity to choose adequate means for approved ends.”(8)

But the practical result of this view is that the ability of humans to realise united impulses of solidarity because of the cognitive role of reason suggest that at some point the justification of selfishness and individualism could become intolerable. The fact that this possibility has been difficult within human history does not mean action in accordance with reason will not occur. Instead it is feasible that at some point the ability to reason will realise a cooperative and united effect of action because society has become intolerable. The fact that existing society is based on the impulse of power and not reason will express a contradiction that has to be resolved. Therefore: “But the reasonable man is bound to judge his actions, in some degree, in terms of the total necessities of a social situation. Thus reason tends to check selfish impulses and to grant the satisfaction of legitimate impulses in others.”(9) The point unintentionally being made is that a society based on the impulses of selfishness and the power of an elite is irrational, and so will ultimately become unacceptable to the influence of reason within the majority of society. To some extent the role of ideology can uphold the importance of irrationality, but this situation has the potential to become intolerable because to some extent even the most unjust society has to reproduce itself on the basis of the promotion of forms of reason, but in a limited and distorted form. Hence there is an impetus for reason to be present in even the most unjust societies in the following manner: “It is a question whether reason is ever sufficiently powerful to achieve, or even approximate, a complete harmony and consistency between what is demanded for the self and what is granted to the other; but it works to that end.”(10) Hence whilst the ruling class has to promote irrationalism and emotional attitudes in order to perpetuate its rule, the impetus for reason is bound to be expressed in how society functions and in relation to the connections between people. This means the influence of reason is always the primary criteria by which it is possible to both create solidarity within existing egotistical society, and to promote a type of alternative.

In other words, Niebuhr undermines his own sense of pessimism about the ability to create a society based on social justice because of his emphasis on the importance of reason. The influence of reason within even the most elitist and irrational societies means that the potential for a different type of society is a constant factor within history. The fact that people have the ability and potential to express the capacity for reason means that they can achieve a condition of solidarity and cooperation with each other. The reasoning of humans means that the potential to establish a better type of society based on the consistent principles of social justice and equality is an ever present even within the apparently unfavourable circumstances of capitalism. It is reason which expresses the premises for collective action to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism: “An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyse the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society....A growing rationality in society destroys the uncritical acceptance of injustice....It may also make those who suffer from injustice more conscious of their rights in society and persuade them to assert their rights more energetically. The resulting social conflict makes for a political rather than a rational justice. But all justice in the less intimate human relations is political as well as rational, that is, it is established by the assertion of power against power as well as by the rational comprehension of, and arbitration between, conflicting rights.”(11)

Thus there is a pessimistic aspect to Niebuhr's emphasis on the importance of rationality because he contends that its very advance will result in the irrational struggle for power. This implies that the end result of reason may be unintended, and so generates the domination of a new elite. Hence he cannot envisage a truly progressive end to the tension between reason and irrationality. However we can dispute this conclusion, and suggest that the very practical application of reason can result in more constructive possibilities. This is because the necessary struggle for power does not necessarily undermine the role of reason. Instead it could be argued that the very highest levels of reason are required in order that the subordinated class is able to develop a strategy that can bring about the end of the old order. Furthermore, if the subordinated class was to descend to the level of irrationality it could be argued that it would not be able to achieve its aims which can only be defined in terms of the highest levels of reason. Only rationality is compatible with the principled application of the collective will of the subordinated class. This means that irrationality would undermine the social cohesion of the attempt to overcome the domination of the ruling class. However, it has to be admitted that this perspective is difficult to uphold given the emotion involved in any attempt to end the domination of the old ruling class. The influence of emotion could degenerate into irrationalism, and so it is necessary to uphold the highest level of discipline if irrationalism is to be avoided in the struggle for political power. Admittedly a revolution expressing this highest levels of self-restraint has never occurred in history, which is possibly why revolutions in the past have often failed. But if we learn the lessons of history we can appreciate that the more reasonable and orderly is the revolutionary process, the greater is the chance that it will realise its objectives. This is why in order to promote a rational form of revolution, it should also be peaceful and democratic. Any unwanted social conflict could result in the role of the irrational distorting the revolutionary process. Niebuhr considers that this possibility is unavoidable which is why he is against the strategy of revolution. Empirically his view seems to have historical justification, but it is still pessimistic. It is possible to learn the lessons of history precisely because we have the attribute of reason, and this enables us to recognise that it is necessary to reconcile the struggle for political power with the importance of rationality.

Indeed Niebuhr recognises that it is continually possible to improve the role of reason so that we are able to realise the political results which we intended. In this context he remarks: “If the social scientist is able to point out that traditional and customary social policies do not have the results, intended or pretended by those who champion them, honest social intentions will find more adequate instruments for the attainment of their ends, and dishonest pretensions will be unmasked.”(12) This comment indicates that precisely because humans are rational they can reflect and improve their ability to act in accordance with the role of reason. Hence it is possible to overcome those aspects of irrationality which undermine the attempt to realise political aims according to reason. Humans are capable of acts of intellectual cognition and reflection which means that the objective of social progress can be realised in an increasingly efficient and rational manner. However, it still has to be admitted that the continued influence of the irrational within society can be effective in denying the possibility to achieve social justice. To some extent the pessimism of Niebuhr is still justified in these terms. Irrationalism is an important part of the ideology of the ruling elite, and can act to undermine the potential for historical change.

The perspective of Niebuhr concerning the possibility of social change is also realistic because he outlines how the defenders of an unjust economic system like capitalism can develop plausible ideas like non-interference in is operations or utilise nationalism in order to uphold the aim of war. But primarily he does not consider that rationality can become the basis of the opposition of social groups to the system. These irrational aspects have importance, but it would be dogmatic to consider that they cannot be overcome. Niebuhr considers that the ability of the ruling elite to maintain its power means it can overcome any challenge to its domination. Hence any challenge is not based on a consistent expression of rationality. There are always limitations which mean that opposition degenerates and cannot defend aims based on reason. If this standpoint was literally true it would mean that no popular and mass opposition to the system is possible. This opposition does develop, but what is very complex concerns the capacity to overcome the power of the elite. Hence the ultimate complicating factor is the issue of strategy. What perspective will enable the forces of opposition to the system to become successful? In most instances the ruling elite has been more strategically astute than the opposition to its rule. This is an indication that whilst reason can motivate collective opposition to the elite system it cannot necessarily express a policy that will bring about certain victory.

Niebuhr also raises another complicating factor because the commitment to social obligations may contradict the impulse for the will to power. This is an important point because it indicates that the vital aspect of solidarity can be undermined in the attempt to establish a new form of political power. Hence the inclination to do good may contradict the impulse of the will to power. However Marxism would argue that there is no contradiction. The very reason that Marxists advocate a different society to that of capitalism is because they aim to establish one that is based on the realisation of higher forms of cooperation and the expression of solidarity within social reality. But Niebuhr could reply and suggest that the views of Lenin have distorted this standpoint, and so the impulse of the will to power has overcome the contrasting influence of the realisation of a society based on equality and the social impulse. But even the Russian revolution could not have occurred without the role of mass and popular organisations of the will of the workers like the Soviets. It was adverse conditions that effectively undermined the social and cooperative character of the revolution and replaced it with a tyranny. Thus in more favourable conditions it will be possible to reconcile the role of reason with the will to power. In contrast, Niebuhr would consider this view as optimistic because he envisages that the very role of the collective can be irrational. This means the aims of the revolution based on solidarity will be undermined. Marxists should not underestimate the importance of this point. A volatile revolution can result in the generation of collective emotions that makes the creation of a society based on social obligations very difficult. Niebuhr has established a sense of realism and caution concerning the difficulties of the revolutionary process. He has outlined an understanding of why a revolution could degenerate into irrationalism which means that its social goals will not be realised. But the response of Marxism should be to elaborate a perspective of why a revolution can still be rational and so capable of realising collective aims. We can never accept that the impulses of irrationalism and selfishness can be eternally stronger than the alternatives of reason and cooperation.

In this context, Niebuhr seems to consider that class struggle is inherently irrational: “The ability of reason to check impulse does not inevitably provide a sufficient check to prevent the conflict of impulses, particularly the conflict of collective impulses in society.”(13) This point could have some truth in that it seems to be an expression of common sense to suggest that a type of political antagonism such as class conflict cannot be conducive to the expression of reason. However, this approach would be a valid viewpoint only if the impulse of emotion undermined the political and collective cohesion of the forces striving to overthrow the unjust economic system. Marxists would argue that it is possible to develop class consciousness to the point that it connects determination with reason. In this manner the collective will can be rational. But \Niebuhr contends that it is possible that egotistical and selfish motives may take the form of rationalist impulses. This point could be true on certain occasions, but if we accepted that it was an expression of inherent social reality it would imply that progressive change, or at least the possibility to advance beyond capitalism was not feasible. Capitalism itself is based on the reconciliation of reason with the role of selfishness, or it could be said that rationality is distorted in the interests of the economic domination of the capitalist class. In this context the will-to-power is connected with rationality in terms of the development of technology within the limits of capitalist relations of production. It would seem that socialism is flawed in comparison to this development because it attempts in a feeble manner to deny the importance of the role of the individual, ego, or selfishness, in relation to its collective aims. Or it could be argued that socialism will be undermined by the increasing influence of individual self-interest. This point could have some validity, and it does describe the difficulties involved in developing a society that is consistently based on the principles of solidarity. However, it could also be maintained that it is possible to create a situation in which the interests of the individual and the social are reconciled. This is the option that Niebuhr seems to reject. Instead he can only envisage the possibility that the impulses of the individual will undermine the aims of the social. Marxism cannot accept this standpoint, but it should acknowledge that the generation of a unity between the individual and the social may be a difficult task.

Niebuhr outlines his viewpoint on the issue of the individual and social in the following manner: “The insinuation of the interests of the self into even the most ideal enterprises and most universal objectives, envisaged in moments of higher rationality, makes hypocrisy an inevitable by-product of all virtuous endeavour. It is, in a sense, a tribute to the moral sense of man as well as proof of his moral limitations; for it is significant that mean cannot pursue their own ends with the greatest devotion, if they are unable to attribute universal values to their particular objectives. But men are no more able to eliminate self-interests from their nobler pursuits than they are able to express it fully without hiding behind and compounding it with honest efforts at or dishonest pretensions of universality. Even a conscious attempt to eliminate dishonest and ambiguous motives is no perfect guarantee against hypocrisy; for there is no miracle by which man can achieve a rationality high enough to give them a vivid understanding of general interests as of their own.”(14)

Thus even the most universal and rational doctrine like socialism will be influenced and presumably undermined by the contrasting impulse of egoism. Such a relationship will be compatible in relation to the character and interests of capitalism, but this contradictory connection will mean that the attempt to realise socialism is compromised by these conflicting values. However, we could suggest that it is not possible to establish a type of socialism in which the role of the universal meant no potential for the interests of the individual to be realised. Hence Niebuhr seems to be unrealistic to imply that the universal aspiration will always be undermined by the emphasis on the individual. Surely it is necessary to try and reconcile the interests of the individual and social. It is not necessarily true that the individual will always be dominant over the collective. In contrast to this perspective, Niebuhr seems to suggest that the individual will always be dominant in its relation to the universal. Hence he concludes: “The larger the group the more certainly will it express itself selfishly in the total human community. It will be more powerful and therefore more able to defy any social restraints which might be devised.”(15) In this manner the formation of societies results in conflicts based on rival forms of egoism, and because of this situation he cannot envisage any progressive result in terms of the actual generation of a higher and more equal society. This view may have validity in terms of the results of human history, but it is also connected to the pessimistic conclusion that a society based on social justice is impossible to realise. This deterministic standpoint is unable to accept the possibility to connect the role of the social and individual in terms of the establishment of a genuinely co-operative society. However, if this conclusion is true it would mean that Niebuhr has to reconcile himself with capitalism which is the expression of the individual at the expense of the social. However, in an inconsistent manner he does not make this conclusion and instead continues to aim for a society based on social justice. Thus his aims are opposed to the conclusions that he has reached from his study of human nature.

Niebuhr could contend that a type of socialism which attempted to reconcile itself with the role of the individual will only result in the enrichment of the latter at the expense of the importance of the social. The problem with this view is that whilst he is formally committed to a society based on social justice, he empirically accepts that capitalism is more compatible with the egotistical impulses of human nature. Thus the most we can envisage is the reform of capitalism. The problem with this logic is that the attempt to reform capitalism has always been undermined by the more powerful impulses of the capitalist economy. The role of the individual is more significant under the conditions of capitalism. This situation seems to imply that there is an impasse. However in order to resolve this situation we have to ask whether the character of the individual cannot be changed? Is it not possible to reconcile the interests and impulses of the individual with the social? Marxists would provide an optimistic answer to this question and suggest that this contradiction can be resolved because the promotion of the effectiveness of the social could be the very manner in which the potentialities of the individual is developed. The most obvious form in which this possibility could be realised is that the alienation generated by capitalist relations of production will be tackled and hopefully overcome under socialism.

The answer of Niebuhr to this complex issue is to suggest that a religious consciousness, with the concern of the individual for others, expresses the ability to overcome the selfish limitations of egoism. The result of this understanding is that a conception of society based on the values of love and justice is developed: “Wherever religion concerns itself with the problems of society, it always gives birth to some kind of millennial hope, from the perspective of which present social realities are convicted of inadequacy, and courage is maintained to continue in the effort to redeem society of injustice.......The modern communist's dream of a completely egalitarian society, is a secularised but still essentially religious, version of the classical religious dream.”(16) The problem is that this religious messianism, and its secular form, may represent motivations for a different type of society but they cannot express valid strategies by which they can be realised. In relation to the role of religion the problem is how can change be realised in a sinful world? Whilst Communism is not able to establish sufficient adherents that would make social change possible. Niebuhr accepts that the typical response of Christians to the problems of the world is either passive acceptance or withdrawal into insulated communities. In general, Niebuhr is aware of the problems involved in making the spirit of religion effective in terms of influencing the policy of society. Hence he concludes that: “Religious idealism may qualify national policies, as much as rational idealism, but this qualification may never completely eliminate the selfish, brutal and antisocial elements, which express themselves in inter-group life.”(17) The problem is that Christianity has either accommodated itself to the various forms of power, or else despaired about the possibility to transform the situation by means of the role of the spirit. He is accommodating to this sort of pessimism. In other words, Niebuhr is suggesting that Christianity has never developed a principled strategy that would combine its sense of spirituality with a commitment to bringing about improvements within the world. His only vague and generalised answer is to suggest that Christianity should be about transforming society: “Men should strive to realise their individual ideals in their common life but they will learn in the end that society remains man's great fulfilment and his great frustration.”(18) Niebuhr has established quite eloquently the problems involved in the ability of Christians to intervene in the world, but he has not been able to elaborate what would be meant by a principled form of action that would advance the aim of a more just society. He knows that it is problematical to advocate the kingdom of God, but he also does not have a more modest approach that would be able to tackle the issue of the problematical relationship between the individual and the social. Instead he can only assert in a vague manner that the role of the spiritual is important, but we only explicitly knows what this does not mean rather than how this activity can be developed in a constructive manner. Hence it would still seem that secular political action is vital if society is to be transformed.

Niebuhr outlines what constitutes an important aspect of modern society which is the nation: “Nations are territorial societies, the cohesive power of which is supplied by the sentiment of nationality and the authority of the state. The fact that the state and nation are not synonymous and that the state frequently incorporates several nationalities, indicates that the authority of government is the ultimate force of national cohesion. The fact that state and nation are roughly synonymous proves that without the sentiment of nationality with its common language and traditions, the authority of the government is usually unable to maintain national unity.”(19) This definition of nation is superior to the usual Marxist one because it includes the importance of the influence of nationalism. Niebuhr recognises that a nation is sustained by the fact that it is based on the promotion of an ideology that upholds its validity and right of existence. This means that the state, or the ruling elites that dominate the state, can utilise the popular emotional support of nationalism in order to carry out possibly aggressive actions against other societies, including the act of war. Niebuhr makes the point that the international communications and economic relations between different nations does not make the people of a given nation sympathetic to needs of other peoples. It can be argued that international cooperation is in the interests of nations but the ideology of nationalism often obscures this recognition, and instead nations act in terms of opposition to other countries. Obviously since this book was written the international situation has become characterised by greater cooperation between the major nations, but this is still because self-interest dictates this situation, and results in the exploitation of the less developed countries. Hence Niebuhr still seems to be right to imply that governments express a narrow form of the national will which is based on the emotions of the population and the self-interests of the ruling class.

In other words, Niebuhr has outlined how the dominant economic class is able to utilise nationalism for the promotion of its own interests. The suggestion is that only by overcoming the influence of popular nationalism will the possibility to uphold principled socialism, which is internationalist, become possible. This point was expressed by the national capitulation of the Second International to the influence of national defence at the outbreak of the First World War. This opportunism undermined the possibility of united and internationalist opposition to the war which could have upheld the aims of global socialism. However, the influence of internationalism is weak compared to that of nationalism. This is why Niebuhr is right to maintain that the result of this situation is that the subordinated classes do not generally contest the selfishness of their own economic elite which invests in other countries in order to exploit them. However, he is surely pessimistic to believe that the growth of socialism would not end the antagonism between nations. The point is that only international revolution can bring about socialism and this very development would mean that solidarity increases between nations. But primarily if a genuine socialist system is developed it would not have an economic motive to exploit other nations. The combination of imperialism and socialism would be nonsensical. Hence the USSR became imperialist because it was no longer socialist. Furthermore, the influence of popular nationalism would be replaced by internationalism within the socialist nations. Indeed it could be argued that only such an ideological change would enable the socialist system to triumph. But Niebuhr is right to issue a cautionary view that the influence of nationalism can be enduring and could distort the activity of a socialist society. Hence he is right to outline its possible continuation despite the fact that socialism could be established in many countries.

Niebuhr also makes the astute point that the altruism of people can become the expression of support for national egoism. But this very aspect can become distorted: “Unquestionably there is an alloy of projected self-interest in patriotic altruism. The man in the street, with his lust for power and prestige thwarted by his own limitations and the necessities of social life, projects his ego upon his nation and indulges his anarchic lusts vicariously. So the nation is at one and the same time a check upon, and a final vent for, the expression of individual egoism.”(20) In this sense, Niebuhr outlines how nationalism can be a form of alienated consciousness, in that it represents a response to the various limitations of an unequal capitalist society. Nationalism is a type of compensation for the disappointments and resentments that are generated within a society that is unable to realise the aspirations of the majority of people. In this sense, Niebuhr has outlined the important view that nationalism is a form of irrationalism which undermines the possibility for empathy between the people of different nations. The assumption is that only with the undermining of this irrational emotion will it be possible to generate the necessary consciousness based on reason that could promote the alternative of international socialism. Niebuhr is aware that the influence of class loyalty, which would be defined in terms of the aim of socialism, is the only effective alternative to nationalism. But he has indicated that the very strong and durable ideological influence of nationalism, and its connection to the irrationalist emotions, means that it will be a difficult task to develop support for an alternative approach of internationalism.

This possibility is complicated by the fact that the ideologues of the nation also project its own interests in terms of universal values: “The dishonesty of nations is a necessity of political policy if the nation is to gain the full benefit of its double claim upon the devotion and loyalty of the individual, as his own special and unique community and as a community which embodies universal values and ideals. The two claims, one touching the individual's emotions and the other appealing to his mind, are incompatible with each other, and can be resolved only through dishonesty.”(21) The fact that nationalism represents a distorted form of universalism means that socialists can attempt to resolve this ideological contradiction in terms of developing a consistent and more principled form of internationalism. However, this would mean that it is also necessary to challenge the irrationalism and egoism that is part of the appeal of the nation. Admittedly, this ability to overcome the irrationalism of the nationalist appeal has proved to be very difficult to overcome. Hence it will require arduous and patient ideological struggle if the influence of popular nationalism is to be diminished and replaced with internationalism. Niebuhr admits that religion can be utilised in order to justify the role of the nation, and so the issue of promoting an alternative would imply that the forces of religion have to adopt a different and more internationalist stance. But this would mean that the adherents of religion adopt a changed understanding of the relationship of their faith to the role of the nation. This development of a standpoint that was opposed to the role of both nation and state would be more principled, but it would mean that the influence of the traditional views of religion as the bulwark of established society has to be overcome. The problem is that there is no basis for this prospect. Hence it would seem that the forces of nationalism are both durable and stronger than any alternative, they are based on the irrational impulses of the general population and the interests of the ruling class. In contrast, the working class is only inconsistently inclined towards internationalism. Indeed this very aspect is complicated by the nationalist inclinations of the major socialist parties. Thus it would seem that the forces for internationalism are weak and small. We have to admit that this unfavourable situation is the starting point for Marxists. It is dogmatic to try and ignore the popular influence of nationalism. Instead the only principled approach is to make more detailed and powerful arguments in favour of internationalism. There is no guarantee that this will undermine the significance of nationalism but there is no principled alternative to this perspective.

Niebuhr writes that the tensions and conflict of rival national powers will either end in catastrophe that could undermine nationalism, or else result in class struggle. His conclusion written in the 1930's is principled: “The sharpening of class antagonisms within each modern industrial nation is increasingly destroying national unity and imperilling international comity as well. It may be that the constant growth of economic inequality and social injustice in our industrial civilisation will force the nations into a final conflict, which is bound to end in their destruction. The disintegration of national loyalties through class antagonisms has proceeded so far in the more advanced nations that they can hardly dare to permit the logic inherent in the present situation to take its course.”(22) Niebuhr was not to know that the very limitations of the so-called socialist parties would undermine the class struggle, and so make inter-imperialist war an inevitability. Once again it was the opportunist aspects of the traditional working class parties that meant the forces of nationalism could still be promoted and so undermine any possibility of combined international opposition to war. Thus in the last analysis, even Niebuhr's perceptive analysis did not mean that he was unable to avoid the mistake of underestimating the continued durability of nationalism. But at least his limitations were principled, because he was suggesting that the influence of nationalism could be undermined by the development of class struggle. Nevertheless, despite certain problems, Niebuhr has outlined a useful analysis of nationalism and its significance. He has established why the role of the nation generates a connected ideology of support for its supposed virtues, and this is expressed by the false combination of individual interest with universalism. Instead of denying the significance of this analysis, Marxist should welcome this useful contribution concerning the national question and attempt to indicate its importance for the struggle to develop the alternative of internationalism.

Niebuhr develops a social and economic analysis which is obviously influenced by Marxism. However, he establishes an important corrective in that he outlines how power can have military and political aspects, and is not just economic. He indicates the importance of the difference between those that own property compared to those that don't. But this aspect is not elaborated into a recognition that the important aspect of the present economic system is the capital-labour relation. It is not possible to understand exploitation in any other manner. But despite this important omission, he does in a perceptive manner indicate that the working class may not be united because of differences between skilled and unskilled workers, and the white collar strata may form a privileged section that also conceives its own distinct interests. Hence he is rightly implying that because of social differentiation it may be difficult to develop united working class action against capitalism. But Niebuhr establishes what may be the most important objection to the promotion of class struggle. This is because of the egoism generated by the class structure which undermines the promotion of rationalism and morality: “The development of rational and moral resources may indeed qualify the social and ethical outlook, but it cannot destroy the selfishness of classes.”(22) Thus the very division of society into classes means that a common rationality which is able to transcend these differences is difficult to develop. Instead each class establishes a sense of particular interest, which Niebuhr defines as egoism. Thus the class struggle is based on a will to power which undermines the promotion of reason and morality. The fact of different interests between classes means that they lack sympathy and empathy for other distinct social strata, and therefore solidarity is limited to the given class. Niebuhr considers that this means that class antagonism undermines the possibility of creating a higher sense of rationality. The paradox is that these social contradictions undermine the realisation of the level of reason and morality required to generate a better form of society. This view denies the understanding that the outcome of class struggle could express the transformation of the tensions between various particulars into the realisation of a new universal. In this manner a superior form of rationality could be realised. But supporting such a standpoint would mean upholding the perspective that the working class is capable of expressing these universal and rational possibilities. However, we have to agree with Niebuhr that such a development is not historically guaranteed. It is quite possible that even with the political victory of the working class its divisions could undermine the potential to develop a society based on the principles of solidarity. Furthermore, the role of the Marxist party could become the justification to assume a situation of dominant power. Therefore if these limitations are to be avoided, the ability to uphold the common interest of the working class must be a constant aspect of the revolutionary process. In other words the revolution must uphold a high level of rational action that prevents the generation of any form of irrational and privileged egoism. Hence the creation of a socialist society is a careful process that must uphold a high level of moral principle, as Niebuhr implies.

However, Niebuhr also justifies class struggle in that the claim of privileged groups to uphold the universal interests of society must be false. Only the end of this situation by the victory of the subordinated classes can transform this hypocritical situation. He outlines how the view that the rewards of capital are the result of thrift is false, and instead defends the inequality of privilege: “Since we are living in a world in which there is too much capital for production and too little for consumption, the argument that economic inequality is necessary for the accumulation of capital resources has lost even its economic validity. Yet it is still used by privileged classes to establish a specious connection between virtue or social function and privilege.”(24) The implicit view being made is that this generation of economic wealth must be created at the expense of a subordinated class. But what is particularly useful in this approach is that Niebuhr is also referring to an important ideological argument being made in order to justify capitalism. Marxism has neglected to try and reject these views because it has regarded this task as being unnecessary. He also outlines how in the last analysis a privileged type of society has to be upheld by coercion because it generates social unrest and class struggle.

However, in a hopeful manner he accepts that the egoism of the ruling class can be overcome by class struggle: “The group egoism of a privileged class is therefore more precisely the sum and aggregate of individual egoisms than is the case in national selfishness, which is sometimes compounded of the unselfish loyalties of individuals. This may mean that the unethical character of class prejudices may, being less complex, be more easily dissolved by reason than similar national attitudes.”(25) It is being argued that all the rational arguments being utilised in order to defend the privileged character of economic activity are spurious because this situation is based on an unjust denial of the realisation of the genuine needs and interests of a subordinated class. Instead what can only be reasonable in this instance is the attempt to overcome this situation by opposition to the domination of the economically wealthy. In this context the group egoism that will still be expressed by the opposition of the working class to this condition of control of the economy by the privileged also means that there is a tendency for this development to acquire the rationality of striving to realise a more just society. But reason and morality are not sufficient, instead the method of class struggle is required: “It must be taken for granted therefore that the injustices in society, which arise from class privileges, will not be abolished purely by moral suasion. That is a conviction at which the proletarian class, which suffers most from social injustice, has finally arrived at after centuries of disappointed hopes.”(26)

Thus in an imaginative manner, Niebuhr develops strategic conclusions that are similar to those of Marxism. Indeed he has elaborated the approach of Marxism and provided important useful conclusions as to why the class struggle is necessary. But he has also provided an understanding of the difficulties of this possibility in terms of the ability of the role of nationalism to unite the nation and to therefore undermine the successful realisation of class struggle. Hence nationalism represents the most irrational problem that means the ability to appeal to the aims of overthrowing the capitalist system can be repudiated by the majority of the nation state. Indeed it could be suggested that the economic elite can utilise nationalism in order to oppose the development of class consciousness within the subordinated class. In this context, Niebuhr has outlined how difficult it is to develop the opposing standpoint of internationalism. For this prospect to occur requires the highest levels of class solidarity and the creation of the ability of withstand the emotionally strong appeal of nationalism. Such a possibility will be rare, and is generally connected to an acute crisis of the capitalist system. In other words, it means that the impetus to rationality is potentially able in this rare moment to overcome the alternative of national egoism. Niebuhr is possibly being over-optimistic when he characterises the contemporary working class of the 1930's in the following terms: “The moral cynicism, the egalitarian idealism, the rebellious heroism, the anti-nationalism and internationalism, the exaltation of their class as the community of significant loyalty, all these characteristic moral attitudes of the modern working class are the products of the industrial era.”(27) This standpoint possibly over-estimates the class consciousness of the era, and underestimated the continued appeal of nationalism. Indeed popular nationalism was to take the form of anti-fascism, and so the universalism of nationality was enhanced at the expense of egoism. Consequently, the political problem connected with the outbreak of world war two was that internationalism could not assume any definite strategy and instead the only viable perspective seemed to be the defence of bourgeois democracy against fascism. In the last analysis, the appeal of nation was still durable despite the actuality of a discontented working class in Europe.

Niebuhr openly accepts that the polarised character of social relations of capitalism in terms of the opposition between the capitalist class and the workers has generated support for Marxism within Europe. This means that a perspective is being elaborated and upheld in which the process of class conflict will not result in a situation of compromise and instead will generate revolutionary struggle which will pose the issue about which class has the primary power within society. However, he suggest that strategic differences have developed between the more privileged workers who may support the reform of society when compared to the less favoured proletarians who advocate revolution. Niebuhr even has sympathetic support for Lenin's innovations in the following terms: “The idea that the superior historical perspective of the educated man must be added to the actual experience of the worker, who lacks perspective, before a theory can be evolved which will do justice to that experience, is an interesting qualification of pure determinism. It enabled Lenin to avoid many mistakes into which purer determinists fell.”(28) Hence Niebuhr is suggesting that orthodox Marxism is based on the perspective that the contradictions of capitalist society imply an inherent tendency of the possibility of revolutionary change. In contrast, Lenin's voluntarism effectively denies this approach and instead he outlines the crucial importance of the role of the revolutionary party if the possibilities for social change are to be realised. Niebuhr does not consider this innovation to be a distortion of Marx, but rather a rejection of its tendency to be determinist. In this sense Lenin has outlined a necessary revision of what could have become a dogmatic conception of history. However, Niebuhr is also aware of the tensions introduced by Lenin because he could be justifying the domination of the class by the party. Nevertheless, Niebuhr has sympathy with Lenin's criticisms of the limitations of bourgeois democracy, which is a political system that can reinforce the rule of the economic elite, and he questions whether the reformist strategy of utilising democracy in order to realise socialism can be successful.

Niebuhr's analysis of Marxism is both principled and perceptive. He outlines that the major weakness of revolutionary Marxism is its inability to explain the popular nationalism within the major capitalist countries, which was expressed with the outcome of world war one: “Whenever a nation does not completely disinherit its workers, it has been able to count on their loyalty. The loyalty has been a little more hesitant than that of the middle classes, but it has been, on the whole more generous than the nation deserved, when the real motives of its martial enterprises are considered.”(29) He outlines how Lenin blamed the opportunism of the socialist parties for supporting the war, but was unable to recognise the importance of popular nationalism. Thus Niebuhr understood that the workers only became sympathetic to internationalism when the world war continued without any apparent possibility of its peaceful resolution, and because of the intensification of social injustice and misery which began to generate revolutionary forms of consciousness, as in Russia. Hence he considers that: “The exaltation of class loyalty as the highest form of altruism is natural concomitant of the destruction of national loyalty.”(30) In other words, Niebuhr recognises that the most important ideological adversary of the development of class consciousness is the role of nationalism. He understands that it represents the ability to undermine class solidarity and instead replace it with a sense of national loyalty, which benefits the interests of the ruling class. Hence he also recognises that Marxism is the doctrine most opposed to nationalism because it is based on the role of the class struggle and in this context has internationalist aims. Consequently: “A fighting proletarian class will tend to depreciate whatever common interests it may possess with other classes in a national structure, and to interpret the conflict of interest between classes in more absolute terms than the facts warrant.”(31) Therefore the ruling class tries to undermine class antagonism by trying to establish supposed common interests between the classes within a national community. The development of class compromise is understood to be what is in the national interest.

However, Niebuhr is being over-optimistic when he suggests that if this situation of national unity is undermined by class conflict, it means the working class has a conscious understanding of the importance of establishing a classless society: “Inevitably the exaltation of the class, as the community of most significant loyalty, is justified by the proletarian by attaching universal values to his class. He does not differ from the privileged classes in attempting this universalisation of his particular values. It is the tribute he pays to the inner rational and moral necessities of the human spirit. His class for the proletarian is not merely the class. It is the class which is destined by history to usher in a classless society into existence.”(32) This comment indicates that Niebuhr has made the mistake of projecting the values of Marx onto the character of the class struggle. Instead it is necessary to maintain that it is quite usual for class polarisation to have more limited and particular forms in terms of the opposition of particular groups of workers to the imperatives of the employers. These disputes do not generally acquire any greater political significance. Thus it requires a tremendous advance of the class consciousness of workers in order that they may begin to define their own particular objectives in universal terms. Indeed such situations are still quite exceptional. For the majority of time the workers are characterised by sectional ambitions and have aspirations that are limited to the importance of the particular. Hence Niebuhr is making the mistake of interpreting the unrest within society in strictly Marxist terms that ignore the limitations of class consciousness. He declares: “It is the class destined by history to usher a classless society into existence.....There is something rather imposing in this doctrine of Marx. It is more than a doctrine. It is a dramatic, and to some degree, a religious interpretation of proletarian destiny....To make the degradation of the proletarian the cause of his ultimate exaltation, to find in the very social disaster of his social defeat the harbinger of his final victory, and to see in his loss of all property the future of civilisation in which no one will have privileges of property, this is to snatch victory out of defeat in the style of great drama and classical religion.”(33)

However, the praise of this perspective by Niebuhr obscures the importance of his own elaboration of the difficulties involved in bringing about a new classless society. These problems are related to the fact that the necessary class consciousness required in order to promote an alternative type of society involves the highest level of rationality that is possible for humans to create. This task may be achieved by discontented intellectuals, but the task becomes more difficult when it is connected to the questioning of unifying the diverse groups of workers into one mass movement. Furthermore, at any given moment the fragile unity of the working class may be undermined by appeals of the ruling class for loyalty to the nation. But in an inconsistent manner, Niebuhr challenges his own optimistic perspective and provides objections. He suggest that human frailties, or irrational impulses, may undermine the belief that history and economic forces are moving in the direction of communism. He raises doubts about whether there is an inexorable logic in history, and instead implies that Marxism is based on a rigid prediction that may not be realised: “The Marxian imagines that he has a philosophy or even a science of history. What he has is really an apocalyptic vision. A confident prophecy of the future is never more than that. In him political hopes achieve religious proportions by overleaping the bounds of rationally verifiable possibilities, just as in the soul of the true Christian, moral hopes achieve religious verification.”(34)

There is inconsistency in the views of Niebuhr because on the one hand he has outlined why he considers it possible for the proletariat to be successful in the class struggle, but on the other hand questions the intellectual validity of this very perspective. However, it is possible to resolve this contradiction if we establish that predictions can only become truths if action occurs in order to realise them. Without the development of class struggle to the point at which revolution becomes feasible, this prediction remains at the level of theory and does not become practice. Only the actual activity of the working class, related to the influence of Marxism, will ensure that a perspective has truth and is not merely a formal conclusion of the historical materialist approach. Furthermore, this standpoint will only acquire effective justification when communist society acquires global significance. In this context the decline of the system in the USSR contributed to the discrediting of Marx's perspective. Only the resolution of the problem of power will determine the ability of the working class to create a classless society. However, Niebuhr qualifies his criticism of Marx's historical perspectives when he admits that political ideals are more difficult to realise than the more morally inspired views of religion. But, in actual fact the possibility to realise Marx's aims have proved to be very difficult. The answer to this problem is to either dilute the aims and so make then more feasible to implement, or else try and overcome the limitations that have led to the difficulty of successfully bringing about the realisation of Marx's aims.

Niebuhr actually considers that the motive of vengeance is a doubtful basis for motivating the aim of revolution and communism. This problem is important in relation to any act of social upheaval, but in actuality it has become of secondary importance because the actual major problem has been the increasing inability to realise success in the class struggle. Marx's historical perspective seems to have become discredited by actual events and the related durability of capitalism. Indeed Niebuhr has an explanation for this situation when he maintains: “Wherever the nation does not totally disinherit its proletarians, they tend to qualify their class loyalty with a measure of national loyalty and to interpret their mission as one of national regeneration. They see themselves as a redemptive community within the nation, rather than as a community standing outside the nation; and they call upon all those who understand the peril in which the national community stands, to make common cause with them irrespective of class.”(35) This point could be connected to the fact that even the intensification of class struggle does not necessarily undermine the affinities of the exploited to the nation. Such a complication was not recognised by the one-sided historical perspective of Marxism. This limitation was connected to the fact that Marxism has not sufficiently recognised the influence of bourgeois ideology. The uncomfortable fact of history is that ideological views can undermine the possibilities expressed by material interest. This point can be reinforced by the fact that ideology is reconciled with irrational and egotistical impulses that oppose the collective development of a united working class movement.

Consequently, Niebuhr was ultimately being over-optimistic when he suggested that society was changing because of the increasing influence of the values of egalitarianism. The irony is that this aim became assimilated into capitalism in the form of the introduction of the welfare state. Hence it was implied that equality would be realised more efficiently and smoothly than in the so-called socialist society of the USSR. Indeed, the establishment of the National Health Service became another symbol of national pride. Thus the welfare state was not a prelude towards full socialism, and instead was one more reason to support British capitalism. Niebuhr asserts that equality is a rational value that is connected to the aim of a just society, and he implies that this aspiration is one of the most important aspirations of the working class. This means: “Equality will be established only through the socialisation of the means of production; that is through the destruction of private property, wherever private property is social power.”(36) This comment indicates that this book was written before the dilution and distortion of the principle of equality in terms of adapting it to the very system of private ownership of production. Thus Niebuhr's view that only the working class can express the standpoint of equality is very timely. This is because of the relationship of the workers to the principle of universality, and a connected desire to create a society based on sharing is genuine and morally superior to the ruling class, which gains by its special privileges. In this context only the end of the power of the capitalist class by proletarian action will generate the possibility of true equality. However, he is also being perceptive when he suggests that this development is not an inevitable consequence of a revolutionary process because of the problem of regenerating power in the control of a new elite. But the point is that such a development could only occur if it was realised against the aspirations of the working class for an egalitarian society. Indeed, Niebuhr also makes the confident point that the role of political power within the new society need not result in the generation of new forms of economic privilege. Thus Niebuhr possibly overestimates the tenacity and determination of the working to promote a society of social justice. But this is a principled mistake to make.

Thus Niebuhr supports the working class and its striving for a society based on equality and social justice. What he is most worried about is that the importance of rationality in order to generate the struggle for communism could undermine the necessity of the moral integrity of the working class movement. In actuality it has been the influence of irrationalism, and its ideological form, which has meant the struggle for a more equal society has not been realised in effective terms. Instead people have accepted the hypocritical morality of the bourgeoisie and utilised it to support the aim of individual self-improvement rather than class struggle. But it can also be argued that when effective mass struggles have developed the values they generate such as solidarity and cooperation have expressed high levels of morality. For example, the miners’ strike of 1984 created many instances of self-sacrifice. In contrast, as Niebuhr suggests, the bourgeoisie has a hypocritical morality because its claim to be opposed to injustice is based on the vindication of inequality within the economic system. Hence the problem of the class struggle is not its supposed lack of morality, but is instead about its inability to become practically effective. Instead of recognising this problem, Niebuhr is ultimately worried about the effects of revolution: “The question which confronts society is, how it can eliminate social injustice by methods which offer some fair opportunity of abolishing what is evil in our present society, without destroying what is worth preserving in it, and without running the risk of substituting new abuses and injustices in place of those abolished.”(37) These qualms are an expression of an inconsistent view because he has already outlined support for the aims of the working class movement aiming to realise the new society. But, in an inconsistent manner, he doubts the validity of the methods that will be utilised in order to establish this end. However, if the revolution is connected to the approach of Marx, it will attempt to absorb the achievements of capitalism within the development of the new society. It will not reject the gains of previous civilisation. Indeed it would be illogical to justify social regression because the aim of the new society will be to develop the productive forces in a manner that is superior to capitalism. This means utilising the role of the technology created by capitalism in order to develop the economy. Thus the serious aspect of Niebuhr's reservations is about the role of violence in the revolutionary process. But if the working class movement is strong and popular it will be possible to carry out a relatively peaceful and democratic process of change. Indeed, Niebuhr could have accepted this possibility, but at the last moment he questions the validity and ethical character of the revolutionary process.

In order to justify his doubts about revolutionary change, he presents a caricature of what represents a proletarian revolutionary: “From his perspective there is nothing good in modern society which deserves preservation. In his mood he is not inclined to worry about the future. Like all desperate men he can afford to be romantic about it.”(38) This is a view that has little basis in reality, and almost represents bourgeois prejudice. It would actually be completely irrational for the proletarian revolutionary to desire the undermining of the gains of civilisation. Instead he/she would want to utilise the advances made within capitalism in order to promote the realisation of the aim of an equal society. It was the civil war in Russia, started by the counterrevolutionary forces, which led to economic and social disruption. This situation was not wanted by the revolutionary regime which desired to create a situation of prosperity and smooth economic development. Hence Niebuhr's views on this issue of the role of revolution amounts to prejudice, and in the last resort represents an inconsistent support for the bourgeois establishment. However, his approach is inconsistent because he is aware of the inequality of capitalism and desires to end it. Yet he also empirically and erratically refers to the success of the Russian revolution. This standpoint would imply that he is not against the role of revolution in concrete terms. Instead it is his mythical and snobbish disdain for the working class which motivates his ambiguity about the revolution. Indeed, he is capable of generous views about Marx and Lenin, but he defines the character of the working class in terms of moral cynicism. But, if the workers were really motivated by a lack of morality it would be difficult to understand even the rudimentary development of class struggle. Instead what is apparent is the generation of a proletarian morality based on the creation of moral values such as self-sacrifice, cooperation and solidarity. But the elitism of Niebuhr cannot recognise these traits and instead defines the egalitarian impulses of the working class as an expression of a differentiation between rationality and morality. This is a false demarcation, because at its highest level the class struggle unites rationality and morality. The problem is maintaining this relationship in a consistent manner until it is possible to challenge the domination of the capitalist system.

Niebuhr outlines how the world war and depression has led to support for proletarian revolution. He accepts that the ruling class oppose this development because it is associated with violence but he rejects this criticism and contends the major issue of dispute concerns whether the revolution is able to realise its ends of equality and social justice. He argues that a revolution should be evaluated in terms of whether it is able to uphold the goal of social welfare, and in this context it is understood in regards to its ultimate consequences. He does not deny that a process of change that involves coercion will imply a test of moral values, but this raises the issue of whether this aspect will undermine the realisation of intended ends. Hence it may be morally superior to attempt to realise change in a peaceful manner, but this may not be possible under the given circumstances. In this situation the question that arises is whether the means are genuinely compatible with the ends. This analysis is a principled understanding of the dilemmas of the revolutionary process in Russia which led to the situation of civil war, and the application of coercion in order to maintain the power of the new regime. It is necessary to accept that the possibilities to develop a successful economy and political stability in the USSR occurred when peace had been established. Only with the compromise of the New Economic Policy, combined with the establishment of the influence of the Communist party, enabled the situation to express the possibilities to create a new society. In this sense violence was problematical because it did undermine the potential to generate the conditions for the creation of a better society on the basis of social justice. In this manner it could be argued that the continued application of violence would undermine the ability of the revolutionary regime to maintain its principles and objectives. Hence the development of Stalin's repressive regime meant that the aims and character of the regime were undermined and replaced by a tyranny. In the last analysis, the systematic application of coercion meant that the ability to construct a regime that upheld the principles of social justice was not possible.

Niebuhr resolves these issues of the morality of the revolution in terms of what he defines as its expression by the working class. He claims: “The former will emphasise loyalty to the group and the need of its solidarity, they will subject the rights of property to the total social welfare, will abrogate the values of freedom for the attainment of their most valued social goal and will believe that conflicts of interest between groups can be resolved, not by accommodation but by struggle.”(39) Hence there is a paradoxical aspect in Niebuhr's approach because whilst he can defend the validity of revolution, he questions the morality of the means to realise it in the form of class struggle. In other words he considers that the emphasis on solidarity of the working class is at the expense of the importance of individual morality. He cannot recognise that the promotion of group morality in the class struggle must be connected to the expression of individual ethics. Niebuhr regards the proletariat as motivated by moral cynicism and indifferent to the issue of individual freedom. This view would imply that class struggle cannot realise a society in which moral goals are related to social issues. Instead the collective impetus of the working class would imply that the values of morality are an expression of bourgeois values. The result of this perspective is that: “He is going to build an ideal world, not by trusting in the moral resources of individuals but by remaining on the level of the men of power and using their instruments against them.”(40) Hence the lack of emphasis on morality in the process of class struggle determines that the outcome is the denial of individual freedom and instead an emphasis on the role of power.

This standpoint would be rejected by principled Marxists. Instead we would suggest that the collective development of the class struggle involves the uniting of the moral values of the individual and group in terms of its solidarity, and this situation implies that the logical realisation of the role of the mass movement is the formation of a type of society that involves the highest level of morality. Indeed it would not be possible to realise social goals in any other manner. Thus the following comment of Niebuhr is incorrect. He comments about the working class that: “But since he is too completely immersed in the social group and too much the victim of group brutalities, he may not have the whole truth about the moral resources of human life.”(41) This is a false view because the working class has a higher level of morality than the middle class as a result of being exploited by capitalism. Indeed, it is bourgeois ideology which undermines the promotion of this class morality and instead generates the influence of a more individualistic morality within the proletariat. Thus it is class struggle which is able to connect the development of an individual and collective morality. Niebuhr accepts that this approach is not hypocritical unlike the connection of morality and privilege by the ruling class. But we can also suggest that without this development of class morality it would not be possible to promote the overthrow of capitalism. Consequently, the logical outcome of the development of a collective morality would be a type of society that is able to realise social justice. The inability to realise this possibility in the USSR was not because of the lack of morality of the revolutionary forces but was instead because of unfavourable conditions and the adverse effects of civil war.

Niebuhr establishes a more serious point when he contends that the most important problem concerns whether the workers have the ability to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism: “Can the workers overthrow the existing power and come in control of both the apparatus of the state and organs of education so that they can establish an egalitarian world and educate a new generation who will maintain it?”(42) He recognises that the ruling class is a formidable opponent which will use its economic and ideological influence in order to undermine the successful realisation of class struggle. He also recognises that some workers have achieved material benefits under capitalism and so are less enthusiastic about revolutionary change, and more inclined to support reformist organisations. Furthermore, the impoverished middle class, as in Germany, are adopting a reactionary standpoint and therefore against the possibility of proletarian revolution or even Social Democratic government. Thus Niebuhr rightly comments that: “The complexity of modern society, with its multifarious economic and social groups, which refuse to accept the destiny assigned to them by a consistent logic of economics, and which are able to defend their position in society by political, and if need be, by more marital weapons, seem to offer permanent resistance to the revolutionary venture of which Marxists dream.”(43) However, Trotsky recognised that this unfavourable situation was to some extent the result of a crisis of leadership within the working class organisations. He advocated the formation of a defensive united front that could attempt to alter the balance of forces in favour of the defence of democracy and for the struggle for socialism. Niebuhr cannot recognise the possibilities of this strategy because he can only acknowledge the importance of divisions within the working class and the increasing reactionary influence of the discontented middle class.

Niebuhr concludes his political analysis by suggesting that: “If any prediction can be made with a fair degree of certainty, it is that Western civilisation will not be ripe for proletarian revolutions for many decades, and may never be ripe for them, unless one further condition of the Marxian prophecy is fulfilled, and that is, that the inevitable imperialism of the capitalistic nations will involve them in further wars on a large scale. Such a war would not necessarily result in communistic regime but it would shatter the authority of some states sufficiently and create enough social chaos to make some kind of revolution possible.”(44) Thus Niebuhr has inconsistently gone from criticising the moral character of class struggle to predicting that its success is unlikely. However, he is right to suggest that capitalism is very durable and that divisions within the subordinated classes within society means that the possibility of revolution becomes problematical. He is also right to suggest that war create the potential for social change. However, he ignored the fact that the USSR would regulate and control this process of change in this situation to its own advantage. But he does connect the possibility to advance communism with the role of a world war. Unfortunately he does not outline whether this means the advance of classical form of proletarian revolution or the increased influence of Stalinism.

Niebuhr rightly outlines how the outcome of the revolution has been the concentration of political power by the Communist Party. This situation is developing the possibility of rule by a bureaucracy in terms of control of the state by an elite. The rule of a powerful state is ideologically justified in connection to the necessity to oppose the threat of counterrevolution and build socialism. He outlines how this hope is problematical: “The hope that the internal enemies will all be destroyed and that the new society will create only men who will be in perfect accord with the collective will of society, and will not seek personal advantage in the social process, is romantic in its interpretation of the possibilities of human nature and in is mystical glorification of the anticipated automatic mutuality in the communist society.”(45) This view is a very important criticism of the limitations of the Leninist view of how to create socialism. Lenin accepted that the workers state would be based on the domination of the Bolshevik party. The assumption was that they would rule in a principled manner on behalf of the workers and peasants. However, this situation was bound to create the problem of bureaucratic privilege and the development of autocratic rule over society. But the democratic alternative of trying to create the actual rule of the workers and peasants was dismissed as being unrealistic. Thus the generation of domination by an elite was justified as being compatible with Marxist theory. This situation was an expression of underestimating the corrupting problem of the role of power and authority over society. It was considered that a vanguard could truly act in the interests of the workers and peasants. Niebuhr is right to maintain that the aim of an egalitarian society cannot be realised by the method of a strong state. Only the effective equalisation of power and privilege can create the conditions to establish a regime without the rule of an elite. But Niebuhr also accepts that such a situation is improbable, instead he contends that: ' there can never be a mutuality of interests between individuals who perform different functions within society'.(46) Instead he suggests that there will always be the necessity of a mediating authority in order to regulate the relations and different interests between say the workers and peasants. This is a valid point, but is not possible to develop a democratic state that could truly express the interests of the workers and peasants instead of an elite? Is it not possible to establish democratic procedures that would result in the election of genuine workers as the expression of the authority of the state? In this manner it would be possible to develop a state authority that was truly representative of the community.

Ultimately, Niebuhr's argument is based on the view that special advantages within society, such as the wage differentials, are the expression of the selfish character of human nature. This is a pessimistic view and ignores the fact that such wage differentials do not result in the generation of class differences between people. Instead wage differentials are socially accepted in order to promote incentives for production. This means such a situation is not in contradiction with the aim of establishing social justice. What is truly problematical is the monopoly of power in the control of an elite. This enables such a state to dictate its authority to the rest of society. Such a development was not inevitable and instead was an expression of the low cultural level of society. But Niebuhr explains such developments in dogmatic terms and considers these limitations to be the expression of the absolutism of fanaticism. Thus in the last analysis he is suggesting that the revolutionary process is futile in terms of its problematical and unequal outcomes. He is implying that Marxism is not realistic and instead can only generate authoritarian results. However, we can learn from the very limitations of the Russian revolution and attempt to ensure that any future revolution does not result in the domination of a new state elite. In this sense the role of workers management of the economy can be upheld together with the importance of genuine democracy. Thus it would be pessimistic to accept that capitalism cannot be replaced by an authentic socialist society that was dedicated to the aim of realising social justice.

But possibly the major argument that Niebuhr utilises in order to be critical of the revolutionary approach is represented by the development of an alternative strategy to realise socialism, which is based on the winning of a parliamentary majority by a socialist party in order to establish a government that can act on behalf of the working class. He realises that this perspective is opposed by the economic privileged standpoint of the dominant classes, and the conservatism of the middle class, together with the individualism of the farmers, which means that it is still very difficult to establish socialism in this gradualist manner. But he also outlines the important point that such an approach would not have the ideological motivation of revolutionary socialism: “A parliamentary socialism which presses towards the goal of social ownership by exerting the full force of the workers political power in the shifting equilibrium of social and political forces, without certainty that the ultimate goal can be reached, and which is forced to use the method of collaboration with other parties, is however, under some moral and psychological difficulties which have not been fully appreciated by socialists. The abandonment of the eschatological element, in socialism means the sacrifice of its religious fervour and the consequent loss of its motive power.”(47) The heroic attempt to establish the classless society would be replaced by the compromise and manoeuvring of the parliamentary process. In this context the means would be everything and the end would become insignificant. This development would not motivate the workers to act to try and bring about a new form of society. Instead in an elitist manner a reformist party would act on their behalf within parliament. The reformist approach is based on accommodation to opportunism and the possibility of acceptance of the status quo. Without revolutionary fervour the result may be inertia and the fact that the reformists have to bargain with other parties means that their policy could become diluted and effectively rejected. In this context reformism has the tendency to become absorbed into a national consensus: “The parliamentary working class movement stands inside the national ethos and thus creates the opportunities for its leaders to become imbued with the national instinct of self-preservation. This instinct expresses itself in defence against internal and external foes of the state.”(48) It was not surprising that the socialist parties accepted the necessity of the First World War. But he argues that it would be more principled if a reformist party was prepared to more resolutely oppose national sentiments.

Despite these criticisms of reformism, Niebuhr does not support the alternative of revolutionary Marxism because he considers it fanatical. This is because of the supposed absolutism of its aims, and its limitations which can result in ultimate inability to realise a classless society. This view is superficial and is based on an inherent scepticism about the value of class struggle. He considers the revolutionary proletarian to be a moral cynic and fanatic. But he is also aware of the opportunist limitations of reformism. Hence he concludes that: “The contrasting virtues and vices of revolutionary and evolutionary socialism are such that no purely rational and moral choice is possible between them. Whatever judgements are made depend partly upon personal inclination; whether one prefers the partial preservation of traditional injustices or the risk of creating new inequities by the attempt to abolish old ones completely.”(49) Thus he is fully aware of the opportunist limitations of reformism, but is also sceptical about the superiority of the alternative of revolutionary Marxism. His ambiguous refusal to make a preference is because he does not consider it possible to improve or enhance the perspectives of revolutionary Marxism. He seems to consider in a dogmatic manner that a fanatical supporter of this approach cannot change. The reason for this is the eschatological motivations of this standpoint. But it could be argued that in order to relate to the complications of social reality, this approach has to be modified. The complexity of trying to overthrow capitalism indicate that the working class is not a chosen people. Instead it is only a class with contingent reasons to overthrow capitalism. In contrast, reformism does not change, it remains opportunist, or even become an open expression of bourgeois politics. This means it would seem to be more principled to choose revolutionary politics despite its possible limitations, and uncertain future. There is no other and more effective manner in which socialism can be realised. This does not mean that the success of the revolutionary approach is inevitable. Instead all that can be established is that reformism has a constant tendency to accommodate to capitalism. Consequently, in order to be principled, and following the very reasoning of Niebuhr, it would seem to be more rational to support revolutionary Marxism despite its limitations. Its flaws are because of dogmatism, and not because of an inherent tendency to compromise with capitalism. The problem of fanaticism can be overcome. Indeed it could be understood as basically an exaggerated issue. In contrast, class collaboration is inherent to reform. To support socialism means to be a revolutionary, even if we do not have any messianic certainty of success.

Niebuhr has up to this point in his book not outlined the significance of Christianity for his approach towards improving society. He has to answer the Marxist criticism that religion generally upholds and reinforces the limitations of capitalism, and is reluctant to support the possibility of change. It is to his merit that he has analysed in a methodical manner the various merits and problems with the Marxist standpoint, and provided some support for this approach. But in order to provide the basis for the development of his alternative, he first asks the important following question: “If coercion, self-assertion and conflict are regarded as permissible and necessary instruments of social redemption, how are perpetual conflict and perennial tyranny to be avoided? What is to prevent the instruments of today’s redemption becoming the chain of tomorrow's enslavement? And if power is needed to destroy power, how is the new power to be made ethical?”(51) This question is addressed to the proponents of Marxism primarily because they have a perspective of the power of the mass movement being able to overcome and defeat the domination of the bourgeois state. Obviously this process expresses the problem that the result could be the formation of a new type of repressive society that is based on coercion. But this is not inevitable. What is vital to overcome this possibility of new forms of repression is the creation of a democratic state that emphasises the importance of consent, and this is possible because the revolution should be based on popular support. Therefore it is entirely possible to avoid the formation of one party state, which should be considered to be the expression of the exceptional circumstances that occurred in Soviet Russia. But also it is necessary to develop a moral sensibility which implies that certain actions should not be carried out because they undermine the ethical credentials of the new revolutionary regime. In this manner it would be a mistake to deny the importance of morality and to define its premises as being merely of a bourgeois character. There are limits to the role of morality, which even Niebuhr acknowledges. He accepts that there must be some form of coercion within society if the authority of the given regime is to be upheld. But the point is that this necessary coercion should be limited and restricted by the role of moral guidance of society. In this sense moral goodwill is based on the laws of society and the right of any society to enforce them in terms of the interests of social cohesion. Thus the tensions within society, which express the importance of the continuation of social conflict, will be moderated, and the premises of social cooperation is based on the role of a moral code. In this context a just society means: “It will try to save society from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict, not by the effort to abolish coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to a minimum, by counselling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society and by discriminating between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.”(51)

Thus the worst possible situation is one in which the new society promises an end to social conflict, and yet it develops a repressive state. The alternative is to ensure that the regime is upheld by limited force. It should be based on an acceptable level of coercion which is regulated by the role of laws and the development of a moral code. In this context it is ethically acceptable to utilise a minimum level of coercion in order to promote the aim of social justice. This means opposing the resistance of the forces of economic privilege who act in order to try and prevent the realisation of the aims of a revolutionary regime. However, this ability of the revolutionary government to act against the forces of reaction should be limited, and conceived within the development of a morality that means that certain types of repressive policy are unacceptable. Indeed this is because such action would ultimately strengthen the forces of coercion and the state at the expense of realising the aims of social justice. Ultimately the actuality of a moral code would mean that the revolutionary regime would not violate its egalitarian objectives, and therefore does not attempt to create a new type of privileged regime that represses society. Hence there is still social conflict, and not absolute peace, in terms of attempting to realise aims of social justice because of the continued opposition of the previous ruling class. In this situation it is not possible to end all aspects of coercion. However, its utilisation is restricted by the role of the moral code and the laws of society. This is why the development of a genuine democratic political organisation is vital if the objectives of social justice are to be realised and not undermined by bureaucratic and repressive distortions. Such an approach is also the most rational because it can be argued that a society that attempts to realise social justice in the most effective and cooperative manner is one that is guided by reason as well as morality. In these terms the minimum application of coercion will not result in distortions and the rejection of the egalitarian aims of society. Or as Niebuhr maintains: “If reason is to make coercion a tool of the highest moral ideal it must not only enlist it in the service of the highest causes but it must choose those types of coercion which are most compatible with, and least dangerous to, the rational and moral forces of society.”(51)

However, Niebuhr is vague about how this process will be realised. He conceives of the role of an impartial tribunal in order to establish the necessary relationship between coercion and moral and rational aims. But such a tribunal is impractical, indeed it is not possible. Instead the only institution that can realise this perspective is one that is based on the highest level of democracy within the revolutionary regime. This means that an accountable state, which is based on the highest levels of participation of the people, is vital. It is true that such a society will be biased in that it aims to realise egalitarian aims, but these will not mean that unlimited coercion is permissible but instead that such a process of transformation occurs in terms of the application of laws agreed by society, and in accordance with a moral code. Niebuhr has some reservations about the possibility to realise such a situation because he believes that the very necessity of power can represent the tendency to uphold egoism and unnecessary repressive control of society. Marxism would reject this pessimistic view and instead maintain that the revolutionary regime can be based on social controls that overcome any possibility of unlimited power. The fact that the regime in Soviet Russia degenerated does not mean that the same situation need to be repeated. Instead we can learn the lessons of a situation in which unlimited power developed, and instead support the adoption of the strictest moral and political limits on the role of a revolutionary regime.

The dilemma that Niebuhr has is that he admits that the moral demands of religion are too strict for them to have any political relevance. He concludes that: “Whenever religious idealism brings forth its purest fruits and places the strongest check upon selfish desire it results in policies which from the political perspective are impossible.”(53) The problem is that egoism is absolutely rejected to the extent that it suggests passivity in political terms. The emphasis of Christianity is that it repudiates the importance of any struggle for power, however principled. Consequently the only role of religion is to contribute to the development of a political strategy in moral terms: “The needs of an adequate political strategy do not obviate the necessity of cultivating the strictest individual moral discipline and the most uncompromising idealism.”(54) Hence the role of religion is to moderate and overcome the moral flaws in a strategy that attempts to realise social justice. This may mean challenging any inclination for individual ambition in the leader of a group for radical change. This process of ethical scrutiny will not dilute or undermine the effectiveness of struggle, but instead enhance its significance in terms of moral development: “No political realism which emphasises the inevitability and necessity of a social struggle, can absolve individuals of the obligation to check their own egoism, to comprehend the interests of others and thus to enlarge the area of cooperation.”(55) In this context, he contends that Christianity can contribute to the ability of promote the forces of reason in the striving for social justice.

The approach of Niebuhr is very welcome, but we could challenge the concluding modest role he provides for Christianity in the process of bringing about social change. The point is that if Christians become part of this struggle they are then partisans and advocates of this perspective. They cannot limit themselves to a modest and supporting role of supervising the morality of the struggle. Instead they have a responsibility to be involved in the development of a strategy of change. Or, at the very least they will be asked about their opinions on the wisdom of a given strategy of transformation. Consequently, they will become an integral part of the revolutionary forces. Niebuhr cannot try to deny this possibility on the feeble grounds that Christianity is too 'pure' to become involved at the level of leadership. The result of this view is an inconsistency which implies effectively that Christians should abstain from the struggle, even if having sympathies in favour of its activity. Instead of this passive view, people should have the courage of their convictions and become involved in trying to promote the realisation of the new society. This would be in accordance with the sympathy of Jesus Christ for the interests of the poor. But most important, it would be possible for Christians to carry out the important task of being the conscience of the mass movement. The point is that it is irresponsible for Niebuhr to imply that the collective creed of Marxism is a new fanaticism and yet do nothing about it. Instead it would be more principled and practical to intervene in order to moderate any perceived excesses of Marxism, and to promote the relationship of a revolutionary struggle with the role of a moral code. Ultimately, Niebuhr's approach is to justify an abstentionist view of history. This approach effectively accepted Stalin's domination of the communist movement and the connected repressive regime in the USSR. The point is that his apparent realism is influenced by a moral perfectionism which does not generate a practical conception of political activity. Yet his criticisms of capitalism would imply that logically he would become a committed adherent of the process of trying to bring about socialist change. He can outline a political perspective of this possibility, and yet he cannot relate it to an expression of support for Christian involvement in this struggle. In this context, Berdayaev is still superior to Niebuhr because despite his idealism he does outline a perspective of the involvement of Christians in the attempt to realise the Kingdom of God. Berdayaev's limitations is his irrationalism, but he is at least an advocate of activity. In contrast, Niebuhr is a rationalist, and a supporter of socialism, but he cannot provide reasons for the Christian involvement in this struggle.

Indeed the irony is that he is aware of the limitations of passivity; thus: “The dangers of religion's inner self-restraint upon self-assertion and its effort to achieve complete disinterestedness, are that such a policy easily becomes morbid, and that it makes for injustice by encouraging and permitting undue self-assertion in others.”(56) The conclusion should be apparent. The necessity of Christian intervention in the struggle for social change. But instead of this obvious and logical view, Niebuhr provides a sophisticated excuse as to why this is not possible. Indeed he effectively concludes that his approach is futile: “This social validity of a moral ideal which transcends social considerations in its purest heights, is progressively weakened as it is applied to more and more intricate, indirect and collective human relations.”(57) Such a self-defeating view is unprincipled. Instead of being defeatist, he should attempt the more constructive task of relating Christian morality to the aim of improving society. It is pessimistic to suggest that this morality is only of use for individuals. The result of this view is accommodation to the existing power structure. It could be argued that this is still the approach of Christianity today. For all its faults, only Marxism is still committed to promoting the possibility of a better and classless society.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Reinhold Niebuhr: Moral Man and Immoral Society, John Knox Press, Louisville 2013

(2) ibid p1

(3) ibid p2

(4))ibid p3

(5) ibid p4

(6) ibid p21

(7) ibid p22

(8) ibid p27-28

(9) ibid p29

(10) ibid p29-30

(11) ibid p31

(12) ibid p32

(13) ibid p40

(14) ibid p45

(15) ibid p48

(16) ibid p61

(17) ibid p75

(18) ibid p82

(19) ibid p83-84

(20) ibid p93

(21Ibid p96

(22) ibid p112

(23) ibid p116

(24) ibid p125

(25) ibid p140

(26) ibid p141

(27) ibid p142

(28) ibid p148

(29) ibid p150-151

(30) ibid p152

(31) ibid p152

(32) ibid p153

(33) ibid p153-154

(34) ibid p155-156

(35) ibid p158

(36) ibid p163

(37) ibid p167

(38) ibid p167-168

(39) ibid p176

(40) ibid p178

(41) ibid p178

(42) ibid p180

(43) ibid p184

(44) ibid p190

(45) ibid p194

(46) ibid p195

(47) ibid p220

(48) ibid p227-228

(49) ibid p230

(50) ibid p231

(51)Ibid p234

(52) ibid p238

(53) ibid p270

(54) ibid p273

(55) ibid p275

(56) ibid p261-262

(57) ibid p266-267