

A Study of the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr focusing on his thought of individuality

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• ABSTRACT •

Reinhold Niebuhr is generally renowned as the establisher or the exponent of social ethics throughout the world. This research is, on the contrary, arguing how he develops his concepts of individualization in terms of ethics as it is focusing on the anthropological thoughts of Niebuhr. Niebuhr completely analyzes the understanding of human beings that human beings individualize themselves as creaturely beings who contain the image of God based upon the neo-Augustinian theology. Thus, Niebuhr develops his ethical thoughts concentrating on the concept of "individualization." The process of individualization begins from the understanding of human finiteness and freedom which are one of the main ideas of human nature.

This individualizing process is the basis of the ethics of agape (divine love) that is the foundation of Niebuhr's ethics for society. Humanity's acknowledgment of society and love is the fundamental way of individualization, especially since both loves of self-giving and forgiving are the main origination of individualization of the self which formulates morality not only human relations but also the individuals relation to God. Only this love makes people meet others and have a relationship in community. Sometimes, the community supports individuals to fulfill their individuality; however, it frequently frustrates their desire to attain individuality because the individual's morality conflicts with the communal order or morality. This situation is the place of Christian realism in Niebuhr. Love, equality, and justice are the main basis of Christian realism, that is, Christian realism tells us the harmony of equality and justice based on love as the possibility of Christian ethics. In short, this research paper delves into how individualization unfolds one of the main thoughts of the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Key Words : Reinhold Niebuhr, Individualization, Anthropology, ethics of love, Christian Realism

I . Introduction

Many people may agree that the twentieth century is a Niebuhrian period in the area of Christian ethics, especially, in North America. Reinhold Niebuhr had been trying to give the realistic answer of the predicament, like genocide and poverty, during the twentieth century. Sometimes, he was a philosopher who explained the meaning of human existence. Other times, he was a great theologian who wrote about human destiny (theological Anthropology) and Christology. And frequently, he was a very prominent political thinker who argued for the necessity of Christian social action, and the superiority of the American democratic political system over totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and China. From his time to the present, many theologians, philosophers, ethicists, and politicians have had various dialogues with him in order to figure out the relation between Christianity and the secular world.

Niebuhr's theological anthropology begins with the modern understanding of humanity which focuses on individual selfhood, and ideology related to the issues of equality and freedom. He developed his theological thinking as he had a dialectical conversation between Christianity and this modern perspectives of humanity. Among these works, I will delve into his theological anthropology in terms of the meaning of individuality and subjectivity.

In this research paper, I will argue that 'individualization' is the main point of Reinhold Niebuhr's theological ethics by looking at his theological anthropology as well as his thoughts on the ethics of love and Christian

realism. Not only is individualization the basis of Niebuhr's theological anthropology, but it is also the crux of his social ethical thought. In the first part of this paper, I will argue that Niebuhr's ethics is based on his theological anthropology in terms of his notion of individuality. I will concentrate on the meaning of individuality based on specific foci of the Christian doctrine such as humanity as sinner, as creature, made in the image of God, the grace of God, and the moral formation of individuals. Then, in the second part of this paper, I will argue for an ethics of Niebuhr in terms of the meaning of the individual within the community. I will delve into the meaning of love, into the dynamic between the individual and the community, and into several ethical norms within society like equality, freedom and justice. This research paper will argue that the main ethical norm of Niebuhr is "individualization." My thesis is that human morality does not come from a simple following of duties, or a pursuit of happiness; rather, it is originated from the assurance of individuality.

II. Theological Anthropology and Christian Ethics

James Gustafson argues that anthropology is one of main focuses of theological ethics as such, "all ethical theory is based in large part on a descriptive anthropology. How a thinker describes human beings determines to a considerable extent how he or she will interpret morality and prescribe right actions."¹⁾ Reinhold Niebuhr bases his ethical thoughts

1) James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold

relying on the anthropological topics of capability and incapability, illusions and self-deception, possibilities and the limits of human beings, in his Gifford Lecture of 1939, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Gustafson argues that Reinhold Niebuhr's ethical theory concentrates more on anthropology than the soteriological concerns in human morality on which Christian theology usually focuses.²⁾ As he understands:

Reinhold Niebuhr is little occupied with salvation from sin; he is much occupied with the development of a theological anthropology that accounts for the deceptions and the possibilities of moral and political action in history. And where the significance of salvation is emphasized, such an assurance of mercy and of the coming of the Kingdom of God at the end of history, its import is the effects on the dispositions of historical moral agents; mercy is the ground of a freedom to be prudential and the Kingdom a ground for hope. Both the freedom and the hope are necessary to avoid distortions and pitfalls in political moral activity.³⁾

Thus, the focal point of ethics in Niebuhr is anthropology which is grounded in human experiences like freedom, love, equality, justice, community, and politics.

According to Reinhold Niebuhr, human beings' "own most vexing problem" is how they "think of" themselves.⁴⁾ How can we understand our-

Niebuhr's 'Theological Ethics,' in Reinhold *Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed., Richard Harries (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 198), 38.

2) Ibid., 39.

3) Ibid., 39~40.

4) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I., (Louisville and London:

selves? Are we the children of nature? Or, are we the children of God? Niebuhr tries to answer these questions by forming a theological anthropology that describes human as existing in very paradoxical situations, which relates to the dialectical experiences of humans such as human limitedness and freedom, finitude and transcendence, vitality and form, nature and spirit, and sinfulness and containment of the image of God. The crux of Niebuhr's anthropology is creatureliness and self-transcendence⁵⁾ which is based upon the acknowledgement of individuality and subjectivity. Niebuhr argues that human beings have the original form of righteousness, and can enjoy original felicity because they still contain the image of God from the creation of the world to the present in spite of their sinfulness.⁶⁾ This is very a particular notion of Niebuhr's in that he is confident of individual transcendence and human creativity. Gilkey points out that Niebuhr develops his idea of human creativity in terms of the polarity between vitality and form.⁷⁾ He claims that Niebuhr articulates four factors of human creativity in terms of human experiences within the creaturely situation:

Four terms must be considered in his situation: (1) The vitality of nature (its impulses and drives); (2) the forms and unities of nature, that is, the determinations of instinct, and the forms of natural cohesion and natural differentiation; (3) the freedom of spirit to transcend natural forms within limits and to direct and redirect the vitalities; (4) and finally the forming

Westminster John Knox Press, reprinted 1996), 1.

5) Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr - A Theological Study*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 78~101.

6) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, Chapter 10.

7) Gilkey, *On Niebuhr - A Theological Study*, 89.

capacity of spirit, its ability to create a new realm of coherence and order. All these four factors are involved in human creativity and by implication in human destructiveness.⁸⁾

This creativity makes human beings participate in creatureliness. Ironically, human destructiveness is not only related to the vitality and form of nature, but it also becomes the source of order and virtue. This paradoxical situation occurs when humans are conscious of their creatureliness when they acknowledge the possibility of transcendence.⁹⁾

Niebuhr demonstrates that the self-consciousness of creatureliness of human beings is the main key to understand human individuality and subjectivity. Human consciousness is the capability to see the world and the self. To see the self and the world occurs in the process of self-consciousness that is the formation of transcendence in that the self gradually recognize himself or herself as a subject, not an object while they are conscious of the world. When human beings delve into the meaning of transcendence, they acknowledge “the divine ground of existence”, namely God, as “the only possible ground of real individuality.”¹⁰⁾ Niebuhr says more deeply, “Christianity is responsible for a heightened sense of individuality because, according to the Christian faith, the human spirit in its freedom is finally bound only by the will of God, and the secret of its heart is only fully known and judged by the divine wisdom.”¹¹⁾ This

8) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* vol. I, 26~27. Gilkey also cites this passage in his book, *On Niebuhr A Theological Study*, on page 90.

9) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, 26~29.

10) Ibid., 14~15.

11) Ibid., 57.

Christian notion of individuality helps people utilize a very particular relationship with God, which Niebuhr calls “the individual responsibility to God.”¹²⁾ For instance, Protestant Christianity lifted up individuality with the phrase the “priesthood of all believers,” which focuses on the individual’s response to God in order to get forgiven of his or her sin through the assurance of the mercy of God. Also, this responsibility requires Christians to reject legalism, not because of the uselessness of the legal system, but because of the strong sense of “the individual’s immediate responsibility to God.” Namely, “the individual faces the awful responsibility of seeking to do God’s will amidst all the complexities of human existence with no other authoritative norm but that ultimate one.”¹³⁾

The Christian doctrine of the goodness of creation tells us the importance of individuality more clearly. Salvation does not mean “the complete destruction of the creatureliness and absorption into the divine” because the Christian doctrine of creaturely goodness values “the Christian concept of individuality.”¹⁴⁾ Although individuality is limited and finite, finiteness should not be regarded as an evil. Rather, it needs to be considered as a new possibility of transcendence through self-consciousness, and as the synthesis of the limited and the unlimited. Finally, the self can realize that self-consciousness and self-transcendence is possible only in the relation to God. Niebuhr articulates the meaning of becoming a self based on his anthropological thinking of the creaturely goodness as following:

12) Ibid., 60.

13) Ibid.

14) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 170.

To become a self means to become concrete. But to become concrete means to be neither limited nor unlimited, for that which must become concrete is a synthesis. Therefore, development consists in this: that in the externalization of the self one escapes the self endlessly and in the temporalization of the self one endlessly return to the self.¹⁵⁾

Likewise, the individual can distinguish the subjectivity of individuals with the sinfulness of human beings through this unceasing process of self-consciousness and self-transcendence as a subject:

Here the self as ultimate subject looks at the sinful self and declares that it is not itself. It is “not I ... but sin.” *The “I,” which from the perspective of self-transcendence, regards the sinful self not as self but as “sin,” is the same “I” which from the perspective of sinful action regards the transcendent possibilities of the self as not the self but as “law.” It is the same self; but these changing perspectives are obviously significant.*¹⁶⁾

Niebuhr thus applies the Christian perspective of creaturely goodness to his anthropology in order to explain human existence and its ethical implications.

When human beings are conscious of creaturely goodness and the original righteousness, he or she can perceive the possibility of transcendence. The more people perceive their possibility of transcendence, the closer

15) Ibid., 171.

16) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* vol. I, 278~279.

they are aware of God as the ultimate transcendental being. This relatedness to God makes human beings cultivate themselves to become subject that the notion of subjectivity is the main theme of Niebuhr's ethics, called "individualization." The moment where original righteousness is remembered does not mean that humans can obtain perfection. Rather, the moment of the realization of self as transcendental being guarantee people to see what they have done as a subject and what virtue that action has. Also, it helps people to see themselves beyond history as the remembrance of the original righteousness.¹⁷⁾ Here is where Niebuhr asserts that Christian ethics is independent from other ethical systems in that it deals with self-transcendence for the Christian life and human actions to original righteousness, but not any form of perfectionism in history.¹⁸⁾ Niebuhr unfolds this point as such that "the pretension of sin is that its act is not in history but an act of impartiality, a deed of eternity."¹⁹⁾ This action for eternity formulates our relatedness to God. Gilkey clarifies the relatedness to God in Niebuhr's ethics:

Now it is the character of that relatedness to God, essential to the human as the center of its structure as human, with which Niebuhr's discussion of 'original righteousness' is concerned. The character of this relation is defined, for Niebuhr, by the crucial role that faith, hope, love—the so-called theological virtues—play in that essential structure. They constitute the conformity of the spirit to God, namely dependence of the

17) Ibid., 277~280.

18) Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), first chapter.

19) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, 280.

spirit on God, in faith, hope, and love.²⁰⁾

Also, the foundation of human freedom, based on original righteousness, does not guarantee that people will receive the virtues of faith, hope, and love, as the ultimate form of freedom, but it guarantees the possibility of a moral norm related to these virtues. Thus, it shows us the law of love as the ultimate form of self-transcendence.²¹⁾

The conception of self-transcendence thus shows us the subjectivity of human beings. Human subjectivity does not simply mean that someone is totally independent from any worldly relations. Only the process of transcendence can draw human beings to the way of original righteousness. Niebuhr demonstrates that only the transcendental-self can esteem himself of herself as a sinner, and only at that time can people see the significance of the self.²²⁾ The transcendental-self values its original righteousness and its relatedness to God in order to be its true self in the world. The conception of subjectivity causes humans to be transcendent between the dynamics of worldliness and the ultimate eternity. That is, the center of anthropology in Niebuhr is creatureliness and self-transcendence, that humans can be conscious of their limitedness from the idea of creatureliness, and they also individualize themselves through the idea of self-transcendence. Human beings are created in the image of God, so they might be aware their possibility of transcendence, not by their own will, but by the will of God and the love of God. This process of self-con-

20) Gilkey, *On Niebuhr - A Theological Study*, 96.

21) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, 28~28.

22) *Ibid.*, 278~279.

sciousness is the way of “individualization.” Individualization is the basis of the moral goodness of humanity because by it they realize the possibility of their transcendence through the love of God. Thus, Theological anthropology based on creatureliness and self-transcendence becomes the foundation of ethics through the process of individualization in Niebuhr.

III. Ethics of love and Christian Realism

Based upon the analysis of theological anthropology, Reinhold Niebuhr keeps asking the meaning of subjectivity not only within in the personal concerns of humanity, but also within the context of society. As we discussed above, Niebuhr’s understanding of modernity, in terms of individuality, successfully resonates with Christian theology in that the self-consciousness of creatures and their self-transcendence is the basis of individualization. In other words, human beings can find their subjectivity through their self-transcendental consciousness of the world in history, and throughout eternity. They acknowledge the relatedness of individuals to God, and they begin their autonomous voyage toward ultimate eternity based upon their acknowledgement of the love of God. Niebuhr has a twofold ethical norm in terms of his theological anthropology: the law of love and the Christian understanding of reality, which is called “Christian realism.”

Gilkey points out that human beings put their existential foundation in their relatedness to God as such that the centrality of the relatedness

to God in human existence is actualized by faith, hope and love in Niebuhr. Human beings can live a “creative and meaningful life” based upon their relatedness to God, “with loving relations to other,” and “without self-destruction.”²³⁾ Niebuhr asserts:

This basic requirement of the love of God is identical with the two terms in the Pauline triad, “faith” and “hope.” Without faith in God’s providence the freedom of man is intolerable. Hope is subordinate to and yet identical with faith. It is faith with regard to the future…… Faith in the wisdom of God is thus a prerequisite of love because it is the condition without which man is anxious and is driven by his anxiety into vicious circles of self-sufficiency and pride.²⁴⁾

Niebuhr articulates the redemptive love of God in order to illustrate humanity’s existential status again:

The revelation of God as redeemer accentuates a previous knowledge of God as judge, for the simple reason that the revelation of His redemptive love clarifies His character of holiness, in terms of which human sin is judged. The anthropological consequences of this paradox are that faith in God’s ultimate resolution of the contradiction in which man stands clarifies man’s knowledge of the contradiction.²⁵⁾

Correspondingly, Niebuhr explains that the only facet of original righteousness is “the law of love.” This law does require us to have the perfect

23) Gilkey, *On Niebuhr - A Theological Study*, 96~97.

24) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. I, 289.

25) *Ibid.*, 290.

harmony between the soul and the self with the obedience of the law of love, but without the coercive conception of perfection.²⁶⁾ Hence, love is “the final form of righteousness,” and it is “the final requirement of human relations.”²⁷⁾

The Christian doctrine of love shows us the possibility for the individualization of human beings in that “love is not only a fruit of grace, but it is also a fruit of faith”²⁸⁾ in terms of moral possibility. The individual life “stands in an ascending scale of freedom and therefore under an ascending scale of moral possibility.”²⁹⁾ This moral possibility is related to the importance of the Christian doctrine of love in that love shows us the way of freedom which comes from the grace of God and having faith in God. Humans can embrace themselves as the “existence in the world as a fragile gift” while they respond to the grace of God.³⁰⁾ Christian faith in God means that we believe in “the transcendent unity of essence and the existence” of both the ideal and the real world which is the basis of the “law of God.” This love “implies an uncoerced giving of the self to the object of its devotion,” where the law is fulfilled through this perfect transcendental love. Love does not coerce the self to be fit into any social conformation, nor any intellectual or rational ideals.³¹⁾ Self-transcendence through love makes us step into the stage of self-giving love that reveals us the way of individualization. Charles Mathewes illustrates this point le-

26) Ibid., 292.

27) Ibid., 294.

28) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 195.

29) Ibid., 182.

30) Charles Mathewes, “Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself” in *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, vol. 19, 1999, 79.

31) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 188.

gitimately:

For Niebuhr, we want these experiences of love; the consummation of our lives is found in such engagements with others. But these desires are strictly speaking not worldly warranted, but are “tangents toward the eternal” which find no home in the closed-circuit calculus of the *saeculum*. Hence, insofar as we rightly understand these experiences of self-giving love to be genuinely self-giving, we are compelled to seek for a “supernatural” source, which we find in the primordial divine agape that creates, sustains, and redeems us.³²⁾

Self-giving love in the Christian doctrine of love, thus, demonstrates to us the way of individualization through the self-awareness of the possibility of self-giving to others.

On the other hand, forgiving-love in the Christian tradition shows us another way of the individual to acknowledging his or her subjectivity. Niebuhr emphasizes the doctrine of forgiveness as “the crown of Christian ethics” in that forgiving-love is “the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements.”³³⁾ Forgiving-love is possible only when the individual admits that he or she is a sinner. In other words, Niebuhr accentuates that “forgiveness is a moral achievement which is possible only when it is transcended”:³⁴⁾

32) Mathewew, “Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Against Himself”, 79~80. According to www.ikipedi.org, a *saeculum* is a length of time roughly equal to the potential lifetime of a person or the equivalent of the complete renewal of a human population.

33) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 201.

34) Ibid.

Forgiving love is a possibility only for those who know that they are not good, who feel themselves in need of divine mercy, who love in a dimension deeper and higher than that of moral idealism, feel themselves as well as their fellow men convicted of sin by a holy God and know that the differences between the good man and the bad man are insignificant in his sight.³⁵⁾

The possibility of forgiving-love causes human beings not only to negate his or her self-righteousness, or pride, which is the source of sin, but also to tolerate and accept the outside world of others within their community or society. To put it simply, forgiveness happens in relationships among people, yet, the possibility of forgiving-love is originated by the self-awareness of the truth that individual selves need to be forgiven before people will initiate to forgive others among themselves. Forgiving-love requires individuals to be conscious that their forgiveness comes from their self-confession of their limitation by sin, which opens the possibility to receive the mercy of God as such that the way of transcendence is based upon the forgiving-love from above the individual self.

In addition, the sacrificial love of the Christian tradition, called *agape*, shows us the acme of the Christian doctrine of love through the epitome of self-giving love and forgiving-love. Sacrificial love is the paramount form of self-transcendence and self-giving love in that it goes beyond the natural moral standard which is limited by human existence in history. *Agape* love, the sacrificial love, clearly demonstrates the genuineness of love in that it is “the willingness to risk or even to sacrifice the interests

35) Ibid., 203~204.

of the self, and in the end the self itself, for the other.”³⁶⁾ Likewise, mutual love (*eros*) also reveals the genuineness of love - self-giving and forgiving - when it tries to accomplish true mutuality.³⁷⁾ The genuineness of love enlightens people that his or her personal selfish notion of love (mutual love, *eros*), from the natural standards of human existence, does not have any inferior or critical sense of love because love is, fundamentally, the caring of others, relations, communities, and justice. At this point, loves, including *agape* and *eros*, are transcendent and eternal:

Sacrificial love thus represents a tangent towards “eternity” in the field of historical ethics. It is nevertheless the support of all historical ethics; for the self cannot achieve relations of mutual and reciprocal affection with others if its actions are dominated by the fear that they may not be reciprocated. Mutuality is not a possible achievement if it is made the intention and goal of any action. Sacrificial love is thus paradoxically related to mutual love; and this relation is an ethical counterpart of the general relation of super-history to history.³⁸⁾

Here is the standpoint of Niebuhr’s dialectics of sacrificial love and mutual love:

Sacrificial love (*agape*) completes the incompleteness of mutual love (*eros*), for the latter is always arrested by reason of the fact that it seeks to relate life to life from the standpoint of the self and for the sake of

36) Gilkey, *On Niebuhr - A Theological Study*, 98~99.

37) Ibid.

38) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 69.

the self's own happiness. But a self which seeks to measure the possible reciprocity which its love towards another may elicit is obviously not sufficiently free of preoccupation with self to lose itself in the life of the other. Consideration of prudence thus inevitably arrest the impulse towards, and concern for, the life of the other.³⁹⁾

Thus, Niebuhr emphasizes the will of God in that God reveals in Christ the ultimate formation of love, *agape*, in order to show the ethical norm of the Christian life, that is, the harmony of the mutual love and the sacrificial love. He writes, “the highest unity is a harmony of love in which the self relates to itself in its freedom to other selves in their freedom under the will of God.”⁴⁰⁾

Based on this understanding of love, Richard Fox points out two tenets of Reinhold Niebuhr's ethical thoughts in terms of Christian realism. The first one is “for the Christian realist there was no ultimate fulfillment in society; but neither was there any salvation apart from the life of social and political engagement.” And the other is “religion was more a matter of trust than of belief” - “an understanding of religious faith as trust in the meaning of human existence.”⁴¹⁾ Based on these two features, Niebuhr expands his social ethical ideas based on his analysis of individuals and the ideal of love as we discussed above. Niebuhr develops his theological anthropology that humans exist as individuals in the world who are limited by nature, sin, and reason. At the same time, human

39) Ibid., 83.

40) Ibid., 95.

41) Richard Fox, “The Living of Christian Realism,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed., Richard Harries (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1986), 1~23.

beings have the possibility to be infinite through the process of individualization by the love of God. Because of their finiteness, they have simultaneously been building community, which is also another foundation of individualization. Niebuhr develops that Christian realism is not only based on this existential status of human beings, but it also formulates the notions of equality, justice, balance of power, and peace in terms of Christian social ethics. Paradoxically, Niebuhr's Christian realism and social ethics is not based on the idea of communitarian collectivism, but rather, it is based on an individuality that is to rely on "the pervasive rule of self-interest" and the individuals' "attentiveness all of the realities at work in social change and conflict."⁴²⁾

The relation between the self and community is so complex that it has two dimensions - vertical and horizontal. The individuals have been encountering others and their communities in the horizontal dimension. While the individuals intend to multiply their own community, they sometimes experience individual emancipation or transcendence through the sense of loyalty, but many times, they come to have a very strong collectivism or collective pride which is a main source of totalitarianism.⁴³⁾ Because of these aspects, the individuals feel frustrated but fulfilled them-

42) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* vol. I, x. Robin W. Lovin defines Christian realism in his introduction of this book as following: "Christian Realism is more than a set of opinions on the issues of the day. It is a synthesis of political, moral, and theological reflection, in which the undeniability of human freedom and the inescapability of its limits are the twin realities that together form a framework for understanding both the multiplicity of our specific choices and the ultimate unity of the environment in which they all take place."

43) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 38~39.

selves in relation to their community in this vertical relation. The individual, on the one hand, looks upon his or her community “as the fulfillment of his life and the sustainer of his existence” as such that each individual meets his or her physical and moral needs while they are staying in their organizational communities. Namely, human reason can acknowledge “the individual’s “concrete universality”” in this community morally as well as physically.⁴⁴⁾ On the other hand, the self looks down upon his or her community in that they might be higher than the community. While the individual adheres his or her external or existential sense to their community, they might feel that they have to sacrifice their dignity in order to merely preserve their existence. The moral ideal of the individual, which wisely shares his or her self-interest with others, is frequently contradicted with the communal moral standards. Niebuhr illustrates this phenomenon as such: “Looking down at the community from his individual height the individual is embarrassed by the difference between the moral standards of the community and his own.”⁴⁵⁾ Thus, “the community will always remain both the fulfillment and the frustration of the individual.”⁴⁶⁾

In addition to this understanding of the self and community, Niebuhr develops his social ethical norms in terms of love, justice, and equality. Love, equality, and justice are the foundations of relation between the individual and the community. Love, especially mutual love, fulfills the issue of justice, and the issue of justice is based upon the issue of equality,

44) Ibid., 35.

45) Ibid.

46) Ibid., 36.

particularly equal distribution. While the ideal of mutual love embodies the community, the individual can understand the meaning of equality and justice. Equality, as the ideal of justice, can be actualized in community when human beings can practice mutual love with reciprocity. Niebuhr argues that this formation of love, equality, and justice, on the one hand, is the very ideal form of social ethics; yet, it needs to be practical to the realities of human beings like the relation between the individuals and community on the other hand. Niebuhr illustrates the ideal of justice with the sense of equality:

Equality as a pinnacle of the ideal of justice implicitly points towards love as the final norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the condition of sin. A higher justice always means a more equal justice. Special privilege may be frowned upon more severely by those who want it than those who have it; but those who have it are uneasy in their conscience about it.⁴⁷⁾

With this sense, Niebuhr does not agree with perfectionism, rather he argues the balance of and vitality of community:

These strategies are impossible for perfect individuals; for perfection seems always to mean in either the classical mystical tradition or in the perfectionist Christian tradition the conquest of the self over its self-concern, in short, its “selflessness.” The justice of the community does not require this selflessness. It requires the expression of competing

47) Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 254~255.

and balanced vital capacities for the sake of the community.⁴⁸⁾

These dynamics of love, justice, and equality, thus, makes the self do his or her ethical action with the notion of “impossible possibility”⁴⁹⁾ in order to fulfill his or her individuality in history.

The issues of justice and equality, related to the sense of community, help the individual to understand a sense of moral goodness. Human beings want to live equally in their society in order to fulfill their individual self-interest; yet, they constantly experience frustration because of the hierarchy of authority and function. The issue of justice, equal distribution, is coming up from this frustration. Here is the place of constant political conflicts among people, and between one community and another community. Because of this reality, “the control of moral goodwill” is required of society in order to find a real trust to deal with these social conflicts, not a simple belief to solve them. Niebuhr argues, “this necessity and possibility of fusing moral and political insights does not completely eliminate certain irreconcilable elements in the two types of morality, in-

48) Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Godly and the Ungodly* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1958), 115.

49) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, chapter 4. titled, “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal.” Niebuhr writes about his rhetoric, “impossible possibility” in pages 111~112 as such, “Christ is thus the revelation of the very impossible possibility which the Sermon on the Mount elaborates in ethical term... Christian faith is a type of optimism which places its ultimate confidence in the love of God and not the love of man, in the ultimate and transcendent unity of reality and not in tentative and superficial harmonies of existence which human ingenuity may contrive.” He insists, quite logically, that this ultimate hope becomes possible only to those who no longer place their confidence in purely human possibility. Also, Niebuhr uses this rhetoric “impossible possibility” in order to explain his social ethical thought as argued above.

ternal and external, individual and social.” This notion of moral goodness, however, may “add to the richness of human life.”⁵⁰⁾ Niebuhr makes a conclusive comment about the resonance of human moral action and society:

From the internal perspective the most moral act is one which is actuated by disinterested motives. The external observer may find good in selfishness. He may value it as natural to the constitution of human nature and as necessary to society. But from the viewpoint of the author of an action, unselfishness must remain the criterion of the highest morality. For only the agent of an action knows to what degree self-seeking corrupts his socially approved action. Society, on the other hand, makes justice rather than unselfishness its highest moral ideal. Its aim must be to seek equality of opportunity for all life. If this equality and justice cannot be achieved without the assertion of interest against interest, and without restraint upon the self-assertion of those who infringe upon the rights of their neighbors, then society is compelled to sanction self-assertion and restraint. It may even, as we have seen, be forced to sanction social conflict and violence.⁵¹⁾

Thus, Niebuhr develops his idea of social ethics, especially political ethics, called Christian realism, with the notion of equality and justice in community and society.

Hence, the practice of ethics in terms of individualization is based upon

50) Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man & Immoral Society*, intro., by Langdon B. Gilkey (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 258.

51) Ibid., 258~259.

the acknowledgement of love and reality. Self-giving love and forgiving-love are the main sources that the individual becomes moral with the relation to God. The sacrificial love, agape, is the ultimate possibility of Christian life in order to learn the meaning of the law of love; whereas, mutual love is the ground of human relation to others. Love makes human beings go forward to others and to God. When they realize they are a beloved being, they acknowledge with forgiving-love that they are aware of the meaning of individuality. The individual's relation to others and to the community, however, has a simultaneous tension of frustration and fulfillment of individuality. The sense of love, equality, and justice compromises this tension with the ethical notion of "impossible possibility." Christian realism answers the balanced capacity of this possibility of equality and justice based on love.

IV. Conclusion

I argued about the meaning of individuality based upon the theological anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr. My basic argument was that 'individualization' is the main idea of Reinhold Niebuhr's theological ethics. Based upon this argument, I argued that Niebuhr's ethics is rooted in his theological anthropology related to the Christian understanding of individuality and subjectivity. I concentrated on Niebuhr's thought of individuality in terms of the Christian doctrine of humanity like creatureliness and self-transcendence. And then, I argued that the way of ethics comes from the law of love, and the relation between the individual and

community. The law of love is related to the issue of equality and justice as the ethical norm of society. Thus, the main ethical norm of Niebuhr's thought is "individualization."

Most of all, Reinhold Niebuhr answered the question of individuality with his thought of anthropology based on the modern thought of humanity and the Christian doctrine of humanity. The crux of Niebuhr's anthropology is the "creatureliness and self-transcendence" that everybody is aware of his or her finiteness in history from the thought of creatureliness, simultaneously, and they are individualized for themselves through the process of self-transcendence. Because God created human beings with the image of God, they are conscious of the possibility of self-transcendence through the will and love of God. Therefore, the moral goodness of human beings is initiated by this process of individualization in that human beings realize the possibility of transcendence.

Moreover, humanity's acknowledgement of society and the self in terms of love is the fundamental way of individualization, especially since both loves of self-giving and forgiving are the main origination of individualization which formulates morality not only human relations but also the individual relation to God. Only this love makes people meet others and have a relationship in community. Sometimes, the community supports individuals to fulfill their individuality; however, it frequently frustrates their desire to attain individuality because the individual's morality conflicts with the communal order or morality. This situation is the place of Christian realism in Niebuhr. Love, equality, and justice are the main basis of Christian realism, that is, Christian realism tells us the harmony of

equality and justice based on love as the possibility of Christian ethics.

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 • 국 문 초 록 •

라인홀드 니버는 일반적으로 사회 윤리의 정초자로 많이 알려져 있습니다. 이 논문에서는 니버의 인간관을 중심으로 그 인간관이 윤리 형성에 어떤 영향을 미치고 있는지를 연구하고 있습니다. 니버는 어거스틴의 전통에서 인간을 이해하고 있으며 그러한 인간 이해는 사람이 자신을 어떻게 이해하고 받아들이고 있는지에 대해서 철저히 분석하고 있습니다. 이러한 인간 이해를 바탕으로 니버는 인간의 개인화에 중심을 둔 윤리 형성을 이야기 하고 있습니다. 사람이 개인화 되어가는 과정은 인간의 본성 이해를 바탕으로 인간의 자유와 가능성을 분석하고 이해하는 과정에서 개인화가 출발하게 되며, 이러한 이해를 바탕으로 그의 윤리의 초석인 사랑의 윤리를 발전시키고 있습니다.

무엇보다도 니버가 관심을 가지는 것은 인간의 창조성과 하나님의 이미지를 가진 존재로 창조되었다는 점을 부각시키고 있습니다. 비록 인간은 죄로 인해서 한계적인 존재이지만, 동시에 자신을 계속 발견해가고 초월자 하나님을 만나는 과정에서 자기초월을 이루어 가는 존재입니다. 이러한 하나님과의 관계에서 자기 초월을 이루어 가는 과정을 니버는 “개인화 (Individualization)”이라고 정의하고 있습니다. 이러한 개인화 과정이 윤리의 중요 주제로서, 하나님과의 관계를 통한 자기 초월의 과정은 신적인 사랑인 아가페를 통해서 구체화되며, 사람들간의 상호 사랑 (에로스) 역시 사랑의 진정성의 측면에서 사회 윤리를 이루어 가는 중요한 개념입니다. 비록 인간의 죄 때문에, 사람에게는 그 한계가 분명하지만, 그 한계를 극복해가면서 개인화 과정을 통해서 정의와 분배, 그리고 사랑을 이루어가는 것을 니버의 기독교 현실주의라고 명명할 수 있을 것입니다. 이 논문에서는 니버가 이해한 인간관과 그 이해를 바탕으로 “개인화”가 어떻게 니버의 윤리 사상을 어떻게 전개시키고 있는지를 연구하고 있습니다.

주제어 : 라인홀드 니버, 인간 개인화, 기독교 현실주의, 사랑의 윤리, 기독교

인간학
