

# Keiser's Post-Critical Niebuhr: A Review Article

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*This review essay on R. Melvin Keiser's Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr surveys selected works about Niebuhr, examines the strengths of Keiser's post-critical treatment of Niebuhr and raises questions about Keiser's views and about Niebuhr.*

R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996. xviii + 248p., with bibliography and index.

In the Foreword to John Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), Martin Marty writes: "The legacy of Niebuhr . . . is among the richest in American theology in the twentieth century; as a matter of fact, I wonder whether since Jonathan Edwards there has been a systematic theologian of such organizing brilliance as H. Richard Niebuhr" (p. 7). In what has become a major focus of his scholarly career, Professor Keiser has gone far in showing the accuracy of Marty's remark. Keiser went to Yale Divinity School to study in what turned out to be the final two years of Niebuhr's life. He later wrote an S.T.M. thesis under Robert L. Calhoun entitled "Relationality in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: A Study in Niebuhr's Understanding of Man and God," 1964, and, in doctoral study at Duke under William L. Poteat, wrote a dissertation on "Recovering the Personal: The Logic of Religious Discourse in the Theological Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr," 1974, in which he suggests that Niebuhr is moving toward the formulation of a postcritical theology and ethics, a term linking his work to that of Michael Polanyi, the Hungarian-British physical chemist turned philosopher, whose theory of tacit knowing, according to Marjorie Grene, provides "grounds for a revolution in philosophy."

Keiser revised and published his dissertation as *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), an exploration of Niebuhr's theological method. Now, in this later book, he focuses on the mature formulation of Niebuhr's theological ethics, on how it developed during Niebuhr's career, and on a critical appraisal of what Niebuhr accomplished and left undone at his death. These two books on Niebuhr constitute the most comprehensive treatment to date of the thought of one who is perhaps the twentieth century's greatest scholar in theology and ethics.

The strength of Keiser's treatment of Niebuhr lies (1) in the scope and detail of his approach, drawing on Niebuhr's published and unpublished writing, on his own personal contact with Niebuhr as a student at Yale, and on the views of other scholars; (2) in his perspective on the development of Niebuhr's thought, especially what Keiser calls the "conversion" that shapes the character of his mature work; (3) in his delineation of the movement toward a post-critical method that has similarities to Michael Polanyi's ground-breaking philosophy; and (4) in Keiser's evaluation of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, dealing with its depth and power as well as its deficiencies.

To appreciate Keiser's accomplishment, I shall first provide a brief overview of published works on Niebuhr. Second, there will be a closer examination of the strengths of Keiser's treatment of Niebuhr. And third, I shall raise some questions of my own about Keiser and Niebuhr.

## Survey of Selected Published Work about Niebuhr

The first substantial commentary on Niebuhr's thought appeared in *Faith and Ethics: the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper, 1957), a *festschrift* with articles by some of Niebuhr's former students. Two chapters by Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" and "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," make up over 40% of the text of the book and provide information on the sources and shape of Niebuhr's thought. Frei is very helpful on the German background and makes good use of these sources to clarify issues in Niebuhr's theology, but he fails to give adequate attention to Niebuhr's American sources, in particular to his acknowledged debts to Jonathan Edwards and to William James and Josiah Royce from the pragmatic tradition. As a result, the first chapter seems more an essay on 19th and 20th century German theology than on Niebuhr. In the second chapter, Frei suggests some questionable interpretations of Niebuhr. For example, Frei speaks of "disbelievers," "half-believers," and "secular" culture, even as he recognizes that Niebuhr "refuses to acknowledge the absence of faith in any man" (p. 13). This basic point in Niebuhr turns "unbelievers" into believers and eliminates the need for the highly vague term "secular" by providing a means for understanding the varied faiths of believers other than Christian. Or again, Frei understands "internal" and "external" history in *The Meaning of Revelation* as "completely parallel to one another" and "quite different in kind" (p. 30), whereas Niebuhr sees a close similarity between histories, in which they differ by the perspective or faith that informs them, making each external to the others but having an internal history as viewed from within. Further, when Frei discusses the five-fold typology Niebuhr outlines in *Christ and Culture*, he says that "Niebuhr's own faith and theology are those of a 'conversionist'" (p. 65), whereas Niebuhr explicitly rejects opting for one as "the Christian answer," says that "the types are not wholly exclusive of one another," and reminds us that "in theology as in any other science the seeking of an inclusive theory is of great practical importance" (*Christ and Culture*, p. 231). While Frei provides helpful insights, especially about Niebuhr and German theology, his treatment is not an adequate guide to Niebuhr's thought.

James Gustafson's article in *Faith and Ethics*, "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," offers a helpful rendition of major motifs in Niebuhr's ethics and "an interpretation of Christian social ethics" consistent with Niebuhr's thought. In his final section, "Some Remaining Questions," however, Gustafson drifts into dubious territory in speaking of ethics and predictability, in saying that in "comparison with Catholicism, Protestantism has little culture of its own," and when he departs from Niebuhr on "the relation of ethics to ontology" (pp. 136-139).

Paul Ramsey in "The Transformation of Ethics" makes the interesting suggestion that relational objectivism may be a better way to describe Niebuhr's treatment of values than relativism.

In "Value and Valuation," George Shrader delineates a distinguishing mark of Niebuhr's thought as "the way he combines rigorous philosophical analysis with penetrating theological insight" (p. 173) and points to an apparent problem in Niebuhr's value theory, which Niebuhr later clarifies (see *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, pp. 100-113).

The articles, taken as a whole, with the exception of that by Julian Hartt, offer a helpful but by no means comprehensive or completely reliable introduction to Niebuhr's thought. Hartt's article admittedly expresses his own point of view rather than Niebuhr's, misrepresents Niebuhr at points, and is open to the devastating criticisms Niebuhr, and Polanyi, make of Hartt's type of overly- confident rationalism.

Two books on Niebuhr appeared in 1970: an introduction to his thought by John D. Godsey, referred to above, and the first comprehensive study of Niebuhr's theology, by Dutch theologian Libertus A. Hoedemaker (*The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970).

Godsey provides a good account of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, drawn from his major books and selected articles. Though he blurs some of Niebuhr's finer distinctions (e.g. internal and external history), he correctly perceives that Niebuhr is "forging something new in the world of Christian theology" and thus opens himself to criticism (pp. 96ff. and p. 108).

Hoedemaker focuses on Niebuhr's theology, showing its American **and** European (including non-German) sources. His treatment, done with empathy but not uncritically, covers an impressive array of topics in Niebuhr's thought, and raises important questions about its possible limitations. Hoedemaker does not deal adequately with Niebuhr's ethics, does not seem to understand the importance of Niebuhr's identification of God with the principle of being, and implies that Niebuhr's theology makes the most sense if linked to "God's final disappearance" (pp. 165-166).

James W. Fowler's *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) emerged from a doctoral dissertation at Harvard and proposes "to study in depth the development of" Niebuhr's thought. Fowler had the great advantage of access to the unpublished manuscripts left by Niebuhr at the time of his death in 1962. The biographical introduction is helpful but errs in saying, "From 1917 to 1918 Niebuhr earned a master's degree in history at Washington University;" the master's thesis itself reports "A.M., 1917, Department of Germanics." The strength of Fowler's treatment lies in his use of unpublished as well as published writings in tracing the development of Niebuhr's thought, in emphasizing the inseparability of his theology and ethics, and suggesting that Niebuhr develops an alternative to Barth and liberalism. Perhaps suffering from never having studied with Niebuhr and seeing him wrestle as he attempted to find "*logos in mythos*" Fowler overly systematizes Niebuhr, who can be called "systematic" only in a sense that is carefully qualified, and comes close to misrepresenting Niebuhr by suggesting affinities with Whitehead's metaphysics. Yet he does find in Niebuhr "a tacit covenantal structure that makes human community and human selfhood possible," a structure that is *triadic* in form (pp. 206-207), thus underscoring Niebuhr's view that humans are involved in a developing experience with their companions in the presence of divine mystery, not a clearly defined situation for rational exposition.

Donald E. Fadner, in *The Responsible God: The Christian Philosophy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (1974), fears the sovereignty of God in Niebuhr endangers human responsibility and holds that the way to correct this problem is through process metaphysics.

Lonnie D. Kliever in *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco: Word, 1977) deals with Niebuhr as reformer, theologian, and ethicist, provides a balanced treatment, and points to Niebuhr's ambiguities and relevance. Though Kliever repeats the minor error that Niebuhr's master's degree at Washington University was in history (p. 20), gives excessive priority to the conversionist position from *Christ and Culture* (pp. 58ff.), and seems to think that the ethics of responsibility eliminates teleology and deontology as principles of Christian action (pp. 113 ff.), Kliever offers a more carefully nuanced view of internal and external history and their relation to Kant (pp. 74 ff.) than is usually found (e.g. Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*. New York: Macmillan, 1966, pp. 234ff.). Kliever also notes the importance of Niebuhr for narrative theology and environmental theology, and sees his "original and powerful re-symbolization of the Christian faith" as a "resource for the ongoing reformation of the church and world" (p. 189).

Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), intends to show that “the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr adequately resolves the problem of faith seeking understanding in a manner that is at once true to the historically distinctive features of the biblical witness and accessible to its hearers” (p. 2). Though specialized in focus, Ottati carries out his purpose well and in the process indicates how Niebuhr’s thought is indeed systematic.

In Jerry Irish’s *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), can be found probably the best short account of the basic themes in Niebuhr. Drawing on the published writings Irish gives an orderly understanding of this dispersed system without over-organizing it and threads his way through Niebuhr’s subtleties with precision and sensitivity.

*The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Ronald Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), fails to live up to its promise or do justice to its subject. With a few notable exceptions (see especially the contributions of James Gustafson and Linell Cady), the contributors do little to illumine Niebuhr’s legacy nor do all of them show close acquaintance with his thought.

Among the unpublished dissertations on Niebuhr, those by Beverly Wildung Harrison (*H. Richard Niebuhr: Towards a Christian Moral Philosophy*. Union Theological Seminary, 1974) and Michael W. Maeder (*H. Richard Niebuhr’s Doctrine of God and Critical Realism: An Attempt to Reconcile Orthodox Christianity with an Experiential View of God*. Graduate Theology Union, 1976) especially merit attention. Maeder provides an extensive and useful bibliography.

Given the unevenness of the published materials, Keiser’s work stands out as a helpful addition to the growing literature on Niebuhr. Without neglecting its problems, Keiser succeeds in getting inside Niebuhr’s complex thought and showing the intent and scope of his work. In so doing, he opens the way for Niebuhr to evoke continuing creative response without producing imitators.

### **The Strength of Keiser’s Treatment of Niebuhr**

a) Scope and Detail. The most impressive aspect of Keiser’s book is his meticulous inclusiveness of Niebuhr’s published and unpublished work. Though he does not deal directly with the background of Niebuhr’s thought, he is aware of his sources and often indicates them, and the entire range of Niebuhr’s writing has been consulted and drawn on extensively to illustrate and support the view of Niebuhr that he presents. We see Niebuhr systematizing but never becoming rigidly systematic, responding to specific occasions (e.g. the articles on war) but always seeking a larger view that makes sense of the tragedies and apparent contradictions of human experience, and in the process dealing with the entire spectrum of elements in ethics and theology, though never arriving at a finished formulation. In addition, Keiser uses student notes of lectures in Niebuhr’s course on Christian ethics, and of special importance, relies on his own experience of Niebuhr in class, which adds conviction to the view that “first-person grammar” is dominant in Niebuhr’s mature work (pp. 48-49). Keiser draws on the work of scholars who have written about Niebuhr, using them to raise questions about possible strengths and weaknesses in Niebuhr; but he does not hesitate to disagree with them when he thinks it appropriate (see his affirmation that Niebuhr’s ethics is more relational than dispositional, pp. 96-97). Part One traces the emergence of relational realism and pinpoints the time of Niebuhr’s “conversion.” Part Two describes the relational ethics of responsibility, involving a postcritical ethics of being and a phenomenology of the moral act. Part Three focuses on

Christian responsibility as action with Jesus Christ as the symbolic form, borne within the Christian community, that liberates and provides principles for “theo-social analysis.” Keiser concludes with a section on “A Relational Ethics of Liberating Spirituality.”

Keiser adds depth and charm to his presentation of Niebuhr’s thought with illustrations drawn from the lectures on Christian ethics in 1961 that both Keiser and his wife attended and recorded in their written notes. Here is an example:

We undergo stages in coming to emotional knowledge of the Creator amidst creaturely goodness. The stages, Niebuhr remarks, are like coming to appreciate modern art. “Our first reaction to the modern artist is: he is out of his mind.” “We look at the late Picasso’s multi-profiled woman and first wonder about his sanity. It doesn’t conform to ‘good art’,” such as that of Rembrandt or Praxiteles. “After this stage of rejection, then I resist my own interpretation of good and evil and believe that Picasso knew what he was doing.” So also, “I don’t know what God was doing when he made me but I accept it” (CE[RMK], CE[EBK]), & CE[RMK] April 26, 1961). From rejection to acceptance we can pass on to affirmation, understanding, and wonder (p. 108).

b) Perspective. The crux of Keiser’s understanding of the development of Niebuhr’s thought lies in his “conversion.” This perspective constitutes a distinctive aspect of the book, and may also be its most controversial point. “Although H. Richard Niebuhr is understood to be an outstanding representative of liberal theology turned neo-orthodox,” Keiser writes, “in fact, his conversion from liberalism was to relational thinking that bears the seeds of a postcritical theology” (p. xi). Central to Niebuhr’s thought after his conversion is the sovereignty of God, a view he shares with other neo-orthodox theologians of his time. What sets Niebuhr apart for Keiser is that he reconceives God and self in relational and experiential terms. “It means the presence of the transcendent God as pattern of being and value in the world, and the self’s personal dependence upon and faith in the trustworthiness of being in its mysterious wholeness” (p.xiii). Keiser dates Niebuhr’s shift to relational realism with precision; he believes it took place in November, 1929. Still Dean at Eden Theological Seminary, having just published his *Social Sources of Denominationalism* and an article, “From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God,” which show no sign of the new perspective, he delivers an address in late November with the title “Moral Relativism and the Christian Faith,” in which, writes Keiser, his “converted” viewpoint appears. So “it would appear that November is the time of his transformation” (p. 213, fn. 21; see also pp. 23ff.).

c) Niebuhr’s Postcritical Theology. Keiser depicts Niebuhr as breaking out of the dualisms that characterize both liberal and neo-orthodox theology, dualisms appropriated from critical philosophy. The relational realism that emerges from Niebuhr’s conversion moves him, Keiser writes, toward a postcritical perspective, so that “in his culminating ethics of responsibility, relational thinking breaks free of its dualistic container and expands into a comprehensive postcritical theology” (pp. xi-xii). By means of his postcritical approach, Niebuhr “is able to get beneath the distortions and divisions of modern thought to discover the spiritual principles inherent in the tacit relatedness of selves in actual living, which bears the seeds of social transformation” (p. 128). Keiser uses language and references that emphasize the postcritical direction of development in Niebuhr’s thought and suggest its relation to the postcritical philosophy of Michael Polanyi. He does not in this volume, however, spell out directly and in detail what this development and the relation to Polanyi mean.

d) Evaluation of Niebuhr. Keiser’s overall evaluation of Niebuhr’s theology and ethics is strongly positive. He does, however, raise questions and points to what he sees as inadequacies.

The crucial element in Niebuhr's development for Keiser is his conversion from liberal idealism to relational realism. His theology and ethics gather strength as the consequences of this shift unfold. Emerging within the context of Niebuhr's conviction of the relativism of human thought and action, relational realism affirms, first, the inseparability of value and being. To experience value is to experience being; to experience being is to experience value. Second, the presence of ultimate pattern within the relative is experienced through revelation that occurs in and through historical events. For Christians, the revelatory event is Jesus Christ. Third, Christians are enabled to trust and be loyal to this reality through the experience of Jesus Christ, which means to have faith in God. This faith, to the extent that it is present, permeates the whole of human life--feeling, reason, and all relations. As Niebuhr works through this viewpoint throughout his career, he moves toward overcoming the dualisms that have pervaded critical thought. In Reinhold Niebuhr's realism the dualism remains as the ideal remains ever unrealizable amid the sin of human actualities. In Barth, the dualism remains in the wholly otherness of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. In Tillich, the remnants of dualism are manifest in that only symbols point beyond the experienced world to the Unconditioned. Troeltsch bridges dualism by affirming the individual's mystical union with Absolute Spirit.

Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility, Keiser points out, takes shape within this relational realism. God is the One action present in all action. Selves are agents acting in response to one another in community, but ultimately in response to the prior and ongoing action of God. Only the language of responsibility to God and human companions through action and interaction in specific contexts is adequate ethics within Christian faith. On this basis, Niebuhr develops a phenomenology of the moral act: fittingness, response to divine immanence, the integrity of maturing inclusiveness, embracing change through self-transformation, finding freedom through the reinterpretation of our context, and meeting needs in response to the fullness of being. Without rejecting them, Niebuhr presents a third alternative to the teleological and deontological patterns that previously have dominated Western ethics, providing a way to deal tacitly with the complexity of actual human situations.

The key to the interpretation guiding Christian moral agency is Jesus Christ as symbolic form, by means of which Christians "tell each other what life and death, God and man, are like" (*The Responsible Self*, p. 154). Jesus Christ is the responsible self, fully human, yet also Son of God through whom humans are empowered to become sons of God. The virtues present in moral life and the principles of moral action inherent in these virtues are "centrally illuminated and reconstructed by the symbolic form of Jesus Christ" (p. 125).

Niebuhr's relational ethics, in Keiser's view, "can contribute significantly to liberation thought" (p. 128) by not separating justice from love and through a community of action that responds to social domination. Issues of social domination to which Niebuhr gives explicit attention are sexism, environmental exploitation, the Christian imperialism that results in anti-semitism, war and pacifism, and racism (pp. 131-155).

Keiser raises an important issue in asking why socioeconomic critique, so central in Niebuhr's earlier years, moves to the periphery in his later years. He builds on Beverly Harrison's comment that this change emerges from his mounting concern about the crisis in language and symbol. The need for a profound "resymbolization of the Christian message and the life of faith" led him to focus on the reformation of the church and of religion as the basis for a reformation of society. The context of social analysis thus becomes inclusive of nature and history as well as present culture and society and involves more complexity than can be managed by any one person (pp. 157-175).

The most pervasive inadequacy Keiser sees in Niebuhr's ethics is the failure to provide specific directives for action or what Keiser calls "Niebuhr's unconscious resistance to praxis" (p. 131). This resistance derives from Niebuhr's reluctance to judge others. Action must be shaped by what is fitting in particular situations, obedient to the agent's covenants. Keiser believes that Niebuhr, in this regard, fails to take responsibility into social praxis and "contradicts his responsibility perspective" (p. 155). Nor does Keiser find any evidence that Niebuhr would have included praxis in his ethics of responsibility even had he lived longer. This failure represents a remnant of dualism in his social ethics (pp. 196-197). Keiser also considers critiques of Niebuhr made by others, in particular criticisms from a feminist perspective. Sharon Welch (*A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) holds that the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in neo-orthodox theology entails domination, conquest, and control. Keiser agrees with Welch in regard to Barth and Tillich, but not with reference to Niebuhr. While Niebuhr does espouse a radical monotheism that dethrones all absolutes except the principle of being, God declares all things good; reverencing the radically monotheistic requires reverencing the entire creation and all relative existents. Indeed, says Keiser, Welch's call for "communicative solidarity" has much in common with Niebuhr's dialogical approach (pp. 52ff.).

In response to the critique of Linda Holler ("Is There a Thou 'Within' Nature? A Dialogue with H. Richard Niebuhr." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17.1 (Spring 1989): 81-102) that Niebuhr's residual dualism shows in his denigration of feeling, Keiser agrees with reference to Niebuhr until the 50's. Influenced by Jonathan Edwards' emphasis on the religious affections, Keiser writes, Niebuhr begins to focus on feelings, especially in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (1956) and in "Toward a Recovery of Feeling," a lecture at Vanderbilt in April, 1961 (pp. 57 ff.).

Catherine Keller, Keiser notes, sees Niebuhr's radical monotheism as recoiling into a focus on the One that demonizes the many (*From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*. Boston: Beacon, 1986, p. 181). Keiser replies that Niebuhr does not affirm **either** the One **or** the many but rather selves amid the valued many, responding to the valuing One in much the way Keller herself proposes. In response to Keller criticism that Niebuhr does not have a metaphysic, Keiser suggests that "Niebuhr starts from experience, not from any philosophical principle," which may be more appropriate for feminist perspectives (pp. 59-61).

Keiser reports on a paper by Linell Cady in which she sees one strand of Niebuhr's view of divine sovereignty as "relativizing and thus a denying of all human judgments and all human agency, which undercuts any efforts at political criticism and action" and another strand, "irreconcilable with the first, that makes room for social critique by affirming the making of relative judgments to achieve relative justice," a view she develops in ways Keiser believes are similar to Niebuhr's (p. 61).

Keiser concludes that these critiques have misjudged Niebuhr's understanding of divine sovereignty, but he agrees that they are correct in rejecting the phrase "radical monotheism" because it communicates a patriarchal, dominating view of God (p. 62).

Keiser mentions another criticism, the opposite of those cited above. "An outstanding ethicist, profoundly influenced by Niebuhr, James Gustafson affirms the importance of fittingness within a system of interdependence; yet he rejects what Niebuhr understands as the foundation of fittingness: divine immanence and its particularising intentionality." Gustafson's view would result in losing "Niebuhr's radical affirmation of dynamic particularity, a relationally lived universality, and the center of fittingness" (p. 220).

## Some Questions to Keiser

a) Is Keiser's emphasis on Niebuhr's conversion at a specific point in time misleading? It seems clear that Keiser has uncovered a decisive change in Niebuhr's thought, has shown it to be a shift to "relational realism" based on divine sovereignty, and has traced its outcome in Niebuhr's development of a postcritical perspective in theology and ethics. By his focus on November 1929 as the exact time of the change and emphatic use of the term "conversion," however, Keiser risks the same error of Christians who cram all the change of coming to faith in Jesus Christ into a single instant and ignore the aspect of conversion that is a continuous unfolding in a person's life. This error is especially important to avoid in dealing with H. Richard Niebuhr, who continues to wrestle with the implications of a crucial insight throughout his career. Additional insights emerge, each with ramifications to be explored as Niebuhr moves from one element of his thought to another. His appropriation of "belief-ful realism" from Tillich is another point of conversion or the emergence of an insight implicit in the earlier conversion, now discovered. Then there is the turn from examining the influence of social forces on the religious stream of faith in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* to exploring the force of the stream of faith itself in *The Kingdom of God in America*. These steps in overcoming the dichotomies of critical thinking were soon eclipsed by the giant steps taken in *The Meaning of Revelation*, as Niebuhr showed reason and faith inseparable, individual and community in symbiotic relation, and history as involving internal and external perspectives rather than being objective and subjective. Here also he provided a central metaphor for his ongoing task of faith seeking understanding: permanent revolution, or, put another way, that the habitation of his intellect was a tent rather than a palace. He then moves beyond the critical bifurcation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith in *Christ and Culture*, and on toward a postcritical understanding of faith, of value, of theological education, and of language. Each stage required rethinking the entire fabric of his theology and ethics, yet each would have enriched the whole he envisaged but did not have time to set down in provisional completion. Overemphasis on the early conversion obscures the crucial character of the ongoing development and continuous rethinking that characterized Niebuhr's method.

b) Does Keiser's focus on the importance of language in Niebuhr's late work tend to obscure at times the centrality of human action and interaction in response to God's action in his ethics and theology? If one reads Keiser's earlier book on Niebuhr, *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr*, the emphasis on meaning, metaphors, and the dialogical self almost eliminates the active motif in Niebuhr in favor of linguistic analysis. Niebuhr in his postcritical quest is distinguished from Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and placed in the company of Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein as postcritical philosophers. While we can understand this focus on language in a dissertation done under William H. Poteat, we must not forget that interpretation and language are functions of agents in community in both Niebuhr and Polanyi. We must not be left with the critical dichotomy between act and word. Though agency clearly is central in his treatment of Niebuhr in *Roots of Relational Ethics*, the linguistic bias remains. Christian ethics is "investigation of the Christian style of human life as agents" (p. 102), yet "the Earl Lectures clearly present Christian ethics as ineluctably linguistic" (p. 103). Would it not be more accurate to say that Niebuhr at this point in his unfolding understanding of ethics is exploring the interpretive dimension of Christian agency? The opening chapters of *The Responsible Self* focus on the situation of selves as responsible agents in society, and the Earl Lectures are placed in that context as Niebuhr explores metaphors and the symbolic form of Jesus Christ as keys to Christian understanding and action. As Keiser has pointed out so well with reference to Niebuhr's movement into a postcritical perspective, he is here overcoming the dichotomy between idea and act, between being and doing.

c) Would the significance of Niebuhr's work, as accomplished and as intended, be further clarified by making more explicit his relation to the thought of Michael Polanyi and the postcritical character of his theology and ethics? Perhaps Keiser thought that enough had been said on this subject in his earlier volume, but the hints and references throughout this volume seem to cry out for more attention and resolution. If Keiser understands Niebuhr correctly, then Niebuhr's work is no less grounds for a revolution in theology and ethics than was Michael Polanyi's in philosophy. Together they represent a breakthrough from the critical to the post-critical as remarkable as the turn from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican perspective in astronomy and from the precritical to the critical period in Western thought. Is Keiser working on a third volume exploring the wider meaning of Niebuhr's theology and ethics?

d) In faulting Niebuhr for resisting "praxis," is Keiser not criticizing him for omitting something that was not on his agenda and which his method excluded him from doing in the form that Keiser and others want from him? Keiser explains Niebuhr's position well: though human contexts require responsible action, Niebuhr does not believe it is an appropriate part of Christian ethics to give specific directives. That in his view is the task of social ethics that takes detailed account of the particular situation for involved agents in the light of God's immanent action within it. This view may disappoint us. We should remember, however, that Niebuhr was not by nature an activist and remember also that he had led in bringing the social sciences into ethics. He was well aware of this "deficiency" but insisted on sticking to the task of theology and Christian ethics as he understood it.

We must be grateful to Keiser for his painstaking research and detailed reporting on Niebuhr's thought. The richness and creative brilliance of Niebuhr's work is brought into sharp relief in this volume. All who deal with Niebuhr in the future must take account of Keiser's analysis and evaluation of this major figure in the theology and ethics of the twentieth century.