

On The Significance of Niebuhr's Ideas of Society

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EDITORIAL NOTE

IT IS not usual to preface a contribution to this journal with an introductory paragraph, but the article which follows has certain unusual features which perhaps justify an exception in this instance.

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Dr. Faruqi is a devout Muslim whose faith has impressed all his colleagues by its qualities of conviction and sincerity. Personally charming, he has become a popular member of the Senior Common Room and is often at the centre of keen discussion. He is well acquainted with the teaching of western philosophers, including the European moderns, and has a knowledge of the works of Barth, Brunner, Tillich, Niebuhr, etc., which the professional theologian might well envy.

His present assignment is a critique of the Christian ethic from the Muslim point of view, and the present paper is an outcome of this interest. Not everyone will accept his estimate of Jesus and his teaching, nor will his exposition of Niebuhr's ethical position meet with the approval of all who have studied Niebuhr's writings, and the conclusion which he draws is certainly disturbing to our complacency. But any who set out to controvert Dr. Faruqi's account of either matter will find him armed and formidable in debate. Nevertheless, it is important that we in the West should discover how we appear to eastern eyes, and also that our thinking should be subjected to the searching scrutiny of those who, though they do not share our faith, are yet deeply concerned with religious truth. As a colleague who has learned much from Dr. Faruqi, I am happy to supply this prefatory note.

S.B.F.

I

What is at once surprising and great in the history of Christianity is that, throughout the metamorphoses it has undergone and the unchristlike history

of Western man, the person of Jesus—the concrete example of his life, his stand *in praxi* regarding the tragic nature of existence—was never lost. Nothing could budge the personality of Jesus from the central position it occupied and still occupies in the consciousness of Western man, however committed he may be to the demands of an unchristlike culture and existence. This conflict between a will committed to the affirmation and pursuit of “the world” and a moral consciousness determined by the word-denying personality of Jesus is the key to the understanding of modern Western nature. More precisely, this conflict consists in Western man’s assignment of a false rank to elemental values which Jesus had relegated to lower rank and above which it was his peculiar message to place the properly moral and spiritual values.

Ever since he became a Christian, Western man has lived a split life and suffered from a split personality. Jesus and his ethical renunciation on the one hand, and nature with its self-assertion and nature-affirmation on the other, divided his loyalty and being. Although he conducted his life oblivious to Jesus’ emphasis on the spiritual over and against the material, yet he invoked Jesus’ blessing for every move. While vindicating the self-assertive nature within, now with brute force, now with rational argument, Western man never had the courage of his conviction that the life of nature was right. Consequently, he strove to convince himself that Jesus really approved. This self-deception, however, never worked. It took but a simple apparition of the person of Jesus to Western man’s consciousness (often evoked by a recitation of the Sermon of the Mount, by the Passion, or by a genuine Jesus-like deed on the part of his neighbour) and the veil of rationalization of his affirmation was rent. Christianity never succeeded in subjugating nature within, in conquering Western man’s ethos-in-action; but it did establish itself as unquestionable master of his ethos-in-consciousness.

For centuries Western man has lived under the strain of this split loyalty. For centuries he has acted self-assertively and nature-affirmatively, and his will as well as his moral judgment *in concreto* have been irretrievably committed to self-assertion and nature-affirmation. Since history dictated his Christianization, he had to learn the technique of representing assertion and affirmation to his moral consciousness as sacrifice and altruism. Because he could not see himself as he was, he had to misrepresent himself to himself. His faculty of moral judgment *in abstracto*, on the other hand, had been just as irretrievably mastered by the ethic of Jesus, which can in no circumstances reconcile itself with self-assertion and nature-affirmation. Albert Schweitzer, a man of Jesus-like judgment *in concreto*,¹ could not even grasp, let alone solve, the problem of Western civilization except as one of a search

1. Except when the subject in question is French colonialism in Africa! Expressing the kind of paternalism imperialists delight in, Schweitzer writes: “There can be no question with these peoples [the Africans] of real independence, but only whether it is better for them to be delivered over to the mercies, tender or otherwise, of rapacious native tyrants or to be governed by officials of European states. . . . Even the hitherto prevailing ‘imperialism’ can plead that it has qualities of ethical value.” (*Out of My Life and Thought*, tr. by C. T. Campion, New York: Mentor Books, 1955, pp. 147–8.) In 1957 Schweitzer appealed to President Eisenhower to interfere so as to prevent a United Nations debate on Algeria.

for a formula which would reconcile the message of Jesus with Western world-affirmation. It escaped him that the central message of Jesus was precisely the condemnation of that affirmation. In him, affirmation of "the World," now philosophically conceived as "existence and actuality," is so well entrenched that it not only fashions the problem of civilization as one of justifying itself in consciousness, but it even dictates the conditions under which it is prepared to negotiate peace with Jesus. This it does by prescribing highhandedly and beforehand that any *Weltanschauung* which does not take the legitimacy and righteousness of world-affirmation for granted is *ipso facto* inadmissible.²

This self-deception, which did not work, nevertheless left indelible stains upon the nature of Western man and affected, through his deeds, countless millions of people. In his pursuit of "the World" Western man has exploited his neighbours, coloured and white, while all the time representing his efforts to himself as Utopia, liberation, socialism, progress, or (as in the case of the Puritans who invented a causal relationship from material success to divine election)³ as something not so much of his own doing as of God's. On the international level, Western man has committed aggression, invaded, colonized, and imperialized. His Christian missions carried the cross only side by side with the national flag and often raised the latter higher than the former. His case would deserve sympathy if it were that of the candid man who falls short of his ideal, better self. If this were the case, he would have acknowledged his trespasses, learned from experience, and endeavoured to become better. The fact is, however, that instead of getting progressively closer to each other, the poles of his deeds and his moral judgments continue to travel in opposite directions.⁴

Western man's moral consciousness is as it were his valet. Its duty is not to justify the master's deeds, for these he recognizes as ugly without question.⁵ Rather, the duty of this valet is to camouflage them to his consciousness, *i.e.*, to transfigure into milk white the moral black of his actuality and

2. See Schweitzer, Albert, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, Chap. VII, p. 94f. Presumably, Western man would vehemently contend that the dominant idea of Jesus' ethic was the renunciation of "the World," and would, as will be noted in the sequel, advance interpretations of that ethic which would safeguard "the World" against attack. This typically Western attitude ought to be regarded as an instance of the point that Western consciousness is often incapable of understanding Jesus except as affirming "the World."

3. Tawney, R. H., *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, New York: Mentor Books, 1950, pp. 203-5.

4. It may be here contended that in this predicament Western man does not stand alone; that all men fall short of what they ought to be; that all men more or less recognize this ethical shortcoming; and that there is hardly a people whose record is free of aggression and hostility against one another or their neighbours—which is all true. The point, however, is not one of the veracity or otherwise of these propositions, but of the conflict Western man's deeds produce in his own consciousness which approves and does not approve of them at the same time. The uniqueness of Western man lies in his conscious commitment to both "the World" and the ethic of Jesus. Attila and Genghis Khan made war in the consciousness that their gods did, and the monastic recluse who sins does so in the consciousness that his god does not, approve. Western man alone commits aggression in the consciousness both that his deed is ethically right and that it violates the ethic of Jesus.

5. Western man has poured the vials of his wrath upon Germany, his own child, because, under National Socialism, the latter dared to believe in and profess the "righteousness" of Western man's self-assertion.

deed, while the "righteousness" of his will to affirm "the World" goes unquestioned. Indeed, it is unthinkable for him that this affirmation should ever be questioned. As a child of nature, Western man has never risen out of her bosom. The advent of Christianity was significant inasmuch as, by completely converting his moral consciousness without affecting his will, it succeeded only in giving him a bad conscience.

Except in the persons of a few saints, Western man never revolted against nature. Luther and Savonarola, among other Christians of similar moral calibre, saw the personality of Jesus being slowly overcome by the world-affirming forces of their so-called "Christian" neighbours in Rome. The sight of the Church's hierarchy being as much infiltrated by longings after wealth, beauty, and power, as were ever Athens or Bagdad in their heyday, horrified them. Savonarola fired the whole of Italy, and Luther the whole of Germany. Their effect on Western ethical consciousness, however, was short-lived. The former's cause was soon quenched by the world-affirming forces of the Church; the latter's cause managed to succeed, predominantly because social-political-economic forces allied themselves to it. Even so, it was not long before these same forces, once victory over Rome had been achieved, gave Luther the suffocating embrace which neutralized the original ethical character of his cause. Indeed, it is no wonder that the monastic orders of Christendom have never been undermanned; monastic life is the only life in which Jesus comes to his own in Western life, determining man's representation of himself as well as his willing. Secular life, on the other hand, is so governed by instinct and so free of Jesus' ethicizing power that men of sensitive nature can only withdraw from it with horror.⁶

Two alternative avenues out of this dilemma suggested themselves to Western man: to re-create Jesus as a world-affirming teacher, or to deny him altogether. The former avenue has a tradition. It culminated in the "Positive Christianity" which European Fascism⁷ and American Progressivism⁸ created in order to justify Western man's affirmation of "the World" in his own eyes. To take the place of the ethical, no-saying Jesus of history, this "positive" Christianity furnished an easy-approving, yes-saying Jesus, as much intoxicated with "the World-in-perpetual-spring" as any of his Fascist and Progressivist followers. Transvaluation is always an easy way out, because it performs its work without touching the object of age-old veneration. On the other hand, the avenue of denial is radical and revolutionary. No wonder that only Communism attempted it. Jesus and his no-saying morality, it held, are an opiate preserved and distributed by the ruling class to support its will to power over the less fortunate classes.

6. Dostoevsky, F., *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. by C. Garnett, New York: Modern Library, Book VI, "The Russian Monk," pp. 295ff.

7. See Rosenberg, Alfred, *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich, 1930; or Kneller, G. F., *The Educational Philosophy of National Socialism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941, pp. 184ff.

8. For an instance in point, see Warner, E. W., "The Heresy of Joy," in *The Divinity School News*, University of Chicago, August 1, 1959, pp. 1-6.

II

The Anglo-Saxon consciousness has been sufficiently removed from the waves of these mighty currents not to be engulfed by them. But it was not able to escape all disturbance. Indeed, the failure of Fascism and the success of Communism have compelled the Anglo-Saxon consciousness to abandon its neutrality and to take sides in the struggle. The most eloquent and prolific mouthpiece of the new attempt to deliver the Anglo-Saxon consciousness from this dilemma is Reinhold Niebuhr. His choice is, in fact, that of Communism, namely, the rejection of Jesus. But unlike the daring Communists, he is careful not to reject Jesus *in toto*, but simply to deny him jurisdiction at the level of societal action. His purpose is to liberate society from the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount in order that it may, by freely meeting evil with evil, assert the self-seeking will in good conscience.

Niebuhr's estimate of human nature is fundamentally that of Hobbes. In society man stands in the midst of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* ("the war of all men against all men").⁹ Not that this state is forced upon him; it follows from his essence, and is precisely what nature intended it to be.¹⁰ The person who lacks the "passion" necessary for self-assertion, he says, quoting Shaftesbury, "must certainly be esteemed vicious in regard to the end and design of nature."¹¹ In another vein Niebuhr calls this predicament in which man finds himself "sin," and regards it as the consequence of man's exaggerated use of his human capacities.¹² But this will to use his capacities without restriction is equally the endowment of nature.¹³ To call it "sin"

9. "Society is in a perpetual state of war" (Niebuhr, R., *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York: Scribner, 1955, p. 19). For Niebuhr this is an axiom. He then quotes Bentham approvingly: "The clue to the interior of the labyrinth . . . is the principle of self-preference. Man, from the very constitution of his nature, prefers his own happiness to that of all other sentient beings put together"; and adds: "The judgement may be a little too pessimistic . . . but it is nearer the truth than the early hope of the utilitarians that reason could resolve the conflict between self-interest and social interest" (*ibid.*, p. 46).

10. According to Niebuhr, "man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses," etc. (*The Nature and Destiny of Man, A Christian Interpretation*, New York: Scribner, 1941, Vol. I, p. 3.)

11. Niebuhr, R., *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 260. Incidentally, this is also identically the view of F. Nietzsche, who regards modern Western man as an animal whom Christian morality had tamed by means of making him sick, *i.e.*, by teaching him to distrust and deny his instincts. "I call an animal, a species, an individual corrupt," he wrote, "when it loses its instincts, when it selects and prefers that which is detrimental to it . . . Life itself is nothing more nor less than the instinct of growth, of permanence, of accumulating forces, of power: where the will to power is lacking, degradation sets in." (*The Antichrist*, tr. by A. M. Ludovici, Section 6.)

12. "Man . . . is a sinner . . . because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man, A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. I, p. 17). "The Freedom of his spirit causes him to break the harmonies of nature and the pride of spirit prevents him from establishing a new harmony. . . . His failure to observe the limits of his finite existence causes him to defy the restraints of both nature and reason" (*ibid.*). Niebuhr had previously told us that the nature of nature was conflict and self-seeking; now he is introducing the concept of a "harmony of nature" in order to ground in nature Christian salvation which would otherwise remain outside of it.

13. "It is . . . unthinkable that a group should be able to attain a sufficiently consistent unselfish attitude toward other groups to give it a very potent redemptive power" (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 26).

therefore avails nothing. It may satisfy the Christian prerequisite of furnishing that from which salvation can take place, but it leaves reality, the real "nature," just as it was before. Although redemption may change the ethical will which in turn may either sanctify and spiritualize "nature," or prevent the fulfillment of its ends, it can never change "nature." Since Niebuhr bases his ethical and political theories on the empirical facts, rather than the desiderata of human nature, the introduction of the concept of sin is superfluous.

The alternative of opposing nature, *i.e.*, of subjecting it to a higher law that is derived not from it, but, like the law of Jesus, "from heaven," does not appeal to Niebuhr. He distinguishes between "mutual love"—a utilitarian give-and-take arrangement by which one serves his own interest by serving another's—and "sacrificial love," that "impossible possibility,"¹⁴ which is the absolute demand of God upon human life, calling for an absolute obedience regardless of consequences to the will of God, however such obedience may run counter to "nature." The first is self-interest all over again, now become enlightened to seek its ends more effectively by circuitous routes. The other is "impossible." "The ethical demands made by Jesus," Niebuhr argues, "are incapable of fulfillment in the present existence of man."¹⁵ This fantastic thesis Niebuhr defends on the ground that, when Jesus made this demand he was not thinking of this world, not legislating for moral conduct in this world but in the next¹⁶—a thesis even more fantastic! The most naive understanding of the Sermon on the Mount could not regard its ethical insights as directives for action in another world, whether inside or outside of time. In such an "other" world, there can *ex hypothesi* be no need for morality.

Even if the Christian were to accept Niebuhr's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, he would still have to agree that sacrificial love is somehow relevant to this world and must somehow affect human conduct. This constitutes a division of man's loyalty. Between the two gods dwelling within his breast, both of which are commanding, the one possible and the other "impossible" duties, the Christian, as Niebuhr sees him, is torn apart. He must follow the practical dictates of utility, but under the accusing and condemning finger of the moral law. But being itself "impossible," the moral law of Jesus has, under this scheme, the sole function of preserving for Western man his age-old "bad conscience."

Should a person, however, resolve to go against "self" and "nature" and fulfill the imperatives of sacrificial love, Niebuhr would at times call him, with Shaftesbury, "vicious" and at other times he would remove his hat in awe at the superhuman effort involved. But he has no sympathy with any society that confuses its own welfare with the welfare of mankind, or its own duty with the general concept of duty.¹⁷ For social groups, it is necessary to

14. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, New York: Harper, 1935, p. 117.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

16. *Ibid.*

17. "Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests

pursue political policies which the ethic of the individual "will always find embarrassing,"¹⁸ and which "sacrificial love"—or the law of Jesus—will always find contradictory to itself. This sharp dichotomy between an ethic of the individual and an ethic of society Niebuhr explains as necessitated by four considerations:

1. "Social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone. . . . Conflict is inevitable and in this conflict power must be challenged by power."¹⁹ "Collective power . . . can never be dislodged unless power is used against it."²⁰ We must understand, he counsels, "the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations."²¹ One may ask here whether this is a law of science or of morals. If the former, it is irrelevant for the ethical problem of injustice in society, though it may be of some use to those in charge of the execution of social ethical judgment, namely, the governors and police commissioners, on the internal front, and the ambassadors and the military on the international. If it is a law of morals, it is nothing but presumption to prescribe evil (*i.e.*, power, coercion, and conflict) to "dislodge" another evil (*i.e.*, another power) when, *ex hypothesi*, all society and all nature are in essence based upon conflict and power. It is an appeal *ad baculum*, the argument of the big stick.

2. "Every effort to transfer a pure morality of disinterestedness to group relations has resulted in failure."²² "It would therefore seem better," concludes Niebuhr, "to accept a frank dualism in morals than to attempt . . . policies which, from the political perspective, are quite impossible."²³ Since no social group has shown enough imagination to make itself amenable to the influence of a disinterested pure love, and since there is no possibility "of persuading any social group to make a venture in pure love," he adds, "the selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability."²⁴ Logically, this is a *non-sequitur*. Historically, that "every effort . . . has resulted in failure" is only one way of interpreting events and is not at all self-evident. Ethically, it is a counsel of morbid despair. Why ought a society not to pursue the disinterested ethic of pure love alone? There is a little reason to think that such self-sacrifice—if that should be the outcome, though it need not necessarily be so—would be less "successful" at the societal level than was the heroic self-sacrifice of Jesus, in the Christian view, or of Socrates in the more general view, at the individual level.

3. The ethic of pure love, argues Niebuhr, demands sacrifices. In the case of the individual, self-sacrifice is morally right since the self is at once subject and object. It is his own interest that the individual sacrifices. In

other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own. . . . [But for societies such] achievements are . . . impossible" (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. xi).

18. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. xi.

19. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

21. *Ibid.*, p. xx.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

20. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

the case of society—where decisions are made by proxy—unselfishness is “inappropriate to the action of a state [because] no one has a right to be unselfish with other people’s interests.”²⁵ This argument misses the fact that in a constitutional society the ruler, whether legislative or executive, is as much object of the self-sacrifice decision as the least citizen. He would not be subjecting his fellow countrymen to any unselfishness that he would not accept for himself. More serious, however, is the implicit conception of the ruler as one-sided servant of interests rather than as definer of duties. To presuppose that the function of government is merely to “serve” or bring advantages to the citizens, and not to impose duties and extract “prices,” is not only to limit unduly the purpose of government, but it is to regard government as a monster bent upon devouring everyone and everything around it. The free bounties of nature cannot be long exploited without nature extracting some “price”; and even an association of robbers cannot last long without some self-imposed duties, not only *vis-à-vis* one another, but *vis-à-vis* the outside world in which they operate. In this regard, Niebuhr’s political theory does not so much as rise to the level of recognizing the necessity of sacrifice even in a hedonistic calculus.

4. The application of the norms of individual morality to society, Niebuhr further argues, results in undesirable consequences. “Such a policy easily becomes morbid [and makes] for injustice by encouraging and permitting undue self-assertion in others.”²⁶ Here Niebuhr is oblivious to the power of love, to the “efficacy” of Christian charity, and consequently, of every noble, disinterested, unselfish deed. He has forgotten the Socratic position that to suffer injustice, not only with regard to individuals but absolutely, is better than to perpetrate it. He has completely ignored the Christian truth, central to the whole message of Jesus and therefore to the essence of Christianity, that, absolutely, it is not through evil and hostility that evil and hostility end.

It is surprising that, along with these views of human nature, Christian ethics, and political theory, Niebuhr holds that the ideal of society is justice. The surprise, however, is shortlived. Indeed, according to Niebuhr, the pursuit of this ideal is necessarily so fraught with “the assertion of interest against interest” that it compels societies “to sanction self-assertion . . . , social conflict and violence.”²⁷ Justice itself can be maintained only through the precarious “balance of power,” the setting and dividing of mankind into self-neutralizing, mutually hostile camps.²⁸ One wonders what sort of justice it is that is based on the balance of power, coercion and social conflict;

25. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–2.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

28. “In the field of collective behavior the force of egoistic passion is so strong that the only harmonies possible are those which manage to neutralize this force through balance of power, through mutual defences against its inordinate expression” (*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 140). Niebuhr condemns international co-operation as “acceptance of traditional injustices and . . . preference of subtler types of coercion” (*ibid.*, p. 233). “Marxian philosophy is more true than pacifism” in that the former “has good reason to insist that the elimination of coercion is a futile ideal but that the rational use of coercion is a possible achievement which may save society” (*ibid.*, p. 235).

in the pursuit of which society "is forced . . . to sacrifice a degree of moral purity for political effectiveness."²⁹ Surely it must be anything but Christian "justice."

For Niebuhr the fact that the conduct of the nations of the world has been immoral weighs too heavily in the scales. Indeed, it weighs so heavily that it tacitly receives a measure of approval from his hand. He insists that "the sentiment of nationality and the authority of the state [are] the ultimate force of cohesion" and therefore society's highest principle.³⁰ He regards universalism, or the will to extend the social sympathies of individuals to the larger social problems of mankind, as vain and futile. "What lies beyond the nation, [namely] the community of mankind, is too vague to inspire devotion."³¹ The Church was once upon a time able to command such a universalist extension of human sympathy. Today, Niebuhr assures us, "the Church . . . no longer possesses [any such] prestige [or] universality."³² This being the case, he argues, society "must be self-assertive, proud, self-complacent and egotistical."³³ Its "most significant moral characteristic . . . is its hypocrisy . . . [just as] self-deception and hypocrisy is an unvarying element in the moral life of all human beings."³⁴ By concluding from all this that relations between social groups must be purely political, not ethical, Niebuhr has not only fallaciously deduced an "ought" from an "is," but has repudiated the ethic of Jesus inasmuch as that ethic is relevant for the conduct of society.

This empiricism, and the confirmation of the Hobbesian thesis that the nature of man is egotistic, self-assertive, hypocritical, and necessarily hostile towards other men imply, further, the rejection of the ethic of Jesus on the personal level, however much Niebuhr has proved to be lacking in the courage to pursue his thought to its logical conclusion. Inasmuch as Niebuhr is an instance of Western consciousness, the problem of Western man today is radically different from that of the first three centuries of Christianity. At that time the personality of Jesus was struggling to invade Western man's ethos. Today, after twenty centuries of "Christian" existence, that ethos is regrouping its forces and struggling to repel, and utterly to banish, that holy personality.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

30. "The unqualified character of this devotion [nationalist sentiment] is the very basis of the nation's power and of the freedom to use the power without moral restraint" (*ibid.*, p. 91).

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.* The words are those of "Tyrrell, the Catholic modernist," whom Niebuhr quotes with full approbation.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 95. "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 loyalty and devotion of the individual, as his own special and unique community and as a community which embodies universal values and ideals. The two claims . . . are incompatible with each other and can be resolved only through dishonesty" (*ibid.*, pp. 95-6). Again, "society . . . merely cumulates the egoism of individuals and transmutes their individual altruism into collective egoism. . . . For this reason, no group acts from purely unselfish or even mutual intent and politics is therefore bound to be a contest of power" ("Human Nature and Social Change," *Christian Century*, 1933, p. 363).