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Abstract

On Reinhold Niebuhr's Critique to Natural Law and his Reinterpretation

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Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), is often said that he severely criticized natural law based on reason. It is certainly true. However, we must take into account that Niebuhr also insisted utilities of reason by assuming “alternative” natural law. For him, this kind of alternative natural law should be based on human’s “freedom”, not human’s reason. The aim of this essay is to analyze his criticism of natural law and examine his way of possibilities of natural law based on freedom.

We can give four points of his criticism of natural law based on reason. First, it cannot be recognize the essence of sin. Second, it cannot have universal validity. Third, it has ideological taints. Fourth point is that it doesn’t have dialectical relation of love and justice (especially Catholicism).

Nevertheless, Niebuhr insists utilities of reason by different kind of alternative natural law. We present some definitions of his alternative natural law.

1. The essential nature of human being should be based on human’s freedom, not reason.
2. Alternative natural law which is based on human’s freedom cannot and should not be used autonomously. It essentially needs close relationship with “law of love”.
3. Law of love must have priority over natural law, because law of love realizes us renewal possibilities of reason by recognizing the limit of reason.
4. Even if we could judge various matters by natural law based on human’s freedom, we should not overestimate it because it does not have universal validity at all, instead, only to confine as provisional judgement.
5. Rational judgment is to obey the judgment of God as ultimate Judgment because, in this process, reason is able to recognize own limits on all judgment. However, we can also use rational judgment with responsibility by knowing the power of the Mercy of God more than the Judgment of God.