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## Abstract

### **The Characteristics of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology: An Analysis of His *Intellectual Autobiography***

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The purpose of this essay is to delineate the salient characteristics of Reinhold Niebuhr's theology through analysis of his 1956 article, *Intellectual Autobiography of Reinhold Niebuhr*. In this writing, the theologian discussed the background of his career, particularly the period during which he served as the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church, as well as individuals who influenced the young Niebuhr. However, autobiographical details are lacking in the latter section of his treatise, as he concentrated on his theological positions and responded to detractors.

Six characteristics of Niebuhr's theology are found in his *Intellectual Autobiography*, the first being the connection between sin and death. Niebuhr ruminates that anxiety over death brings on two types of fear: fear of the eradication of one's existence and fear of judgment of one's sin.

The second characteristic is related to Niebuhr's anthropology. His critics often claim his theology over-emphasizes the problem of human sin, thereby neglecting the positive aspects of man's potential, a criticism Niebuhr refutes.

Third, Niebuhr asserts that the principal element of being human resides in man's freedom, but it must be understood this freedom will inevitably lead to sin.

The fourth distinctive of Niebuhr's theology resides in his thought on the relationship between Christianity and democracy. He understands the spirit of modern democracy was produced through the revolution of Puritanism and insists modern democracies must have a proper perspective of Christian anthropology.

Fifth, Niebuhr posits that a "framework of meaning" can enable one to realistically interpret the situation of the world and history.

The sixth trait of Niebuhr's theology is that his method of apologetics is based upon his conception of the circular relationship between faith and experience.