

[1960. Review of *Essays in Applied Christianity*, by Reinhold Niebuhr. *Christianity Today* 4 Jan. and 1960. Review of *The Social Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr*, by Theodore Minnema. *Christianity Today* 4 Jan.]

## CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

*Essays in Applied Christianity*, by Reinhold Niebuhr (Meridian Books, 1959, 343 pp., \$1.45 and *The Social Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr*, by Theodore Minnema (Eerdmans, 1959, 124 pp., \$3), are reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, Professor of Philosophy, Butler University.

The first of these books is a series of reprinted articles dating back at least to 1928. They have the great virtue of being interesting. In addition, they contain more details of social ethics than the second book. For example, Niebuhr believes it “monstrous egotism and foolish blindness ... when we imagine that this civilization in which commercialism has corrupted every value is in any sense (!) superior to the Middle Ages, or that the status of the industrial worker differs greatly from that of the feudal slave” (pp. 143, 144).

After having read a little about medieval conditions, and having viewed some of their remains in European museums, I would rather conclude that individualistic capitalism has greatly improved the physical life of the industrial workers. If anyone is blind, is it not the man who maintains that strikes are necessary “in order that wage scales may not sink to new minimum levels” (p. 149)—a new minimum, even below that of feudal slavery?

So much is said of being sensitive to social evils that one wonders if sometimes a man can mistake his own nervous disorders for perceptions of the external world. Surely it is a remarkable social theory and a remarkable theory of theology as well to regard as an *a priori* element of religious knowledge the idea that democracy is an instrument of middle class interests (pp. 160, 161).

Minnema does not discuss these details of social ethics; he studies their theological bases. He notes that Niebuhr begins with rational absurdity. Man is above and free from all the categories of reason. Every affirmation becomes involved in contradictions when fully analyzed (pp. 3, 4, 5).

Examples of Niebuhr's exegesis are given. They do indeed seem to be free from the categories of reason. Prophetism, supposedly pessimistic, and Messianism, supposedly

optimistic, are arbitrarily interpreted (p. 50); and Galatians 2:20 is so altered in meaning that there remains no conceptual connection with the text.

The most valuable part of Minnema's study is the concluding chapter in which he easily shows that whatever it may be that Niebuhr applies, it is not *Applied Christianity*. Minnema's concluding chapter, and his book as a whole, may not be what one would expect under the title of *Social Ethics*, but the information and analyses are pertinent and valuable to the contemporary scene.

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