Pride, experience and transcendence: a critical evaluation of the feminist critique or Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of sin

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Pride, Experience and Transcendence: A Critical Evaluation of the Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology of Sin

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

November 2014
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signature:
Date: November 2014
In this study I explore the feminist critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology of sin, both to understand what the Niebuhrian and feminist understandings of sin talk about, and to see whether or not, or to what extent they are tenable in theory and in practice.Niebuhr’s feminist critics argue that Niebuhr’s claim of pride as the primary human sin fits only with men’s experience; women’s sin, they contend, is not self-inflation but self-loss. While I acknowledge the value of Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ interpretation of sin, this study provides a Niebuhrian response to the feminist critique. My main contention is that by overemphasizing women’s sin of passivity, some feminist theologians go too far to deny women’s capability of committing sin actively against others and the divine in both socio-moral and religio-theological aspect. The total rejection of the applicability of pride to women’s situation, I contend, undermines the profoundness of the feminist critique.

I firstly give detailed expositions of Niebuhr’s theology of sin and the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin respectively. The main discrepancies between the Niebuhrian and feminist understandings of sin will be laid out. Then I respond to some feminist criticisms by pointing out that the feminist misreading of Niebuhr on the topics of pride, the self, love, justice and the family is prevalent. I also question the two presuppositions of the feminist critique—the idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity. These two presuppositions, I argue, contain in them some insoluble dilemmas that cause trouble for understanding women’s secular and religious experience. Lastly, I try to pull the insights of Niebuhr and his feminist critics together to form a more integrated view of women’s sin.
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Introduction

Reinhold Niebuhr is called the twentieth-century theologian of sin. Not only because he writes extensively on this subject, but also because he reinterprets and reintroduces the doctrine to a generation that regards it as merely a religious cliché. As D. R. Davies says: “Niebuhr, more than any contemporary Christian theologian, has rehabilitated the Christian dogma of original sin in present-day thinking…rescu[ing] it from the neglect and contempt of a mere secular science and philosophy.”¹ Many people believe that by giving “one of the most astute analyses of the source of sin in human nature which Christian thought has ever achieved,”² Niebuhr reveals the profound significance of the concept of sin in its theological, sociological and political aspects in the context of modern society.

Opposing the confidence in moral progress and the faith in human innocence or even in human perfectibility that prevails in his day, Niebuhr emphasizes the ambiguous character of human nature. For him human existence is characterized by creative impulses as well as by destructive impulses—self-worship, will-to-power and inhuman exploitation. In every human achievement that the creativity of rationality, scientific enquiry and democracy bring, there are latent possibilities of corruption. This is what is known in Christian faith as the concept of original sin. Niebuhr regards sin as referring to both of humanity’s social and personal existence, the righteous and the unrighteous alike. According to him there are mainly two categories of sin: pride and sensuality. Pride or self-inflation is human beings’ refusal to admit their limitedness. Committing the sin of pride, human beings try to usurp the place of God by raising their contingent existence and achievements to unconditioned significance. Sensuality is an escape from freedom and an “unlimited devotion to limited values.”³ Contrary to pride,

sensuality is the effort of the self to escape from itself by finding other gods for its life rather than substituting itself for God. For Niebuhr, pride is the primary form of sin, while sensuality is a derivation from pride.

Niebuhr is widely praised for his insights on the doctrine of sin. His masterpiece *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that elaborates this topic is compared to Augustine’s *City of God*: “not since Augustine’s *City of God* have we had such a sustained and brilliant analysis of the political and social effects of man’s inflated self-love.” However, many feminist theologians give Niebuhr’s analysis a different reception. These feminist theologians find Niebuhr’s understanding of pride as the primary sin problematic. They contend that it is inapplicable to the situation of most women. Early in 1960, Valerie Saiving writes an article to challenge Niebuhr’s theology of sin by asserting that Niebuhr is identifying men’s experience with universal truth. Saiving’s article, which was later viewed as the beginning of feminist theology, opens the door of the feminist critique. The beginning of the feminist theology, which parallels the beginning of the second-wave of secular feminism, dates back to late 1960s because it is when “liberal and Marxist critiques of ideology and society had been somewhat assimilated into modern culture and women gained some access to theological education, teaching, and ministry in some theological schools and churches.” The growing number of women as students, ministers and teachers in churches, according to Ruether, entails that “feminism had to be translated into feminist theology.” From 1970s to early 1980s, feminist theologians seek to reconstruct theology by employing women’s experience as both the source and criterion of truth. However, back then those feminist theologians are mostly white, middle-class women with high educational level. In the last thirty years, feminist theology becomes more and more diverse and global. Younger generation feminist theologians are more aware of the gender and class factors than their feminist

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teachers. The differences in women’s experiences around the global are emphasized in the feminist interpretation of the Christian faith and justice is envisioned for women from all kinds of different cultures and subcultures.  

Niebuhr’s feminist critics criticize Niebuhr for neglecting women’s experience when he tries to deal with the issue of sin. When Niebuhr uses the word “man” to describe the universal condition of human being, as Daphne Hampson says, he might mean more literally than he knows. They argue that pride maybe is the problem of most men, but it is not the primary sin of women. Women’s closeness to nature, their universal condition of oppression and their preference of connectedness over isolation, immanence over transcendence make them less aggressive, arrogant and egocentric, but are more prone to suffer from self-shrinking, sensuality or hiding. In this way, Saiving defines women’s sin as self-negation and self-loss. Judith Plaskow writes that women’s sin is sensuality, it is the sin of not to be responsible for their own life and letting others make decisions for them. In other words, women’s sin is to leave the sin of pride to men. Hampson points out if men’s sin is “to be actively destructive of others,” women’s sin, then, is “destructive of themselves and their own potentialities.” Susan L. Nelson (Dunfee) describes women’s sin as “hiding in a deformed existence.” By “hiding” she means “a conscious effort to suppress talents, desires, and possibilities.” Jacquelyn Grant also opposes the assumption that sin as pride speaks to black women’s experience: “For women of color, the sin is not the lack of humility, but the sin is too much humility. Further, for women of color, the sin is not the lack of service, but too much service.”

10 Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 123.
I agree with Niebuhr’s feminist critics that self-loss is a very common sin for women. I also agree with them that many of women’s problems should be viewed in the context of the sinned-against, rather than the sinner. Nevertheless, as a woman, I find some feminist understandings of sin going too far by denying pride as women’s sin and by associating the feminine self with some ideological stereotypes that only affirm women’s passivity and innocence. Women’s biological or sociological differences from men do make women’s ways of sinning presenting different traits comparing to that of men. However, does it mean women don’t have “masculine sin?” Or to put it more accurately, does it mean pride is only a masculine sin? I believe that putting self-inflation and self-loss in an either-or situation and associating them stereotypically with gender is unnecessary. To say women don’t have expanding ego and will-to-power, or to assert that women can only sin against themselves rather than sin actively against other selves, the world and God is neither an empirically accurate claim, nor a claim that ultimately works in women’s favor, since without a thorough diagnosis of sin, the possibility of finding the right antidote is lost.

On this point, I find Niebuhr’s theology of sin a less idealistic approach that alerts us to the danger of self-righteousness. For Niebuhr, the alleged innocence of a certain group is an illusion that encourages a Manichaean dualism that easily identifies the members of the group as good, and their opponents as evil. Opposing absolutism, Niebuhr insists on the relativity and ambiguity of all human knowledge and powers, but he does so by the deep trust in something genuinely transcendent to human partiality, ambiguity, achievements, and righteousness. Although Niebuhr does not speak much on gender issues, but in his theology of sin, we often find a carefully maintained balance between the world and God, the relative and the absolute, horizontal sin and vertical sin, love and justice...which as I try to demonstrate in this work, is illuminating even in light of women’s experience. A total rejection of his insights as “no accidental sexism”14 is unnecessary and also troubling.

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On the whole, this study aims to provide a response to the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin and a preliminary exploration of a model of sin that integrates the Niebuhrian and feminist insights. I give an exposition of Niebuhr’s thought and his understanding of sin in chapter one. In this chapter, Niebuhr’s rich analysis of transcendence, mythology, human nature, pride, sensuality, grace, justice and love will be laid out.

In chapter two, I outline some feminist theologians’ critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin and their reconstruction of the doctrine. I will mainly, though not exclusively focus on several Niebuhr’s most important and most influential critics: they are, Valerie Saiving, Daphne Hampson, Judith Plaskow and Susan Nelson (Dunfee). To be noted, when I use “feminists” or “feminist theologians” in my research, especially in this chapter, I should not be understood as referring to all feminist theologians, or regarding all feminist theologians are disapprove of the Niebuhrian interpretation of sin. I also have no intention to exhaust myself by clarifying every feminist theologian’s opinion on the subject of sin. Therefore in the context of this work, the term “feminist theologians” will only be confined to those who directly or indirectly criticize Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin from the perspective of feminist theology. The “feminist criticism” or the “feminist critique” is a general term for these feminist theologians’ understandings of sin. Comparing to theologies of sin of some liberation theologians, non-white theologians and third-world theologians who also are critical of Niebuhrian theology of sin, the feminist critique resembles them in the rejection of pride as the primary sin, the emphasis upon socio-moral aspect of sin and the understanding of sin from the perspective of the sinned against, it differs from the non-feminist criticisms mainly in its focus upon the factor of gender, other than some factors like class, race, religion, sexual orientation and et cetera.  

15 Although it is interesting to note that the feminist and non-feminist criticisms share many commonalities, this study

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15 For example, Miguel A. De La Torre criticizes the primacy of pride from the perspective of a Hispanic male. He argues that both Saiving and Niebuhr’s theologies of sin are from the dominant, white culture, which need to give more considerations to racial and class factors. See Miguel A. De La Torre, “Mad Men, Competitive Women and Invisible Hispanics,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28.1 (2012), 121-126.
will only focus on examining the content and validity of the feminist critique.

Chapter three begins by distinguishing two kinds of Niebuhrian pride: moral pride and theological pride. I contend that for Niebuhr sensuality is not a secondary sin to moral pride, but both sensuality and moral pride are derivations from theological pride. Most feminist critics of Niebuhr fail to recognize the double-level nature of Niebuhrian pride, and in most of the time they direct their critique of pride as women’s sin to moral pride rather than the more basic theological pride—which result in a mismatch between Niebuhr’s understanding of sin and their critique of Niebuhr. I also point out in this chapter that the feminist misreading of Niebuhr on the topics of the self, love, justice and the family is prevalent.

Chapter four questions the methodological plausibility of the feminist critique. Some feminist theologians claim that unlike Niebuhr’s theology of sin, which comes from a male perspective, their understandings of sin are based upon women’s experience. I oppose this assertion by pointing out that the theology of pure experience is a delusion. Any generalization of the raw experiential materials is a process of reframing and retelling influenced by theologians’ inclinations, namely, their specific presuppositions, convictions and faiths. The validity of a presupposition needs to be checked by its theoretical and pragmatic coherence with the empirical facts. However, the feminist critique of Niebuhr eludes this check by implying that it is based on no *a priori* commitment16 but only women’s experience. I regard this claim as misleading. Only by identifying the guiding presupposition of the feminist critique, I argue, can it be possible to examine whether or not, or to what extent is the presupposition confirmed by the lived experience of women. I identify two major presuppositions of the feminist critique: the idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity. Along with many female scholars, I show in the rest of this chapter that the idea of women’s innocence is a myth that does not fit with women’s lived experience. Women can

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16 By “*a priori* commitment” I mean the guiding presupposition of a theory. Instead of deriving this presupposition from the experiences, the experiences are examined and interpreted in light of this presupposition.
act selfishly and tyrannically; they often indulge in narcissism; they seize power by manipulation; sometimes, even beneath women’s seeming shrinking self, there is an ego secretly expanding in self-righteousness. In other words, like men, women can suffer from the sin of (moral) pride.

In chapter five, I examine the other presupposition of the feminist critique—the spirit of secularity. Rejecting the dimension of transcendence as a male projection, some feminist theologians claim that to view sin as a rupture of relationship with a transcendent God not only fails to speak to women who favor the model of radical divine immanence, but also, it will assign blame and guilt to women. I refute this claim by pointing out that the secular feminist model of absolute divine immanence is problematic in many ways. I argue that women’s experience and the Christian faith in a God who transcends the human psyche do not necessarily stand in opposition. I conclude this chapter by demonstrating two points: firstly, Niebuhr’s model of theological pride can be justified by women’s experience of refusing God; secondly, women’s experience of theological sin is paradoxically the negation of both women’s self-loss and self-assertion.

I do not want to make a false impression that the empirical facts manifesting women can commit the sin of socio-moral and religio-theological pride will overturn the feminist observation that women often suffer from the sin of self-loss. I just wish to counter the irrational and unnecessary denial of pride as women’s sin based on some *a priori* commitments that are incongruent with women’s experience of sin. Many of feminist theologians’ understandings of sin are illuminating. And Niebuhr’s theology of sin is also not, like some of his feminist critics suggest, sexist and hostile to women. Therefore in the last chapter, I try to incorporate the feminist insights on this topic into Niebuhr’s model, to form a more balanced interpretation of sin that maintains the dialectical relationship between vertical sin and horizontal sin, pride and self-loss, sinning and being sinned against.
Chapter I. Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology of Sin

In this chapter, I will firstly give an outline of Niebuhr’s life and thought, focusing on his attempt to maintain the tension between transcendence and relatedness/immanence. Then I will turn to the mythical interpretation of human nature and the world, which according to Niebuhr understands the world more faithfully than rational explanations. In sections three and four, Niebuhr’s analysis of the myth of fall will be expounded. Humanity’s dual nature of being free and bounded, and how men and women commit sin by denying their freedom and limitations will be laid out. At last, I will consider some issues relevant to the discussion of Niebuhr’s theology of sin, like grace, justice, and love.
1.1 A Profile of Niebuhr’s Life and Thought

Niebuhr was born on June 21, 1892 in Wright City, America to a German immigrant Gustav Niebuhr and his wife Lydia. Niebuhr was the third child of the family. He had an older sister and two brothers. Since Gustav Niebuhr was a pastor of German Evangelical Synod of North America who was influenced by liberal theologians such as Harnack, this family had both a pious and liberal background. Actually this upbringing made three theologians: Reinhold, his sister Hulda and his younger brother Helmut Richard. Following his father’s steps, Reinhold decided to enter ministry. He went to Eden Theological Seminary and then Yale Divinity School. After finished his study in Yale, Reinhold was sent to serve at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit in 1915.

As a young pastor, Niebuhr was educated in the liberal Protestant tradition. Like most of his American contemporaries, he believed in moral idealism and progressive achievement of society. But his pastoral life in Detroit gradually made him realize that with its optimism in human nature and indifference to social justice, modern liberalism as a product of bourgeois mentality is irrelevant to either the struggles of personal life, or “complex social issues of an industrial city.”

Although in his Detroit years there is “no serious evidences of a revolt” against the liberal worldview—the decisive break would wait until Niebuhr’s first major work Moral Man and Immoral Society published in 1932, nevertheless the uneasiness of a young pastor about a culture which was unaware of the limits of its idealism was reflected in his early publications. The Detroit years were the watershed in Niebuhr’s life: after that he took up the battle with secular and Christian liberalism, and the polemic against liberalism became a major theme throughout all of his later works.

Niebuhr left Detroit in 1928 to teach Christian ethics in Union Theological Seminary, New York City, where he stayed for the next thirty years until his

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Retirement in 1960. During the period he wrote and published many books which established his apologetic and prophetic role within academic and political areas. Among all his books, the two volumes *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (delivered as Gifford Lectures in 1939, published in 1941 and 1943) is the masterpiece which contains his most mature, elaborated and profound reflection about human nature and sin. After retirement, Niebuhr taught seminars in different universities while his influences continued to grow. He died on June 1, 1971 at the age of 78.

It is generally acknowledged that Niebuhr is not a systematic theologian interested in developing a rounded theological system. Like Richard Harries remarks, Niebuhr is not that kind of theologian who gives us a *summa theologiae*.19 He is more interested in, for instance, elaborating the doctrine of humanity and history, rather than Christology or atonement. Niebuhr’s attitude towards many issues such as pacifism and Marxism also changes radically during his course of life. However, as Hans Hofmann points out, neither Niebuhr’s disinclination to build a theological system nor his changing of minds makes him fail to provide a consistent theological interpretation of the reality of existence. In order to understand Niebuhr properly, Hofmann says, it is very important to know what Niebuhr’s starting point of doing theology is; and by recognizing Niebuhr’s theological principle, it will be clear that “his one great concern remains always the same; the changes are confined to his theological or philosophical views.”20

Niebuhr’s starting point, Hofmann contends, is the *prima facie* conflict between Christian faith and the world; and to reach a balance between the two without retreating to one of the two poles is the utmost concern in Niebuhr’s theology.21 William John Wolf and Niebuhr’s friend Richard Kroner also note that it is exactly the tension between faith and the world that prompts Niebuhr to develop a dialectical method to respond to each.22 Niebuhr’s dialectical method is not like

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21 Ibid. 7-15.
that of Hegel’s, which seeks to approach the absolute though the evolution of dialectical processes. As a successor of Søren Kierkegaard, Niebuhr believes that the ultimate dialectical contradictions cannot be solved logically by reason. He therefore employs dialectics to maintain the tension between God and humanity. Niebuhr’s conviction is that God as the creator of the world is transcendent to the world, but God as the redeemer and judge of the world is also active in the world. The infinite on the one hand is by no means a product of the human psyche, and on the other hand deeply related to the world. For Niebuhr the lack of the dimension of transcendence in modern culture conceals the truth that the meaning of life and the world is beyond any cultural norm bounded by time and space. Yet a genuine faith in God that hopes for justice and peace will not seek to escape from the realities of the world. Langdon Gilkey among others generalizes Niebuhr’s basic methodology of doing theology as “the dialectic of transcendence and relatedness.” This dialectic of transcendence and relatedness, as Gilkey sees it, is not only one of the most powerful weapons of Niebuhr to fight against both absolutism and cynicism, but also forms the necessary presupposition for all of Niebuhr’s theology.

1.1.1 The Defense of Transcendence

Niebuhr’s defense of transcendence starts from his attack of liberal culture. Taking over the optimistic view of human nature from Renaissance and Enlightenment, secular liberalism of Niebuhr’s time believes that human society is in the process of evolutionary progress to ultimate justice and prosperity. This confidence, which Niebuhr describes as “middle-class sentimentalities,” is reflected mostly in the conviction that all social problems and immoralities are caused by an underdevelopment of human rationality. Responding to secular

229-249.
24 Ibid., 19.
liberalism, Christian liberalism (represented by the Social Gospel movement that was prominent in America from 1870s to 1920s) translates the language of modern idealism into theological terms. Liberal theologians assert that the Kingdom of God can be realized on earth by employing Christian ethic in the organization of society. In this way, the Kingdom of God is identified with perfect social order that will be gradually established along with the growth of human being’s rationality and morality.

Niebuhr regards the spirit of the Christian and secular liberalism as fundamentally the same. Both believe in the progress of history and thus claim that ignorance and irrationality that hamper the development of civilization will eventually be eliminated either by employing proper pedagogy or cultivating religious goodwill. However, Niebuhr points out that both religious and secular idealism estimate human nature erroneously: “The wise men of our day cannot gauge the actions of our strong men correctly because they do not understand the tragic facts of human nature.” Niebuhr argues that there is no evidence that the human sense of moral responsibility can be enhanced to such a degree as moralists expect. Even though some individuals have great moral sensibility, he says, it is hard for them to extend their attitude of morality to social areas since collective behaviors are much more complicated and thus are beyond the control of individuals. Besides, in human social life, as Niebuhr sees it, the goodwill of human being can only partly reconcile the conflicting opinions and interests of different groups. As a matter of fact, the political opinions of human being are inevitably entangled with economic interests under the influence of which pure goodwill and reason become impossible. As for the role of education, Niebuhr asserts that modern educators are so obsessed with the power of rationality that they forget “reason is always, to some degree, the servant of interest in a social situation.”

27 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), xv.
its dealing with social problems, especially when facing social conflicts caused by clash of interests.

The reason liberalism fails to provide a valid estimation of human being’s social and personal existence, Niebuhr says, lies in its indifference to the dimension of transcendence. Modern mind rejects the Christian concept of divine transcendence, relegating it to a pre-modern antique and replacing it with the idea of total divine immanence. In other words, for secular and Christian liberals the absolute is to be found in the flux of history, rather than beyond it. Nonetheless, Niebuhr opposes this idea by pointing out that nothing in time and space can be identified with the absolute. None of the ideologies in history is as virtuous as it claims to be. Apostle Paul’s assertion, “there is no one righteous, not even one,”28 is applicable not only to individuals, but also to all the norms, cultures, ideals, laws and moralities. Sin is so deep-rooted in human society that even the noblest deeds may be corrupted by self-interest. By identifying the ultimate norm of good with absolute human creation, secular and Christian liberalism loses the ground to criticize and judge the good and the evil in human existence, especially human claims for power.

In order to justify the faith in progressive history, secular and Christian liberalism needs to picture human nature as fundamentally good. As mentioned above, human corruption in this way is no longer viewed as a stain that can only be cleansed by transcendent grace, but a kind of ignorance or malice that can be cured by education or brotherly love. However, history never develops like those who hold evolutionary optimism expect. The reality of history constantly contradicts the optimism of liberal culture. Modern utopianism of a Kingdom of God on earth crumbles easily in the face of historical events like the two world wars. The history of humankind, Niebuhr remarks, is “not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of the good over evil, of cosmos over chaos,”29 but full of possibilities, good and evil. A profound observation on human society would

28 Romans 3:10, NIV.
29 Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, 108.
notice that the possibility of evil grows with the possibility of good in human history, and the depth of both the good and the evil in human society is not to be easily ignored.

What secular and Christian liberals forget, Niebuhr argues, is that history can’t be its own Christ. With prophetic insight, Niebuhr sees that any effort to absolutize history, or any blind faith in historical ideologies—no matter how rational or spiritual it seems to be, is hard to escape the pitfall of idolatry. Hence the ultimate meaning of history for him is beyond history. Niebuhr admits that the meaning of history is partly fulfilled within the historical process, but he also points out that history is creative, not redemptive, and it points beyond itself to its final fulfillment: “human history is a realm of reality having its final basis in eternity…history is meaningful but pointing beyond itself.” The history after Christ as Niebuhr sees it is “an interim between the disclosure of its true meaning and the fulfillment of that meaning.” The Kingdom of God has come in the sense that the meaning of history is revealed, but life will remain to be ambiguous and fragmentary, waiting for its final fulfillment until Christ’s second coming. An overly idealistic interpretation of human existence, Niebuhr contends, becomes irrelevant especially in times of tragedy and ambiguity.

However, this does not mean Niebuhr regards the answers of life as only fragmentary and momentary. What he seeks are not norms and hopes relative to time and space, but a realm of meaning with indestructible certainty. Niebuhr points out that only God whose overarching power and sovereignty completely over the finite world can transcend the surface of history to provide such certainty. Without the dimension of transcendence, human existence is either in danger of falling into despair or idolatry. Only when we are sure that the absolute is not bounded by space and time, are we able to affirm the legitimacy of truth. Otherwise certainties are unimaginable. Only when we know that God is not a projection of human mind, can we understand that the genuine experience of God

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31 Ibid., 67
32 Ibid., 49.
does not generate from our psychological needs. It is instead, Niebuhr explains, “the sense of being seen, commanded, judged and known from beyond ourselves.” As biblical wisdom reveals, Israel does not choose God, it is God who elects Israel in free grace. God as “the Other” cannot be known to us unless God speaks to us through revelation. God’s transcendence hence challenges both absolutism and cynicism. On the one hand, it radically relativizes all “man-made” norms and philosophies in history; on the other, it provides a solid ground for hope even in times of suffering, trouble, and tragedy.

1.1.2 The Defense of Relatedness/Immanence

The transcendence Niebuhr referring to, as Gilkey put it, is a “vertical” transcendence. It is not a transcendence that lies ahead, but a radical transcendence “beyond, above, over” any finite realm. However, Niebuhr understands the radical transcendence above history not as unrelated to history but, on the opposite, as continually related to history. Niebuhr believes that the Christian myth of creation affirms “both the transcendence of God and His intimate relation to the world” by indicating God is the Creator of the world. Nonetheless, since human being’s real milieu is history as they stand within space and time, Niebuhr realizes that “man is at variance with God not by ontological fate but by historical guilt.” From the side of the divine, “God has taken historical action to heal the breach between man and God” as the Redeemer, but from the side of human beings, they have their responsibility in temporal social existence, to be more specific, they have the responsibility to achieve order and justice in personal and collective life despite the ambiguities of history.

Christian faith, therefore, is not irrelevant to historical realities. It concerns personal spiritual life, as well as social justice. Yet unfortunately in history Christianity often plays a passive part in politics and economics. The incapability

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of Christianity in politics and economics is caused mainly by two tendencies—the liberal and the conservative, which, as Niebuhr says, relax the tension between the historical and the transcendent: “the orthodox Church dismissed the immediate relevancy of the law of love for politics. The modern Church declared it to be relevant without qualification.”37 If the fault of the liberal church is “giving ultimate significance to the relativities of history,” then the error of orthodox Christianity is accepting the impossibility of the realization of the ultimate ideal of love on earth.38

If we single out the issue of relevancy, however, we will find that it is especially the weak point of orthodox Christianity. The problem of orthodox Christianity, as Niebuhr sees it, is “sacrificing time and history to eternity.”39 Orthodox Christianity often fails to understand that though the ideal of love cannot be fully realized, it is not only an ideal concerning a perfect divine-human relationship—it should be related to the problems of the world. When Christian political ethics cannot relate the principle of justice to the ideal of love, Niebuhr says, it is reduced to cynicism. To be worse, the failure of orthodox Christianity to find a balance between love and justice often leads to its tolerance of evil rulers and governments. In a less prophetic Christianity, the domination of rulers or governments is often regarded as an ordinance of God. This sometimes makes the church become a defender of unjust social powers:

The lack of this discrimination has led the church at times to thank God for the order established by government when it should have resisted tyranny; and at other times to express contrition for sins which resulted in injustice, when it should have moved to change the institutions which generated the injustice.”40

Realizing the error and danger of an irrelevant church, Niebuhr fights with

38 Ibid., 151.
39 Ibid., 151.
40 Ibid., 176.
resolve against cynicism and moral complacency, as fervently as he fights against liberal absolutism. Personal perfection may be one of the goals in religious life, but Niebuhr asserts that Christian life can’t be “reduced to a purely individual transcendence over a very inscrutable collective life.” As he says, “the kingdom of God is not of this world; yet its light illumines our tasks in this world and its hope saves us from despair.”

In addition, it is necessary to note that Niebuhr’s defense of relatedness/immanence of Christian faith is closely related to his attitude toward experience. “I stand in the William James tradition,” Niebuhr once wrote to one of his biographers. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. notices that Niebuhr is “an instinctive empiricist” who has “sharp political intuitions, an astute tactical sense, and an instinct for realism.” For Niebuhr, the truth of faith comes from a revelation beyond history, which is not something that can be deduced from experience. Nevertheless, he contends that the relation between faith and experience is not always contradictory because faith “illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience.” In his conviction Niebuhr knows that Christian faith is not supported by dogmatic authorities like many think, it is nonetheless supported by obvious facts in history and life. Therefore Niebuhr constantly appeals to experience in his analysis of human nature and society. A typical Niebuhrian answer to the validation of a Christian doctrine is that it fits with human experience. By pointing out that the alternative understandings of human and society are inadequate, Niebuhr tries to show in his works that the biblical religion makes more sense of the human situation. In his refutation of Barthian theologians who criticize him of using experience to determine faith, Niebuhr replies that the history of human race provides “pretty conclusive evidence” to validate the

41 Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, 440.
Christian understanding of human being and society, and faith validated in experience “is the key which resolves the divine mystery into meaning and makes sense out of life.” 47 It can be seen that Niebuhr regards experience as one of the ways to relate Christian faith to the world. “Experience” therefore plays a considerably important role in Niebuhr’s theology, which distinguishes him from other neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth. As we will see, “experience” is also a key word in the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin. Although detailed discussion about experience is not intended here, it will be further dealt with in subsequent chapters.

1.1.3 Conclusion

A general exposition of Niebuhr’s theology reveals that the dialectical relation between transcendence and relatedness, revelation and experience, gospel and the world, faith and modernity is Niebuhr’s main concern. According to Gilkey, Niebuhr’s theology is “a theology of catastrophe, nemesis, and renewal in history, not one of progress.” And the meaning of faith for Niebuhr “is to provide meaning, hope, and grounds for creative action and for new life precisely in such a real world of experienced ambiguity and tragedy.” 48 Niebuhr tries carefully in his theology to avoid sacrificing the absolute to the relative, or giving in to cynicism. If we want to read Niebuhr properly in the following interpretation of his thought, we should be careful not to relax the dialectical tension between extremes for him.

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47 Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, 432.
48 Gilkey, On Niebuhr, 22.
1.2 Scientific Worldview and Mythology

For Niebuhr, the reality of the world abounds with contradictions, antinomies and inconsistency that a too coherent rational system cannot explain. One of the predicaments of modern culture, as Niebuhr sees it, is its over-reliance and indulgence in the simplified hope that objective, ideology-free social sciences will provide tools for humankind to understand itself and gain its ultimate freedom after social and religious restraints upon these disciplines are removed. Although admitting “modern social and psychological sciences have been able to teach us a great deal about man and his community,” Niebuhr criticizes them for being “fruitful of many errors and illusions on the ultimate level.” Niebuhr’s concern is to undercut the scientism of modern culture, and meanwhile provide an alternative that will not obscure the integrity and freedom of human being. Only by what he calls “myth” which relates the transcendence to the facts of experience, Niebuhr says, the coherence of the world and meaning of life can be clarified.

1.2.1 Limitations of Social Sciences

According to Niebuhr, first of all, the assumption of a presuppositionless social science is an illusion. The possibility of social sciences to achieve pure objectivity is an idea borrowing from the realm of natural sciences. As observers of nature, physical scientists who stand outside of nature are to some extent disinterested and unbiased. However, for social scientists, the pure empirical or scientific observation is impossible since they are not only observers, but also agents in history and culture that they try to understand. In Niebuhr’s words, human being is at the same time a “creature” and “creator” in the study of itself. Besides, scientific research cannot be done without a framework of guiding presuppositions—even natural sciences have one fundamental faith that “the operations of reason are relevant to the processes of nature.” A totally
presupposition-free scientific method therefore is a lie of modern scientism. There will be no interpretation of history without specific expectation and faith—the meaning that social scientists use to relate various empirical data is exactly the presupposition, rather than the consequences of their research.\textsuperscript{52} In opposition to the ostensible presuppositionless assumption of modern social sciences, Niebuhr points out that social sciences generally hold two presuppositions: “the idea of the perfectibility of man” and “the idea of progress.”\textsuperscript{53}

Moreover, human beings’ engagement in the realm of history makes their observation hardly objective, because there is always the danger of their ideas being corrupted by interests of class, race and nation. Enlightened by Marx, Niebuhr recognizes that ideological taint is upon every judgment which social scientists claim to be objective:

Even the most ‘objective’ interpretations of human life and destiny, of legal and moral norms and ideals are in fact the rationalization of the interest of the ruling groups of a society, and mirror the economic interests of that group.\textsuperscript{54}

Niebuhr contends that the historical judgments that social scientists make are ultimately value judgments, which seek meaning and desirability of ends. It is never pure minds, but embodied selves who are involved in the research of human history. It is generally believed that the only force that can restrict the development of social science is external authority, but in fact it is the interests of human beings that are restricting the development of social science—embodied selves with interests spontaneously engaged in scientific research, and they usually are not under the coercion of religious or political authority. Therefore the challenge of social scientists is not an intellectual, but an ethical one since “no scientific method can compel a self to cease from engaging in whatever

\textsuperscript{52} Niebuhr, \textit{Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 118.

\textsuperscript{53} Niebuhr, \textit{Christian Realism and Political Problems}, 3.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 76.
rationalization of interest may seem plausible to it.”\textsuperscript{55} It is for this reason that a “scientific” method with ostensible presuppositionless presupposition is not only ineffective in mitigating ideological taints, but also dangerous because it sanctifies some observations that comes from partial interests in the name of objective science.

Thirdly, the objects of social sciences are so completely different from that of physical sciences that a pure empirical approach to social sciences is hard to be efficacious. History is full of complex causations and contingent factors. It is impossible for scientists as finite observers to trace all dimensions of historical events, not to mention that they are tempted constantly to make their own interests and prejudices to be the final ground of their research. Another difficulty of social scientific inquiry is the non-repeatability of history. It is true that “there are cycles, recurrences and analogies in history” which are the basis for scientific research, but as Niebuhr sees it, “endless contingencies supervene upon the recurrences. In the physical sciences there can be controlled experiments which may be endlessly repeated until the ‘right’ answer is found, but nothing is exactly repeated in history.”\textsuperscript{56} Although social scientists can find some patterns of social and historical development in their investigation, there cannot be genuine predictability of social development since the actions of human agents as well as causal events are unpredictable. Without valid predictions of social development, Niebuhr says,

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
it is difficult, if not impossible, to refute conclusively flagrant forms of ideology which operate in ordinary political polemics, it is even more difficult to come to terms with the subtler ideologies which lie at the basis of the ethos of a whole age or culture.\textsuperscript{57}
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1.2.2 Coherence, Meaning and Myth

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 87.
Acknowledging the fact that there are antimonies and paradoxes permeated in every facet of life, the world for Niebuhr is nevertheless not a meaningless chaos. In his mind the whole of reality is marked by a basic coherence: “The world is organized or it could not exist; if it is to be known, it must be known through its sequences, coherence, casualties, and essence.”58 Nevertheless, Niebuhr points out that genuine coherence cannot be achieved at the expense of the uniqueness of particular realities. He complains that most rational efforts to understand the world’s coherence—especially the efforts of modern scientific culture—disregard the facts of incongruities of the world. Niebuhr realizes that “things and events may be too unique to fit into any system of meaning; and their uniqueness is destroyed by a premature coordination to a system of meaning, particularly a system which identifies meaning with rationality.”59 An excessively coherent rational system that tries to give the whole reality an explanation may be far away from the total truth since it overlooks many particular facts. Niebuhr devotes many pages in his works to illustrate this by exposing the inadequacies of classical and modern rationalists’ interpretations of the world.60 Consciously or unconsciously, rationalists often have to ignore or even distort some facts of experience in order to achieve the total coherence they are pursuing. For example, it is the particular dilemma of modern scientism, Niebuhr points out, that the word “scientific” stands for “empirical” as well as “rational,” but these two connotations are sometimes contradictory since by the attempt to bring empirical facts together into a coherent system, scientists are often tempted to deny empirical facts that “violated, or appeared to violate, the test of rational coherence.”61

The limitation of employing pure reason to gain coherence is also reflected in rationalists’ inability to understand paradoxes. Since rationalists know no way of

58 Ibid., 175.
59 Ibid., 176.
60 See, for example, Christian Realism and Political Problems, 176-203; Reflections on the End of an Era, 126-135; The Nature and Destiny of Man, volume I, chapter I-IV; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, chapter I, et cetera.
61 Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, 4.
maintaining the tension between time and eternity, nature and spirit, the ideal and the real, they constantly destroy the tension by holding on to one extreme. Therefore in their defiance of incoherence of the world, they lose the sense of ultimate coherence. An overly coherent philosophical system does not understand genuine freedom that implies the possibility to violate rationality as well. Thus Niebuhr claims, “the whole realm of genuine selfhood, of sin and of grace, is beyond the comprehension of various systems of philosophy.” 62 This is also why Niebuhr refuses to develop his theology toward an ontological direction like Paul Tillich suggests. Tillich criticizes Niebuhr for regarding ontology as a work of calculating reason—which is mainly a cognitive function that is not able to attain the knowledge of God, not of logos type reason—which is “an element within the divine life” and “the principle of that which creates faith.” 63 But Niebuhr replies that it is exactly the logos type reason he chiefly discredits since he is convinced that faith cannot be deduced from any form of pure rationality. Niebuhr concedes that God must be logos or reason in some sense, but “God has freedom beyond the rational structure.” Being per se contains mysteries beyond rational comprehension, and likewise “the mystery of God’s creative power is certainly beyond the limits of a rational ontology.” 64

In this way, Niebuhr regards genuine coherence not just as rational or logical coherence. For him only a coherence that can do justice to the incoherence of the world is the real coherence. A monotonic world without paradoxes is not the real world. It only exists in the minds of great metaphysicians. Therefore it turns out that arts and religions are more proximate to the truth of life than philosophical systems. Although arts and religions do not accurately describe and analyze the world like science does, they prevail over science and any other rational coherent systems for bringing the light of meaning into reality. Under the influence of secularization and scientism, modern minds often regard reality as no more than a

62 Ibid., 178.
64 Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, 432-433.
flux of temporal events. Yet for prophetic religion, Niebuhr contends, the world is both a revelation and veiling of eternity whose finite occurrences point beyond itself, indicating that the reality and existence have a coherent meaning. Meaning for Niebuhr, as Gilkey interprets, represents “a sense of worth, significance, or purpose in who we are and what we do; even more, meaning connotes the assurance not only of worth and purpose but also of the achievement of that purpose,” and the assurance of meaning “gives direction to our common projects and our acts; it is the principle of judgment on our relative successes and failures…”\(^{65}\) Therefore only meaning can coordinate paradoxical facts into a coherent whole without disavowing them.

However, Niebuhr is never that parochial to assert there is no meaning in rational paradigms. On the contrary he insists that every worldview—including two leading worldviews of modern time, “bourgeois naturalism” and “proletarian communism”—has meaning. These worldviews can even be called faiths in a sense that they find “the mechanisms of the cosmos either neutrally amenable or profoundly sympathetic to human ideals.”\(^{66}\) The only difference is: worldviews influenced by modern scientism try every effort to cover the fact that they provide various meanings since science is believed to deal with pure and objective facts, and it would be discredited if it is involved with the realm of meaning or is “religious-based.” The result is not only that these worldviews leave their faith and presupposition unexamined, but also they fail to develop and provide a creative meaning for life. As Niebuhr remarks: “a vision of the whole is possible only if it is assumed that human history has meaning; and modern empiricism is afraid of that assumption.”\(^{67}\)

Acknowledging the limits of rationality, Niebuhr is convinced that the meaning which is able to combine all perspectives of life must contain “the highest imagination,” in other words, it must be mysterious in order to integrate “the exact data of the scientist with the vision of the artist and must add religious depth to

\(^{65}\) Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 34.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 122-123.
philosophical generalizations.”68 Pure rational description of the world will either end in pantheism/naturalism which eliminates difference between the temporal and the eternal, or dualism which divides the world into two parts—a spiritual world without substance or content, and a physical world without value or meaning. The quest for coherence then points beyond rationality to a meaningful but mysterious realm. For Niebuhr, mystery enriches meaning and it “prevents the realm of meaning from being reduced too simply to rational intelligibility and thereby being given a false center of meaning in a relative or contingent historical force or end.”69 A faithful description of the world, which does not disavow the paradoxes and antinomies inside of it, uses the language of symbols, not the language of logic. In other words, a coherent understanding of reality must be achieved by mythology rather than philosophy.

Myth or mythology is a recurring term in Niebuhr’s works. In his interpretation of the Niebuhrian interpretation of mythology, Robin W. Lovin says, “Christianity speaks in myths and symbols which relate God to the realities of our own experience. The mythic representation is always incomplete and partial. By the criterion of rational coherence, it always fails as knowledge. Yet the myth apprehends a coherence in God which the reason of the myth-maker cannot completely formulate.”70 Mythology therefore is not completely rationally coherent, nor is it true in the sense that it gives a detailed description of the world. But myth is capable of providing a coherent meaning without ignoring the facts of incoherence. Like Niebuhr says:

While rational and non-mythical religions tend to define the ideal in terms of passionless form and the world of actuality as unqualifiedly evil, it is the virtue of mythical religions that they discover symbols of the transcendent in the actual without either separating the one from, or identifying it with, the other. This is perhaps the most essential genius of myth, that it

68 Ibid., 122.
69 Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 103.
points to the timeless in time, to the ideal in the actual, but does not lift the temporal to the category of the eternal (as pantheism does), nor deny the significant glimpses of the eternal and the ideal in the temporal (as dualism does).\textsuperscript{71}

Nevertheless, since “myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its form of expression,” says Niebuhr, mythology “invariably falsifies the facts of history, as seen by science, to state its truth.”\textsuperscript{72} Every myth seems to contain a certain degree of deception because mythical ideas cannot be rationalized. Myth is ultra-rational rather than irrational in its efforts to relate divine mysteries to time. Niebuhr uses the Pauline phrase “as deceivers, yet true” to state this paradoxical nature of Christian mythology—it deceives in order to say the truth.\textsuperscript{73} For example, to say God created the world \textit{ex nihilo} is ultra-rational, since human beings can only understand experiential things in the flux of time, the idea of creation is beyond rationality. In a rational philosophy, God is regarded as the First Cause; only in a mythology, God is viewed as the Creator: “to say God is the creator is to use an image which transcends the canons of rationality, but which expresses both his organic relation to the world and his distinction from the world.”\textsuperscript{74} And by this mythical language, both the coherence and incoherence of the world are expressed: “to believe that God created the world is to feel that the world is a realm of meaning and coherence without insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred.”\textsuperscript{75}

The awareness of mythical language’s deceptiveness distinguishes authentic mythology from primitive mythology and ultra-modern mythology. Orthodox Christianity often expressed itself as a primitive mythology by interpreting the Bible literally. “The weakness of orthodox Christianity lies in its premature

\textsuperscript{71} Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 93.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{73} See, 2 Corinthians 6:8, KJV; Niebuhr, \textit{Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1-24.
\textsuperscript{74} Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 37.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 37.
identification of the transcendent will of God with canonical moral codes, many of which are merely primitive social standards, and for development of its myth into a bad science.” When deceptive mythical surface is regarded as its essence, Christianity is turned into true deception without truth. Opposite to orthodox Christianity, liberal church “is dominated by the desire to prove to its generation that it does not share the anachronistic ethics or believe the incredible myths of orthodox religion. Its energy for some decades has been devoted to the task of proving religion and science compatible.” But the error of liberal Christianity lies exactly in its uncritical acceptance of modern culture. It takes the knowledge of a time as a standard to judge the religious beliefs that are supposed to transcend human physical life. Liberal Christianity wants to be justified by science, but it loses the uniqueness and creativity of religion in the so-called “modern spirit.” If a religion that literally interprets myths is a bad science being constrained in breadth, then a religion that sacrifices its mythical heritage to criteria of the age is a superficial religion without depth.

For Niebuhr, again, “the ethical fruitfulness of various types of religion is determined by the quality of their tension between the historical and the transcendent.” Biblical religion is in this sense an adequate mythology and a profound religion that avoids the mistakes of the religions of primitives and ultra-moderns. The biblical or prophetic religion, as Niebuhr calls it, develops in both breadth and depth. The significance of biblical religion lies in the fact that the tension between the historical and the transcendent is to be “maintained at any point in history, no matter what the moral and social achievement, because its ultimate ideal always transcends every historical fact and reality,” while the transcend remains in organic relation to the historical, so that the significance of historical actualities may not be “robbed.”

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76 Ibid., 19.
77 Ibid., 15.
78 Ibid., 19.
79 In Niebuhr’s books, other synonyms of the term “biblical religion” includes “biblical faith,” “high religion,” “prophetic faith,” “prophetic religion,” “Hebrew religion,” et cetera.
80 Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 31.
81 Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 19.
The four myths of Christianity, namely the myth of creation, fall, atonement and eschatology, all provide coherence in the complexities of paradoxical facts, combining reality with meanings of life by the sense of transcendence. Briefly speaking, the myth of creation reveals that God is related to the world and transcends the world. The myth of fall acknowledges that there is evil in the world without ascribing it to God or the physical world. The myth of atonement/justification is the center of meaning and life that reveals the Christian ideal as an impossible possibility—it is God’s answer to human being’s limits. The myth of eschatology denies provisional meaning while affirming that history is not meaningless, and it demonstrates that the fulfillment of history is not in history but beyond history. Among the four dominant Christian myths, it is the myth of fall with which we are chiefly concerned. In the next section, we will expound Niebuhr’s understanding of human sin in more details.
1.3 The Myth of Fall

1.3.1 Human Being’s Dual Nature

Concerning human nature, Niebuhr always describes it as a paradox. On the one hand humans are animals. Being a “child of nature,” humankind is “compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years.” On the other hand, human being is more than a part of nature. It is a spirit who stands outside nature, life, itself and the world. Niebuhr notices that the dual nature of humanity is realized throughout the ages by different kinds of schools and philosophies like Platonism, Stoicism, Thomism, Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, et cetera. But most of them fail to comprehend human nature as an antinomy that combines both boundedness and transcendence: either they overlook human being’s finitude, or they ignore its freedom.

For example, there is the classic view of humanity, namely the view of Greek-Roman world, which is represented mainly by Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism. The classic view of human nature holds that human being is essentially rational. In this view rational man is identified with the divine, while human being’s boundedness is greatly depreciated. In Platonism and Neo-Platonism, this negative approach toward the creatureliness of humankind reaches its peak by identifying spirit with the good and body with the evil. Another inheritance of Greek-Roman world, the Epicurean and Democritan naturalism whose modern representatives are all kinds of rational and romantic naturalisms, focuses on human being’s affinity with nature. By contrast with classical idealists, naturalists are willing to deny the sense of transcendence by reducing spirituality to physical process of nature, since for them human situation is completely bounded by various things like culture, race, social status, gender, and so on.

Christianity, as Niebuhr sees it, is capable of integrating both aspects into one

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83 Ibid., 3.
unified view of human nature since God has made human being in the divine image. This presupposition indicates that human being is both a creature who is finite and bounded, and *imago Dei* who is transcendent and free. Being God’s creation, human being in nature is good. But it is not essentially good or essentially eternal. Rejecting naturalistic romantics who extol the vitality of nature beyond measure, Niebuhr holds that Christianity seeks goodness not in “man-as-nature” because human being is “a created and finite existence in both body and spirit.” Nevertheless, nature and the limitedness of humanity should not be viewed as a flaw—although human being is good when created, it is not self-sufficient or perfect as God, in its good nature human being is limited and finite. Clinging to Christian notion of human goodness when created, Niebuhr states again and again that the finitude of human being is not the source of its sin. For Niebuhr, the acknowledgment of finiteness as a created existence helps human being to “relate himself to God without pretending to be God; and to accept his distance from God…” Not only finitude or creatureliness is not sin, but paradoxically, only by realizing its finitude, human being can transcend itself and its finiteness to reach another core of human nature—the image and child of God.

Human beings own an essential characteristic that separates them from animals, which is what Christianity calls “the image of God” (*imago Dei*). This human uniqueness is something more than rational faculties like many theories of humanity suggest. Niebuhr interprets *imago Dei* as “an orientation of man toward God.” This relatedness to God enables humankind to stand outside the world’s temporal process to understand itself and the world since God to whom human being is related transcends the finite world. Thus for the most common human experience, *imago Dei* is the human being’s ability of self-transcendence. The capacity of self-transcendence, which comes from the nature of human being is reflected, for example, in human being’s self-consciousness which can make itself its own object.

84 Ibid., 12.
85 Ibid., 15.
86 Ibid., 153.
Identifying *imago Dei* with mind or reason, therefore, would be a depreciation of it since it is exactly the capacity to transcend and criticize rationality, circumstances and human being itself. Only in a transcendent way can human being understand the true meaning and limits of itself, and thus creates history: “man is the only creature imbedded in the flux of finitude who knows that this is his fate; which prove that in some sense this is not his fate.”87 Only in the sense of self-transcendence can human being understand the meaning of its genuine freedom since it knows that although it is subject to its creaturely limitations, “he is not inevitably bound in his actions to the norm and universalities of ‘reason.’”88 Since human freedom that transcends finite norms, culture, law and rationality comes from God’s image in humankind, this ability of human being links it naturally to its creator: “man who is made in the image of God is unable…to be satisfied with a god who is made in man’s image.”89 Like Augustine, Niebuhr knows that for human being “the power of transcendence places him so much outside of everything else that he can find a home only in God.”90

1.3.2 The Origin of Sin

The Christian faith affirms that humankind is God’s good creation and the *imago Dei*, however, it also affirms that every human being is a sinner:

The high estimate of the human stature implied in the concept of “image of God” stands in paradoxical juxtaposition to the low estimate of human virtue in Christian thought. Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God.91

Where, then, is the source of human sin and rebellion? Niebuhr states over and

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87 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 77.
90 Ibid., 156.
91 Ibid., 16.
over again that humanity’s boundedness is not sin. For him sin stems from human being’s will, rather than its nature. According to the Christian myth of fall, the first couple is tempted by the serpent to eat fruits that have been forbidden for them to eat lest they know good and evil like God. “Man is tempted, in other words, to break and transcend the limits which God has set for him.” 92 Niebuhr believes that this temptation is possible only because as an intermediate being of freedom and finiteness, human being is neither pure spirits like angels, nor animals that are completely bounded in the necessities and contingencies of nature.

The occasion for his temptation lies in the two facts, his greatness and his weakness, his unlimited and his limited knowledge, taken together. Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. 93

The situation in which human being stands is not a temptation itself, but it does gives a lot of temptations. Niebuhr writes,

man knows more than the immediate natural situation in which he stands and he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation. Yet he is unable to define the total human situation without colouring his definition with finite perspectives drawn from his immediate situation…therefore man is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge, and the finiteness of his perspectives. He pretends to have achieved a degree of knowledge which is beyond the limit of finite life. 94

In the paradox of transcendence and finitude, and in the temptations this paradox brings, human being is inevitably anxious not only because it is limited and dependent, but also because “he does not know the limits of his possibilities.”

92 Ibid., 179-180.
93 Ibid., 181.
94 Ibid., 182.
Therefore “there is …no limit of achievement in any sphere of activity in which human history can rest with equanimity.”\textsuperscript{95}

Niebuhr’s analysis of anxiety is largely indebted to Kierkegaard who describes the two aspects of human nature which conflict with each other within human being and how they eventually induce anxiety. In his book \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, Kierkegaard defines humankind as “a synthesis of psyche and body that is constituted and sustained by spirit.”\textsuperscript{96} Kierkegaard realizes that if human being is an animal or an angel, it could not be in anxiety. However, since human being is an intermediate being of freedom and finiteness, its existence is full of possibilities. Human being is not already what it is, but it must grow to become what it will be. This nature of humanity eventually leads to anxiety, which precedes and causes sin. Closely following Kierkegaard’s analysis, Niebuhr regards anxiety as the temptation and “internal precondition of sin.”\textsuperscript{97} Yet anxiety cannot be identified with sin since Niebuhr sees that anxiety could also serve as a source of creativity. Sin otherwise arises from human being’s anxious attempt to deny its finitude or freedom. As Hoffmann interprets, “the source of sin…is not in what man is but in what he wishes to be.”\textsuperscript{98} Human beings’ denial signifies two things. Firstly, they refuse to admit their nature as limited creatures, as children of nature. The pretence of not being limited exposes human beings’ desire to be more than who they are. Secondly, human beings fail to realize their self-transcendence, which involves self-knowledge. In both ways their anxiety-related creativity is “corrupted by some effort to overcome contingency by raising precisely what is contingent to absolute and unlimited dimensions.”\textsuperscript{99} Human beings’ destructive effort to hide their limited nature of existence, which they know quite well, makes them fail to see what they really are—dependent and bounded beings that can transcend and stand outside of the world and the self. Thus anxiety brings forth

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{97} Niebuhr, \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, Vol. I, 182.
\textsuperscript{98} Hans Hofmann, \textit{The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr}, 183.
two primary sins: pride as the substitution of contingent existence for the unconditioned and sensuality as the escape from freedom and possibilities of transcendence.

1.3.3 Freedom and Responsibility

Niebuhr’s interpretation of humanity’s freedom and responsibility on the issue of sin is closely related to the Augustinian-Pelagian debate. According to Pelagius, sin is not a result of compulsion—human being is free in the sense that it can choose either the good or the evil. In this way for Pelagius only transgressions that are consciously or deliberately committed in freewill can be regarded as sinful:

Yet we do not defend the good of nature to such an extent that we claim that it cannot do evil, since we undoubtedly declare also that it is capable of good and evil; we merely try to protect it from an unjust charge, so that we may not seem to be forced to do evil through a fault of our nature, when, in fact, we do neither good nor evil without the exercise of our will and always have the freedom to do one of the two, being always able to do either.100

However, following Paul who finds that “I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing,”101 Augustine contends that human being is not free to change its will or choose freely between the good and the evil since it is enslaved to sin. Niebuhr agrees with Augustine on the point that sin does not have to be deliberate—it could be unconsciously done even when people believe they are doing the good. Most importantly, like Augustine Niebuhr realizes that if human being has no responsibility for those transgressions that are not deliberately done, then the root of most wrong-doings can be attributed to external factors such as the physical impulses, cultural lag, education or family inheritance rather than the will of human being itself. Or just like Pelagius says,

101 Romans 7:19, NIV.
it should be thought to be nature's fault that some have been unrighteous, I shall use the evidence of the scripture, which everywhere lay upon sinners the heavy weight of the charge of having used their own will and do not excuse them for having acted only under constraint of nature.102

Niebuhr points out that modern culture follows Pelagianism’s way in the sense that it tries every effort to find external reasons to explain human evil, but is unwilling to admit that the most basic explanation for human corruption does not exist in somewhere else but in human will itself.

Sin is an outdated word for modern mind. It is gradually replaced by more “scientific” words like illness. Since many modern theories of humanity sees human actions as bounded by various external forces, it is natural for them to think if those causations are recognized or removed, human evil will vanish or at least be controlled. For example, Marxism thinks that evil stems from unequal distribution of material resources, and will disappear in a communist society that exterminates inequality. In modern psychology people trace a person’s misbehaviors and mental illness back to various particular circumstances like family of origin, educational background, strains of life, marital problems, and so on, hoping that the analysis of these situations will give a prescription that finally cures the person. For Niebuhr these solutions are not completely invalid, but he insists that they are inadequate in the sense that they only consider external factors while ignoring the bias toward evil residing inside human will. If sin is caused or determined by any factors or temptation other than will, Niebuhr contends, the idea of human responsibility will ultimately dissolve. Echoing Kierkegaard, Niebuhr asserts that sin is presupposed in human being’s will before temptation and exterior factors:

For the general insecurity of man and the special sense of inferiority of his class and nation

102 Pelagius, The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers, 43.
do not lead necessarily to the excessive self-assertion in which he is involved. They do not lead to sin unless sin is first presupposed.\textsuperscript{103}

In other words, human beings sin before they act, because they sin in their will. As a creature standing at the juncture of animal and spirit, human beings sin inevitably. But the inevitability of sin doesn’t mean that human beings are not responsible for committing sin since a human being sins in her/his will, that is to say, she/he sins by using her/his freedom.

Sin is to be regarded as neither a necessity of man’s nature nor yet as a pure caprice of his will. It proceeds rather from a defect of the will, for which reason it is not completely deliberate; but since it is the will in which the defect is found and the will presupposes freedom the defect cannot be attributed to a taint in man’s nature.\textsuperscript{104}

Secular culture may try to reject an inner attribution of evil as outdated religious superstition, but for Niebuhr any denial of human inner responsibility is unempirical since human being’s responsibility is testified by its conscience, namely the experience of remorse or repentance: “from an exterior view not only sin in general but any particular sin may seem to be the necessary consequence of previous temptations,” but “the fact of responsibility is attested by the feeling of remorse or repentance which follows the sinful action.”\textsuperscript{105}

The relation between freedom and responsibility seems to be logically inconsistent, which makes it one of the most confusing paradoxes of Christianity. On the one hand human will is enslaved to sin, in this sense human being’s will is not free—not only is it incapable of choosing between the good and the evil, but also sometimes it acts immorally inadvertently or even against its will. However, on the other hand since sin in the origin and end can be understood only in human

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\textsuperscript{103} Niebuhr, \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, Vol. I, 249.  \\
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 242.  \\
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 255.
\end{flushleft}
being’s relationship to God, Niebuhr contends that in this sense the freedom of human being does not mean it can choose between the good and the evil, but means that it can choose between God and itself, and by choosing itself, it becomes a slave of sin and lose the freedom to choose between the good and the evil. Human being then is both free and not free. Yet since this situation of enslavement is chosen by free will, human being is responsible for its sin even though its sin is inevitable.

For Niebuhr, human being has genuine freedom and responsibility. Any attempt to weaken these two is unacceptable. That is why in his defense of the paradox of freedom and responsibility Niebuhr also criticizes Augustine for interpreting Genesis 1-3 and Romans 5 literally. Niebuhr contends that the Augustinian explanation of original sin as an inheritance handed down from generation to generation is a great offense to free will which God gives human being and the consequence would be the destruction of responsibility for sin and wrong-doings. What’s more, if sin is inherited from the first couple, the body is to be blamed for being the container of sin, but according to Christian interpretation there is no evil in the creation. Therefore the true purpose of Genesis story about Adam and Eve is to show that how the first couple sin by using their freedom. Niebuhr quotes Kierkegaard claiming: “The concept of sin and guilt presupposes the individual as individual. There is no concern for his relation to any cosmic or past totality.”

Human beings as independent individuals are responsible for their own sin, and they sin because they use their free will to defy God, not because their ancestors have misused their freedom. Adam in this way should be viewed as a representative of humanity. Human beings do not sin because of some absolute necessity; they sin because they are free beings who can choose to sin. Their sin is inevitable, but this inevitability lies paradoxically in their spirituality and freedom.

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106 Ibid., 257.
107 Ibid.
1.3.4 Conclusion

For Niebuhr the complexity of human being lies in the fact that it is both a child of nature and a spirit. Neither human being’s boundedness nor transcendence is sin. However, as Niebuhr sees it, the dual nature of humanity eventually leads to anxiety, which precedes and causes sin. Human being has genuine freedom—which is the precondition of responsibility for sin—although it sins inevitably. Niebuhr claims that the Christian concept of “responsibility despite inevitability” is a dialectical truth. And the final paradox, he says, lies in the fact that “the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man’s highest assertion of freedom.”\(^{108}\)

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 263.
1.4 Human beings as Sinners

It is known that Niebuhr divides sin into two primary categories: pride and sensuality. They depict two tendencies of human beings as they are standing both inside and outside of the contingencies and necessities of temporal process. Pride, as Niebuhr observes, is the denial of one’s contingent condition of being: “man falls into pride, when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance.”109 While sensuality is the escape from freedom, an “unlimited devotion to limited values.”110 Niebuhr contends that the sin of pride is more basic than the sin of sensuality since the latter is derived from the former.111 And social sin as a collective form of pride is the most obstinate and ineradicable disease in human history.

1.4.1 The Sin of Pride

Niebuhr divides pride into four groups: pride of power, pride of knowledge, pride of virtue and spiritual pride. There are some people whose social status is high and secure, in contrast with others who feel insecure in social life. According to Niebuhr the pride of power can manifest in either group of people. To individuals and groups who are abundant in power and wealth, there seems no boundary of their capabilities. Many great emperors and militarists in history obsessed with power are of this kind. However, some people lust for power because they lack power and want to overcome their sense of insecurity by pursuing power:

Among those who are less obviously secure, either in terms of social recognition, or economic stability or even physical health, the temptation arises to overcome or to obscure insecurity by arrogating a greater degree of power to the self.112

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109 Ibid., 186.
110 Ibid., 185.
111 Ibid., 186.
112 Ibid., 190.
Niebuhr contends that the boundary between the two is quite blurred. For example, even the most secure tyrants are afraid of losing their eminence. The fact is that the more power and glory they gain, the greater fear they feel of losing them. The insecurity of the greatest monarchs is betrayed by their fear of death and their wishes to be immortal. The will-to-power which knows no limits of itself, Niebuhr claims, cannot be attributed merely to the finiteness of human self-cognition, but quite the contrary, it is an “uneasy recognition of man’s finiteness…which become the more apparent the more we seek to obscure them.”\textsuperscript{113} In fear and ambition, weakness and greatness, human being’s pride for power chases its own good at the expense of other lives and tempted to take the place of God by making the self a god.

The will-to-power provoked by the sense of insecurity takes two forms, power over nature and power over human beings. In modern society, especially in a middle-class culture, greed is a regular form that people use to ease their insecurity in nature: “This culture is constantly tempted to regard physical comfort and security as life’s final good and to hope for its attainment to a degree which is beyond human possibilities.”\textsuperscript{114} However, uncertainties not only exist in matter and nature, but also in society and history. Human being’s attempt to ease insecurity in society is constantly reflected in the self’s attempt to prevail over others by power, which involves the self inevitably in injustice.

The pride of knowledge is, as Niebuhr explains, a spiritual sublimation of the pride of power. The two kinds of pride share the common roots of the ignorance of limitedness and the attempt to obscure the recognition of limitedness. The pride of knowledge or the intellectual pride is the pride of the reason that claims to be the final or ultimate truth. But the absolute transcendence over history of the human ideas is impossible since, as Marxists find out, all knowledge and education are “tainted” by ideologies of different cultural contexts. This danger of

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 191.
intellectual pride may arise for an individual thinker, a class or a nation. Even Marxism, Niebuhr notices, which sees the ideological taint so well, is no exception to the intellectual pride: “The Marxist pride may...be regarded as merely the fruit of the ignorance of ignorance. The Marxist has mistakenly confined ideological taint to economic life and therefore erroneously hopes for a universal rational perspective when economic privileges would be equalized.”

The “ignorance of ignorance” in the pride of knowledge which Niebuhr mentions, is never a mere ignorance but ignorance so closely related to the sin of pride that it presupposes pride, not only because there is always a chance and possibility that human beings know that their systems and ideas are limited, but also, since reason is a partial and ambiguous power which people often use as a tool to defend and protect their own interests, most people know their limits but still pretend that they have no limits:

Men will not cease to be dishonest, merely because their dishonesties have been revealed or because they have discovered their own deceptions. Wherever men hold unequal power in society, they will strive to maintain it. They will use whatever means are most convenient to that and will seek to justify them by the most plausible arguments they are able to devise.

If the intellectual pride is to claim its own knowledge to be the final truth, then the moral pride is to declare its own standard to be the absolute moral value: “The self judges itself by its own standards it finds itself good. It judges others by its own standards and finds them evil, when their standards fail to conform to its own.” The pride of virtue, which implies self-righteousness, hides sin underneath the very surface of virtue. It is guilty of the many horrible cruelties in history in the name of morality. The last type of pride—spiritual pride or religious pride, says Niebuhr, is the immediate child of moral pride. In the ultimate battlefield between God and human being’s self-esteem, Niebuhr says, pride finds

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115 Ibid., 197.
116 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 34.
its worst manifestation:

The same man may in one moment regard Christ as his judge and in the next moment seek to prove that the figure, the standards and the righteousness of Christ bear a greater similarity to his own righteousness than to that of his enemy.118

Niebuhr sharply criticizes religions (Christianity included), which are trapped in the sin of self-deification.119 Religions are supposed to enable humans to realize both of their creatureliness and transcendence, but religious leaders are constantly seduced to identify their or their groups’ norms and values with the absolute. Niebuhr maintains that there is no guarantee against the spiritual pride of humankind—even in the proclamation of humility there is always a danger that the humility may be used as a vehicle of the spiritual pride. And that is why the spiritual/religious pride is more dangerous than any other forms of pride in public life since it makes absolute claims for itself in the name of God.

Human being falls into pride because it loves itself inordinately. In order to justify this self-love, the self will need to engage in some deception to convince itself and others that such overweening love is not inappropriate. This dishonesty of humanity indicates that the self knows in some degree that there is truth and good, and it knows that it will not be justified if its determinate ends are not directed to this truth and good. Therefore self-deception is the first step to rationalize self-interest: “while such deception is constantly directed against competing wills…its primary purpose is to deceive, not others, but the self. The self must at any rate deceive itself first.”120 The self not only wants to make others believe it is not a defender of its own interests, but it also convinces itself that its intention is good and unselfish. Deception as a concomitant of pride testifies that ignorance or unconsciousness is never a genuine, but a “willing” ignorance or

118 Ibid., 200.
119 Niebuhr also adds that spiritual pride need not only be concerning religion. For example, Stalin can make unconditioned claims as the Pope. See ibid., 202-203.
unconsciousness. Therefore ignorance cannot be used as an excuse for the sin of pride. Human beings employ deception to secure their interests, but they are bogged down deep in the morass of pride by deceiving themselves and others. To be worse, in self-deception the self now has a new insecurity and anxiety—the fear of being discovered that it is not as virtuous as it claims to be.

1.4.2 The Sin of Sensuality

Besides pride, Niebuhr also highlights another form of sin—sensuality. Nevertheless, according to him pride is the primary form of sin, while sensuality is a derivation from pride. Niebuhr explains that only “Hellenistic and rationalistic forms of Christianity” which attributes sin to desires of flesh would regard sin as primarily sensuality or lust. But a theological tradition started from Paul, inherited and developed by Augustine, Aquinas and Luther, which parallels with the Hellenistic-influenced one, never fails to recognize that sensuality/lust/concupiscence is the consequence or punishment of human being’s rebellion against God. In other words, pride or self-love which puts the self in the place of God is the primary sin, while sensuality which manifests itself as the inordinate love for mutable good such as natural impulses and desires is the extension of pride:

Sensuality represents a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God as the center of existence. Man, having lost the true centre of his life, is no longer able to maintain his own will as the centre of himself.

Niebuhr finds that theologians like Augustine and Aquinas understand sensuality as the devotion of oneself to the temporal good rather than God. This inordinate love could be for desires of body, idols or other people, but it

121 Ibid., 228-229.
122 Ibid., 233.
eventually stems from the love for the self. While Niebuhr agrees with them that sensuality is a fruit of pride or self-love, he also discovers that sensuality has a very different form of expressing itself comparing to the sin of pride. Quite opposite to the sin of pride, sensuality sometimes is the effort of the self to escape from itself. The self tries to escape itself by finding other gods for its life rather than substituting itself for God.

Niebuhr analyzed three forms of sensuality (luxury, drunkenness and sexual passion) to prove his point: luxury is on the one hand an expression of self-love, “an advertisement of the ego’s pride,”123 but on the other hand, it also could be a narcotic the self used to ease the tension of an uneasy conscience, knowing that it is not the center of the world. Drunkenness is the same. Drunkards sometimes drink to excess to “experience a sense of power and importance which normal life denies him.”124 It may stem from the self-love of trying to enhance ego, but it also may be an escape from the shrinking ego. Sex as the “most vivid expression” of sensuality is not a sin itself. However, once the sin of inordinate self-love is involved, sex can easily become a “drama in which the domination of one life over the desires of another and the self-abnegation of the same life in favour of another are in bewildering conflict, and also in baffling intermixture.”125 In sexual act there may be self-deification or the deification of another in order to flee from oneself. Niebuhr notices that due to the more passive part of women in the relation of two sexes, it is women’s particular temptation to idolatrate the other, while man is more liable to commit the sin of self-deification, although both parties are vulnerable to self-assertion and self-abnegation. However, Niebuhr points out that apart from the assertion or flight of the self there is a third possibility in the sexual act that “the ego, having found the worship both of the self and of the other abortive, may use the passion of sex, without reference to the self and the other, as a form of escape from the tension of life.”126 This means that

123 Ibid., 234.
124 Ibid., 234.
125 Ibid., 236.
126 Ibid., 237.
sensuality sometimes is not the worship of idols or false gods but the flight to nothingness. Sensuality in this sense is the escape from freedom. If pride is human beings’ reluctance to admit their limitedness, then sensuality is the refusal to face their transcendence and meaning of existence.

1.4.3 Collective Sin

Niebuhr notices that although only individuals are valid agents of moral activities, and group sin is merely manifestation of individual sin, making a distinction between them is quite necessary according to the following three reasons: to start with, originating from the individual sin of pride, group pride develops its own value system to take precedence over individuals’, and sometimes individuals have to give up their own inclinations to fit into more accepted and more “overarching” values. Moreover, human groups are more self-centered and less self-transcendent than individual human beings. It is easier for individuals to make moral decisions than social groups since individuals are able to suppress their selfish impulses and recognize the legality of other people’s satisfaction of reasonable impulses, while being a compound of individual egoistic impulses, collective egoism is almost impossible to be dealt with by a coherent social force. Lastly, “The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.”

Since the power and influence of group is much greater than that of individuals’, it is more likely for groups to exert human egoism to its extreme. Collective sin, therefore, is the “most fruitful of human guilt...a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride.”

For Niebuhr the egoism of group is vividly expressed in the pride of national state. By analyzing the egoism of nations, Niebuhr is convinced that there is no nation in history which is free of the sin of pride. Since the fate of state is linked

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127 Ibid., 208.
128 Ibid., 213.
directly to every citizen, it can provide its people a collective identity that creates the sense of belonging as well as the absolute claims that most individuals can never imagine or achieve by themselves. Collective pride stirs human being’s deepest and darkest desire for power and majesty. The group, nation and race make idolatrous claims for themselves in the process of self-deification. They claim their norms to be the best by despising one another and by imposing their own standards upon others. In this way, groups’ declaration of self-righteousness wins the mass support of individuals because no individual can make such unlimited claim for herself or himself plausible. Moreover, within groups or communities like nations, the possibility of self-criticism is restricted since openly expressed self-criticisms are regarded as signs of inner disunity or lack of loyalty. The egoism of nations is composed of both the selfishness and unselfishness of individual women and men. An ethical paradox thus exists in patriotism, that is, on the one hand individual selflessness is corrupted by collective selfishness:

Patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism. Loyalty to the nation is a high form of altruism when compared with lesser loyalties and more parochial interests...thus the unselfishness of individuals makes for the selfishness of nations. 129

And on the other hand, human selfishness is often concealed beneath patriotism:

The man in the street, with his lust for power and prestige thwarted by his own limitations and the necessities of social life, projects his ego upon his nation and indulges his anarchic lusts vicariously. So the nation is...the expression of individual egoism. 130

Concerning the collective sin of different groups, Niebuhr points out that privileged classes tend to be more immoral than the underprivileged ones since

129 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 91.
130 Ibid., 93.
they are capable of manipulating the nation or groups to gain economic advantages for themselves. In order to do that, privileged classes need to convince underprivileged classes of the legitimacy of their rights. Dominant classes use every means to secure their position by justifying their special interests as common interests:

Since inequalities of privilege are greater than could possibly be defended rationally, the intelligence of privileged groups is usually applied to the task of inventing specious proofs for the theory that universal values spring from, and the general interests are served by, the special privileges which they hold.”

The pride of privileged classes, which turns the Truth to their truth, is the real force of ideology. However, proletarian class is not as virtuous as Karl Marx expects: “The egoism is…a compensation of frustrated ego in the contemporary situation. The class which has its human meaning and significance destroyed in the immediate situation, declares itself the most significant class for the future of history.” Besides, the moral characteristics that Marx attributes to the proletarian class are extremely unstable ones that could easily lose once the proletarian class becomes powerful enough to take over the state apparatus, and then emerge as a new privilege class.

For Niebuhr “collective pride is thus man’s last, and in some respects most pathetic effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence.” Although groups can make more plausible pretensions for individuals, the self may easily be lost in the collective. The group demands the individual to be loyal and obedient for the sake of the individual’s own existence. It guarantees that the interests and freedom of the individual would be protected by the powerful “state apparatus,” as the Marxists call it, but the truth is that the

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131 Ibid., 117.
133 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 156-157.
self often loses itself “in a larger whole” by letting itself being absorbed in a group.

1.4.4 Conclusion

In this section we have seen Niebuhr’s interpretation of human sin in two forms: pride and sensuality. We also have seen a common but very severe form of pride—collective sin. Niebuhr holds that pride is the more fundamental sin, and sensuality is derived from the sin of pride. We will see in the next chapter that how Niebuhr’s insistence on the primacy of the sin of pride attracts criticisms from feminist theologians, but before that, it will be helpful to consider some other issues relevant to Niebuhr’s understanding of sin.
1.5 Grace, Sin and Realism

1.5.1 Grace as Power in and over Humanity

Since human beings’ sin comes from their incessant effort to anchor the meaning of life in themselves or things other than God, the grace of God in Christ, as Niebuhr sees it, is not only wisdom which brings human beings to the truth of their life, enabling them to become what they ought to be, but also is God’s forgiveness to conquer all sin. By interpreting the Pauline phrase “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,”¹³⁵ Niebuhr points out that grace as power in and over humanity accompanies inevitably with the death of the old self and the birth of the new self.

Firstly, the old self is an egoistic self which is preoccupied by its own interests, and will continue to “bring more lives and interests under the dominion of its will-to-power” if not to be broken by the grace of God.¹³⁶ Therefore when the sinful self is confronted by the power of God, it must be “shattered,” or as Paul says, be “crucified” since it can no longer pretend to be the center of its life. Furthermore, the death of the old self does not destroy the self, but gives birth to the new self. The new self who is no longer self-centered but God-centered is the real self that maintains balance between its transcendence and finitude since God can provide the self freedom to transcend all of its partial interests. In other words, the self possessed by Holy Spirit is the real self.

If the self is possessed only by itself—which is somehow impossible—it is not able to escape from itself, because “human personality is so constructed that it must be possessed if it is to escape the prison of self-possession.”¹³⁷ If the self is possessed by a spirit which is not Holy Spirit, there will be transfiguration for the self, too. For instance, in the case of nationalism or racism “the self is now no longer the little and narrow self, but the larger collective self of race or nation. But the real self is destroyed.”¹³⁸ Only Holy Spirit as God’s spirit dwelling in

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¹³⁵ Galatians 2:20, KJV.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 111.
¹³⁸ Ibid., 111.
humanity is neither an extension of human being’s spirit, nor will it destroy human being’s self-hood. In this case the self finds its fulfillment and becomes a real self when it is shattered by God’s grace, but the self shattered and possessed by other spirits is completely shattered and destroyed. That is why Paul says “nevertheless I live” because the real self can live only if the old self is shattered by grace.

Thirdly, the reconstruction of the self undergoes a “negation of negation” which is illustrated by Paul’s words “yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” Niebuhr points out that the power to shatter sinful self-centeredness is not from us, but from a power beyond ourselves:

The self was too completely its own prisoner by the ‘vain imagination’ of sin to be able to deliver itself…the power which breaks the self-centred will must be perceived as power from beyond the self; and even when it has become incorporated into the new will, its source is recognized in the confession: “I, yet not I.”

For Niebuhr anyone who has the experience of divine grace can testify that the release from the self is a miracle that human being cannot accomplish by itself since it is too obsessed with its personal or collective interests to escape from it. Without the truth of God, human beings cannot even recognize their inordinate self-love as sin, and they will be trapped by their egoistic purposes without repenting for them.

However, the new self is not an accomplished reality, Niebuhr argues, but an intention that directs toward Christ. Niebuhr regards the conquer of sin by grace in humanity’s historical life only as a kind of overcoming in principle, which means that the old principle of self-centeredness is destroyed, and the new principle of devotion and obedience to God is actualized in life. But it does not mean human beings will not sin again or be sinless after they are touched by God’s grace. Niebuhr denies any possibility of humanity becoming perfect in its historical

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139 Ibid., 115.
existence. For him it might be logical to think that people who repent and have a new center in God will lead a sinless life, but experience tells us that the war between self-love and the love for God never ends as long as human being still stands in the process of temporal existence. Human beings are seduced constantly to seek their own good with seemingly pious excuses. As Niebuhr sees,

the sorry annals of Christian fanaticism, of unholy religious hatreds, of sinful ambitions hiding behind the cloak of religious sanctity, of political power impulses compounded with pretensions of devotion to God, offer the most irrefutable proof of the error in every Christian doctrine and every interpretation of the Christian experience which claim that grace can remove the final contradiction between man and God.\textsuperscript{140}

On this point, “publicans and sinners” reveal to “saints” an undeniable truth: whenever sin is declared to be conquered in life, the sanctity of faith is corrupted and the sin of pride reaches its peak. Grace is not a possession, Niebuhr contends, but a hope. And peace which follows conversion is not a product of achievement, but an awareness of being forgiven. Only in this way can a Christian claim “Christ liveth in me” because she/he knows that it is not herself/himself, but God’s grace, which imparts righteousness.

1.5.2 Christian Realism

A proper understanding of grace indicates that none can be saved by works or virtues since all have sinned. Thus humanity is justified not by its goodness but by God’s goodness. There will be no acceptance of grace without repentance, but repentance only comes from the humility that acknowledges sin—to know that there is imperfection in our perfection, sin in our virtues and self-interest in our unselfishness. The righteous, therefore, can find no vantage point by their righteousness since whether the righteous or the unrighteous are under God’s

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 122.
judgment: “the final enigma of history is therefore not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome.”\textsuperscript{141} The ultimate perfection of life and the Kingdom of God therefore is now and not yet—it is revealed, but waits for its culmination. As we have seen, Niebuhr maintains that human history after Christ is an interim, and it will still be incomplete and fragmentary until the end of time.

To acknowledge this ambiguity of history, says Niebuhr, is to have a realistic understanding of human life and society. According to Niebuhr, realism is “the disposition to take into account all factors in a social and political situation which offer resistance to established norms, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”\textsuperscript{142} It stands in contrast with idealism, which regards the ideals of human society as reality. Being indifferent to the tragedies and brokenness of life, idealism is in danger of reducing the ideals to illusions since its understanding of the world is irrelevant to social realities. For idealists injustice can be brought under control if there is a higher level of law. Therefore their primary concern is not fragmentary current conditions but the ultimate goal. However, by adhering to the ultimate ideal idealists think human society can be changed and develop toward a better direction.

Realists in contrast know that the incongruities of life are not accidental, but perennial as they are basic characteristics of human existence. Therefore for them it is naïve to rest the hope of building a better world upon the imagination that selfish people will simply be unselfish or there will be perfect love between different people and between different groups. Niebuhr points out that idealists’ understanding of love as simple possibility turns love into sentimentality which is incapable of resisting evil or self-interests under the cloak of love. A realistic account of human society, especially a political realism, he says, realizes that there are no saints, but only sinners fighting each other in the political arena.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{142} Niebuhr, \textit{Christian Realism and Political Problems}, 119.
Recognizing the obstinate power of self-interest will “express itself illegitimately as well as legitimately,” realists remind people to prepare themselves to “resist illegitimate self-interest, even among the best men and the most just nations.”\(^{143}\)

Due to the corrupted situation of human society, a realistic approach is to balance power and interests in order to establish justice: “a simple Christian moralism counsels men to be unselfish. A profounder Christian faith must encourage men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness.”\(^{144}\)

A realistic understanding of history enables human beings to measure and fight against social corruption. Yet there is a possibility for realism to become cynicism if it regards all goodness as disguised evil. A relativism that denies all ideals is not better than idealism since it has no source of power to deal with evil and injustice. Niebuhr is convinced that Christian realism has the merit to avoid the danger of becoming relativism because in Christianity love is the final law of human existence. The love commandment of Jesus demonstrates that the love for God, rather than the love for the self is the guiding principle of human life. However, for Niebuhr the ideal of love is not a simple possibility like idealists have thought.

For one thing, the love ideal transcends cultural stereotypes of the world, upon which no socio-moral or politico-moral system can be built. It is a vertical relation between God and humans. For another, the perfect love must be unconditional; it contains no calculation of interests and seeks nothing for itself. The absolutism and perfectionism of love in Jesus’ ethic is against every human effort to assert themselves against God and their neighbors. For humankind the ideal of love best revealed in Christ’s sacrificial love is impossible to be fully embodied in wills and actions, but it stands as a final norm and criterion which guides and encourages human beings. It is relevant to social realities as an ultimate possibility that stands against complacency:


\(^{144}\) Ibid.
In such faith Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from the contrite recognition of those limits...this ultimate hope becomes possible only to those who no longer place their confidence in purely human possibilities.\textsuperscript{145}

Then, the ideal of love is an “impossible possibility”—only to understand what is impossible opens a door for what is possible in life.

For Niebuhr the law of love is the essential and final law, but it doesn’t mean that the law of love would abolish the law of justice—for justice is the embodiment and implication of the ideal of love. It is hard to establish a perfect ideal of love in personal life and even harder in the domain of politics and economics. But there are some applications of love like equality and justice which are more close to historical realities than the law of love. Since these possibilities admit “the claims of the self,” they are “something less than love,”\textsuperscript{146} but as Niebuhr says, the law of love is involved in these approximations. Justice is the law of love in rational form. It is a calculation of rights, which cannot simply be substituted for love because even in the most intimate human relations, there are possibilities that harmonies established by love may be ruined by partial claims. Love without justice may easily be corrupted into hypocrisy and injustice:

In a struggle between those who enjoy inordinate privileges and those who lack the basic essentials of the good life it is fairly clear that a religion which holds love to be the final law of life stultifies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love.\textsuperscript{147}

Like the ideal of love, equality and justice cannot be fully realized. But it is the responsibility of Christians to defend the ideals in the incomplete world. For

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{145} Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{146} Niebuhr, “Justice and Love,” in \textit{Love and Justice}, 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{147} Niebuhr, \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 131.
\end{itemize}
Niebuhr a realistic approach to the problems of the world is to refuse resting upon the *status quo*. Knowing that the norms of a time cannot be ultimate value, realists dedicate themselves to expose the limitations and corruptions hidden under these criteria because they believe there is a possibility which transcends all sinful self-interests and limited norms that worth fighting for.

1.5.3 Conclusion

Like other antitheses, Niebuhr views the antimony between the old self and the new self, grace and sin, and love and justice as profoundly dialectical. As we will see, understanding these paradoxical pairs are important not only to a holistic interpretation of Niebuhr’s theology of sin, but are also important to our discussion of the feminist reading of Niebuhr’s theology of sin.
Chapter II. The Feminist Critique of Niebuhr’s Theology of Sin and the Reconstruction of the Doctrine of Sin from Women’s Experience

For Niebuhr the human world is fragmentary and incomplete, abounding with injustice. The tragic realities of society, of course, are fruits of sin. Sin like social injustice is experienced and realized mostly, if not only, by the oppressed rather than the privileged. According to Niebuhr, this is partly due to the reason that it is the oppressed who suffer from injustice—experiencing the consequences of sin that make their life difficult, the oppressed find explanations of the powerful hardly convincing; and partly because the privileged classes are blinded by their own vested interests—they cannot realize tragic realities of the world because the world is congruent with their interests and desires, and they try to find any plausible rational and moral reasons to legitimate their privileges. 148 Therefore for the poor and weak, sin is more “real” than the powerful tend to believe. Feminist theologians that we will introduce in the following discussion couldn’t agree more about this. They notice that the oppressed groups like women have experienced and are experiencing sin on a daily basis. Women are constantly being abused, they point out, by the consequences of sin of themselves and others.

However, although many feminist theologians agree with Niebuhr about the destructive power of sin, most of them disagree with him about what sin is, or to be more specific, about what women’s sin is. Early in 1960, Valerie Saiving writes an article to challenge Niebuhr’s theology of sin, contending that Niebuhr neglects women’s experience in his discussion of sin by identifying men’s experience with universal truth. 149 Saiving’s article, which later is viewed as the beginning of feminist theology, opens the door of the feminist critique of Niebuhr. After Saiving, more and more feminist theologians join the crusade against the

Niebuhrian understanding of sin. Varied in details, these feminist criticisms share a similar trait—all of them claim that identifying sin with pride fails to speak to the situation of most women. Drawing heavily upon the studies of psychologists and anthropologists like Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Margaret Mead and Sherry Ortner, feminist theologians such as Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hampson, Susan Nelson (Dunfee) and Rosemary Radford Ruether contend that the biological or sociological differences between women and men make them sin differently. Pride as the primary sin fits the experience of most men; nevertheless it is hardly the sin of most women. Quite opposite to the Niebuhrian definition of sin as pride or self-inflation, these feminist theologians claim that women’s sin is primarily self-loss.

This chapter is an exposition of the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin. For many feminist theologians, Niebuhr’s interpretation of sin represents the mainstream Christian tradition from Paul to Augustine and other influential theologians who overlook women’s experience. Taking pride as human being’s primary problem, they say, stems from a deep patriarchal problem of silencing women’s voices. These feminist theologians’ critical efforts of breaking down the edifice of Niebuhrian/traditional doctrine of sin, therefore, are coupled with a radical reconstruction of the doctrine. In section 1 of this chapter, we will examine the feminist challenge of Christian theology in methodology and content as a whole. Then we move in section 2 to several feminist theologians’ critique of Niebuhr’s understanding of sin. At last, the feminist re-visioning of the doctrine of sin will be explored.

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2.1 Reconstructing Theology: A Paradigm Shift

Virginia Woolf once says women are the most discussed animals in the universe. However, she further points out that women are constantly discussed not by themselves but by men. As she finds, women’s own voices about themselves are nearly absent from history.151 Feminists are well aware of women’s loss of voices in history. They notice that in the long course of human history, human nature and characteristics are defined mainly from men’s experience since women are viewed as inferior to men. Like Carol Christ says, “We women have not told our own stories. The dialectic between experiencing and shaping experience by storytelling has not been in our own hands.”152 In many stories that men told about women, they find, women are depicted as either Mary/Snow White or Eve/ Snow White’s wicked stepmother—one is innocent and virtuous like an angel; one is evil and seduces men into sin. And also, women are mostly remembered as some man’s daughter, wife or mother—their own meaning is closely associated with men—even today in some places, women are still properties of their father or husband.

One truth about history, many feminists contend, is that it is written by male conquerors who wipe out the voices of the oppressed female. Generation after generation, the figures of women seem so dim in the unlit corridors of history, and their memories are almost unrecorded. Although there are some exceptions in history—few outstanding women made great achievements in various fields, and also, nowadays women possess much more freedom than old times, feminists remind us that in cultures where sexism is deeply rooted, men make the rules of the game to make sure they are in positions of power and are the major beneficiaries. In patriarchal societies, no matter past or present, most women are forced to be silent, and the voices of the few excellent ones are restricted. To borrow Simone de Beauvoir’s words, when man is regarded as the actual standard of humanness, woman is regarded as the Other and the Second Sex.153

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152 Carol Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 229.
Moving to the area of religion, feminists find that the situation is hardly any better. Many feminists agree with Mary Daly’s statement that “patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet…all—from Buddhism and Hinduism to Islam, Judaism, Christianity, to secular derivations such as Freudianism, Jungianism, Marxism, and Maoism—are infrastructures of the edifice of patriarchy.”154 Among religions and ideologies, Christianity is especially under attack for its “male-oriented” theologies and praxes. Many feminists regard Christianity as a patriarchal religion that legitimates men’s power over women:

For centuries some women have had an ambivalent relationship with religion, particularly with Christianity…how a tradition values and affirms women when its central figures, God the Father, Jesus the Son, the twelve apostles, and a host of other prophets, priests, and kings, are all male…where the good news is in biblical texts about women who are raped, murdered, ignored, or valued primarily for their wombs…the church “fathers” that blame women for human sin or claim that a woman is a misbegotten or defective male…some contemporary churches do not permit women to serve as priests or pastors; and if women are ordained to the ministry, they are often denied positions of power and influence.155

In this way, some feminists conclude that Christianity is irredeemably sexist. They suggest that the best solution to free women from Christian sexism is to abandon Christianity altogether. However, there are some others who believe that although Christianity is pervaded by androcentrism, it is still intrinsically meaningful and should not be abandoned. Those feminists who find religion important but sexist theology intolerable maintain that the male-centered heritage in Christian theology has to be changed. Yet how could a male-dominated religious tradition acknowledge itself as patriarchal? Feminist theologians suggest that women’s experience should be introduced into the doing of theology.

Like Hampson and many others point out, for centuries theology is written

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almost exclusively by men. Doing theology is basically an all-male profession.156 Women are always the majority of the church’s population. Nevertheless they often are prohibited from expressing their own feelings about faith, and are forced to take men’s experience of faith as norm. Men do not represent the whole of humanity, feminist theologians contend. If the Christian faith is the real good news for all its members, women’s experience must be included in the doing of theology. The challenge of feminism, Hampson remarks, is not so much as women wanting to gain an equal place with men in a man-privileged religion, but as women wanting to express their experience and interpretation of God legitimately.157 This is why Christian theology needs to be reshaped and revised according to the female perspective. As Letty Russell says,

In a Christian context [feminists] reflect on the way in which theology can become more complete, as all people are encouraged to contribute to the meaning of faith from their own perspective. Such action and theory form the basis of feminist theology. It is ‘feminist’ because the women involved are actively engaged in advocating the equality and partnership of women and men in church and society.158

For many feminist theologians, therefore, women’s experience is the new norm and primary resource of theological reflections. But what is “women’s experience?” Feminists admit that it is a little hard to give it an accurate definition since the diversity and plurality of women’s situations make it almost impossible to put women’s experience into a fixed category. Besides, many feminists point out that since patriarchy is the context within which most women live, women may suffer from a “false consciousness” that makes them mistakenly identify the patriarchal norms and standards being taught to them with their own. In this sense, the “women’s experience” that legitimates women’s situation of subordination is

156 Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1.
157 Ibid., 4.
not the “women’s experience” feminists are promoting. For feminist theologians, only the experiences that acknowledge liberation and equality of women are genuine women’s experience that can become the positive power of transformation, and thus have central significance. Although there is no standardized definition for this kind of “women’s experience,” many feminists agree that in a large measure it can be negatively understood as women’s individual and social experience of inferiority and oppression, and positively, it is the celebration of female bodily characteristics, spirituality and socialization which are quite different from those of men.159 It is based on these experiences of women, feminist theologians contend, that feminist theology is formed.

Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that the feminist emphasis upon women’s experience is sometimes regarded by some critics as “distant from ‘objective’ sources of truth of classical theologies.”160 However, many feminist theologians respond that the seemingly “objective” sources like Scripture and tradition are also ultimately based on individual and collective religious experience. Among others, Ruether contends that the feminist methodological principle of drawing upon women’s experience as norm and resource is justified by the fact that experience, rather than some so-called objective sources like reason, is the foundation stone of all theology, for even the most abstract theology comes from the theologian’s experience and his/her reflections upon God, the world and human beings. She says,

Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience…Systems of authority tries to reverse this relation and make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that which is experienced. In reality, the relation is the opposite. If a symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead or must be altered to provide a new meaning.161

159 See, Japinga, Feminism and Christianity, 28-30; Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, Womanspirit Rising, Introduction; Linda Hogan, From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), Introduction.
160 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 12.
161 Ibid., 12-13.
Like Ruether, many feminist theologians maintain that human experience is the starting point and the ending point of theological reflections. As Lynn Japinga writes,

Theology does not finally represent the mind of God so much as it illustrates the efforts of human beings to gain a deeper understanding of God, themselves, and the world. Theology is not abstract and objective, but arises out of human lives, conflicts, doubts and dreams.¹⁶²

Feminists argue that if theology is shaped by culture that is deeply affected by patriarchy, “neutral” theology is only a fairy tale. Since the absence of women’s voices from theological reflections results in the fact that men’s experience has been erroneously regarded as universal experience, many feminist theologians regard the affirmation that Christian doctrines are unchangeable and universal as fundamentally mistaken. They argue that there is no absolute theology that is valid for all times and for all people, there only are theologies relevant or irrelevant to the situations and problems of people who live in a specific time and culture. Theology is not infallible, they contend, but always in process. Letty Russell notes that like liberation theologians, feminist theologians prefer the inductive method more than the deductive method in the doing of theology. Feminist theology itself is also not absolute, she says, it is in nature a dynamic theology, which constantly revises “questions and tentative observations about a changing world.”¹⁶³ The only criterion of feminist theology is the well being of the female gender, as stated by Ruether and generally accepted by other feminist theologians:

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity

¹⁶² Japinga, Feminism and Christianity, 19.
of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community.\textsuperscript{164}

Since the primary task of this new theology is to liberate women from the control of patriarchal oppressions, feminist theologians attempt to catalyze a paradigm shift, which challenges methods, values and beliefs of patriarchal traditions. It means that Christian doctrines and theories that once were taken for granted will have to be reexamined. Claims that deny women’s equality in the name of faith should be discarded. Apostle Paul, for example, teaches that women should cover their heads when they speak in church while men don’t have to, because man is the glory and image of God while woman is the glory of man. Augustine follows him by claiming that man is the full image of God, woman possesses the image of God only in an indirect way—in her connection with man. If considered separately, woman is not the image of God. According to Aquinas, woman is a misbegotten male. Barth says the precedence and following pattern of man and woman is the order that God has established that cannot be questioned…\textsuperscript{165} In the light of feminist theology, all of these statements that devalue woman and promote subordination cannot be considered as inspired by God.

The patriarchal traditions in Christianity, many feminist theologians point out, contradict the gospel of God which is love and freedom. Like liberation theologians, many feminists contend that the prophetic tradition from the prophets in Old Testament to Jesus himself is the real core spirit of Christianity. In this tradition God is the protector of the oppressed and the accuser of the powerful.

\textsuperscript{164} Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God-Talk}, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{165} See ibid., 94-99.
The Old Testament prophets repeatedly emphasized the importance of the concern for orphans and widows. They were urged to challenge social injustice. Jesus rebuked Pharisees for ossifying faith into rigid dogma. In a culture where women were not respected, Jesus touched and healed a woman when she was religiously unclean; he taught and talked to women; some of his disciples were women; when he resurrected, he first appeared to a woman. Paul said that in Christ there is no more male or female, everyone is equal and one… Many feminist theologians hold that feminist theology needs to rediscover this prophetic principle in Christianity, and use it as a tool to criticize patriarchy in Christianity.

Only a critical attitude toward tradition, feminist theologians claim, rather than blind obedience can give strength to atone for what is wrong and to create a new future. In order to do that, the Scripture and theological traditions need to be put under scrutiny according to the feminist perspective. As we have seen, for feminist theologians a paradigm shift that combines the experience of women, or in other words, a new feminine way of doing theology is needed. In the light of women’s experience, feminist theologians claim, we will find that the understandings of Christian doctrines are often quite different from the interpretations that we are familiar with. And according to some feminist theologians, this is most obviously manifested in the issue of sin, which we will now explain at length.
2.2 Women’s Experience and the Sin of Pride

In the case of the Christian doctrine of sin, the feminist reinterpretation of the doctrine is closely associated with some feminist theologians’ critique of Niebuhr’s understanding of sin as pride. As we have mentioned in the beginning of this research, many feminist theologians doubt the relevance of the sin of pride for women. We will now examine several Niebuhr’s major critics’ interpretations of sin, which are most influential and representative in this field.

2.2.1 Valerie Saiving

In her famous essay “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” Saiving argues that the sexual identity of a theologian would affect his or her theological views. For this reason, she is unsatisfied with some contemporary male theologians’ estimation of human situation, especially Niebuhr and Anders Nygren’s identification of sin with pride and love with selflessness, as she points out that both theologians make the mistake of identifying male experience as universal. Basing her arguments on cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead’s research, Saiving contends that the sexual differences between men and women mold their characters as male or female in totally different ways.

For Saiving, women’s close relationship to infants and children plays a significant role in the formation of the children’s masculine and feminine characters. Children need to gain their individuality by differentiating themselves from their mother. However, boys’ and girls’ processes of differentiation are quite different. For a girl, “she will grow up to be a woman, like her mother, and have babies of her own; she will, in a broad sense, merely take her mother’s place.”166 In this sense, a girl attains her womanhood naturally. She will become a woman when her first menstruation comes and becomes qualified biologically for motherhood. “A girl’s history as a female,” Saiving discovers, “is punctuated and authenticated by a series of definite, natural, and irreversible bodily occurrences:

first menstruation, defloration, childbirth, menopause...they are things which happen to a woman more than things that she does.”\textsuperscript{167}

In contrast, the situation of a boy becoming a man is not that simple. A boy’s differentiation from his mother is not like that of girls’ because he knows that he will not be like his mother. A boy does not just grow to be a man—he must prove himself to be a man. In other words, he must fight, rather than wait to gain his masculinity: “growing up is not merely a natural process of bodily maturation; it is, instead, a challenge which he must meet, a proof he must furnish by means of performance, achievement, and activity directed toward the external world.”\textsuperscript{168}

Saiving notices that men don’t have “biological creativity” like women since having children do not guarantee maleness to them. Therefore men are pushed to find other kinds of creativity to guarantee their maleness and this “calls for a kind of objective achievement and a greater degree of self-differentiation and self-development than are required for the woman as woman.”\textsuperscript{169}

In this way, men on the one hand enjoys more freedom than women—men do not go through the processes of impregnation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation which happen naturally to women, so they don’t have much string to hold them back. Boys are encouraged to use their power, courage and strength to overcome obstacles during journeys to gain their manhood and freedom. In this sense, “masculinity is an endless process of becoming, while in femininity the emphasis is on being.”\textsuperscript{170} However, Saiving points out that the process of gaining masculinity has its drawbacks for men. Since the sureness of men’s sex role is not as strong as that of women, and men needs to prove again and again their masculinity by achievements, the urge inevitably provokes anxiety in them. Men’s freedom then, as Saiving contends, is a double-edged sword: “man is, in his greater freedom, necessarily subject to a kind of anxiety—and, consequently, to a kind of creative drive—which is experienced more rarely and less intensely by

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 31.  
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 31.  
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 32.  
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 32.
most women.”\textsuperscript{171}

On this point, Saiving totally agrees with Niebuhr that anxiety is the occasion of the sin of pride. For Saiving the Niebuhrian account of human sin depicts vividly the tensions of the contemporary world. She argues that being a “masculine age par excellence,” modern era emphasizes and encourages “those aspects of human nature which are peculiarly significant to men.” Therefore the contemporary theology written mostly by male theologians is the immediate child of this hyper-masculine culture and speaks directly to the experience of men:

Contemporary theology—its definition of the human situation in terms of anxiety, estrangement, and the conflict between necessity and freedom; its identification of sin with pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons; its conception of redemption as restoring to man what he fundamentally lacks (namely, sacrificial love, the I-Thou relationship, the primary of the personal, and, ultimately, peace) –it is clear that such an analysis of man’s dilemma was profoundly responsive and relevant to the concrete facts of modern man’s existence.\textsuperscript{172}

However, for Saiving women’s situation is quite different. She agrees with Mead that there is a connection between maleness and pride, especially when women are excluded from some field and confined within the domestic and biological role. Besides, Saiving contends that women keep themselves in some kind of bondage when they choose to accept the feminine role, from which they get much lower chance to subject to anxiety since their situation is relatively stable and they face fewer possibilities. If like Niebuhr says, men stand at the juncture of nature and spirit, and the tension between nature and spirit stretches them to the edge of despair, then women “must travel to reach spirit.”\textsuperscript{173} Due to women’s closeness to nature, Saiving contends, women do not suffer from anxiety so much as men. In this situation, women’s sin is not that they try to deny the

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 32-33.
finitude of the self. On the opposite, their sin is the failure to actualize the self:

The temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man, and the specifically feminine forms of sin—“feminine” not because they are confined to women or because women are incapable of sinning in other ways but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure—have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as “pride” and “will-to-power.” They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.174

Saiving admits that the sin of pride could be applied to women, but for her pride is more of men’s, rather than women’s temptation. Take the example of modern women, Saiving finds that in the modern society more and more young girls grow up without believing in the inequality of the sexes. These modern women enjoy the same education and opportunities like their male contemporaries, but when they reach the point that they marry someone or have babies, “they become aware of the deep need of almost every woman, regardless of her personal history and achievements or her belief in her own individual value, to surrender her self-identity and be included in another’s ‘power of being.’”175 Contemporary women get a vantage point of having the opportunities to choose the way of life they want to live. First time in human history, women are able to live as independent human beings both financially and spiritually. However, Saiving points out that although the human society is moving to a feminine orientation, it does not mean that the male-dominated society will simply let it go. The patriarchal society and church try to convince women to go back to their traditional feminine role by implying that their attempts and desires to find

174 Ibid., 37.
175 Ibid., 36.
themselves are driven by selfishness or sin. Yet as Saiving sees it, a woman’s (especially a mother’s) temptation is exactly to “give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God.”176 If theologians do not acknowledge the fact that women experience and act, and eventually sin differently from men, Saiving contends, theological reflections will inevitably become irrelevant to the situation of the woman race.

2.2.2 Judith Plaskow

Judith Plaskow further develops Saiving’s view of women’s sin by elaborating a comprehensive critique of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin and grace. She accepts Saiving’s definition of feminine sin, and expands it as “the failure to take responsibility for self-actualization.”177 However, Plaskow’s approach to the issue is a little different from that of Saiving’s. She complains that Saiving’s excessive emphasis on biological factors in differentiating the experiences of men and women make her argument not flexible enough to serve as a critical basis, since if women’s underdevelopment of the self is innate, it cannot be called “sinful” and therefore cannot be changed. Plaskow thus concentrates more upon the role culture plays in the process of shaping femininity. For Plaskow women’s experience is “the interrelation between cultural expectations and their internalization.”178 Plaskow contends that there is no Eternal Feminine inherent in women that can be detached from the social context. Living in a male-dominated culture, women’s experience as a product of social experience is not free from male definitions. She writes, “women have known themselves and the world only in lived relation to male definitions of women and male definitions of women’s possibilities. These definitions have thus come to form a part of women’s

176 Ibid., 37.
178 Ibid., 2-3.
Plaskow focuses mainly on two definitions of feminine experience, which she finds associated closely with the interpretation of sin and grace: women’s naturalness and passivity. In the search of the reason for women’s pan-cultural subordination, anthropologist Sherry Ortner finds that almost in every culture “women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture.” She believes that the first reason for this connection is that the female physiological functions “doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must…assert his creativity externally…In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings.” Yet Ortner also notes that physiological reason is not the only factor to contribute to the view that women are aligned more closely with nature. She points out that since women’s activities are largely limited by her physiological functions, they usually are confined within the realm of family, which in turn reinforces their close connection with nature. Plaskow agrees with Ortner that the identification of women with nature is not only biological, but also cultural. In opposition to Saiving who locates the difference between women and men mainly in the domain of biology, Plaskow regards the association between women and nature as a product of culture. Society, she says, “is an active interpreter of biological data.”

Plaskow contends that when women’s closeness to nature and their characters like gentleness, warmth and sensitivity are used to restrict them in home and family, they seem to be passive. If the female social role is to be naturally associated with domestic sphere, “her active involvement in the concrete world of everyday is invisible to the public eye, and therefore invisible altogether.” In this way, women are passive, as they can understand their value in the society only

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179 Ibid., 10.
181 Ibid.
182 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 13.
through what they does for others, “she is dependent on others for her own self-definition.” Combined with social expectations, women’s physiological passivity, namely women’s sexual passivity like intercourse, pregnancy and childbearing, is internalized to become “active” psychological passivity of “submissiveness, self-abnegation, and what Freudians call her masochism.”  

For Plaskow, traditional roles like mother and wife *per se* are not problematic, but they are when they are not chosen. Plaskow argues that the dilemma of women’s lives is that “women do not shape their own experience, but allow their life choices to be made for them by others.”  

Living by others’ expectations, women’s responsibility of developing full humanity is vaporized.

The biggest problem of Niebuhr’s theology of sin, Plaskow claims, is his neglect of women’s experience of passivity and naturalness when trying to deal with the human situation as a whole. Pride for sure is the primary sin of some people, Plaskow contends, but for most women it is not a predominant problem. In opposition to Niebuhr’s identification of pride or self-inflation as primary human sin, Plaskow regards women’s primary sin as self-loss. As she says, woman’s sin “cannot be seen as the product of over-glorification of the self, for the problem is precisely that she has no self; she has not yet become a self and will not take the responsibility for becoming one.”  

The reason for women’s selflessness is sometimes based upon material considerations: “as long as they depend on men, women are spared the difficulty of providing their own physical comfort.” Yet most often their self-loss comes from the unwillingness to face their freedom and make decisions of life for themselves. In other words, women sin because they conform to social expectations of becoming the Other (as Simone de Beauvoir puts it) and a thing: “Insofar as women accept this status for its rewards and welcome relief from the burden of freedom, they are guilty of complicity in their own oppression; they sin.”  

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183 Ibid., 14.
184 Ibid., 32.
185 Ibid., 66-67.
186 Ibid., 64.
187 Ibid., 64-65.
In this way, Plaskow finds that the sin of “sensuality” in Niebuhr’s work is much more in accordance with women’s experience. Plaskow points out that Niebuhr has two definitions of sensuality. One identifies sensuality as undue impulses and desires—he follows traditional views on this point; the other definition is broader, which identifies sensuality as the contradiction of the true essence of the self and the denial of freedom. Plaskow accepts the latter one as women’s sin, and considers it as “more faithful to his analysis of human nature”\textsuperscript{188} than the former one. Although Niebuhr’s concept of sensuality is analogous to what feminist theologians call the “female form of sin,” Plaskow argues that it cannot be taken as the primary theme of his understanding of sin, since his analysis for the sin of sensuality is quite inadequate and underdeveloped.

Niebuhr does not realize that, as Plaskow points out, the sin of sensuality as the escape from freedom is as serious as the sin of pride. Therefore he subordinates the sin of sensuality to the sin of pride, and claims that sensuality derives from pride. However, Plaskow argues that Niebuhr has no ground for this assertion. The two kinds of sin are both emerging from a misuse of freedom, one is the exaltation of freedom, and the other is the renunciation of it. There is no reason to put one above the other. Plaskow maintains that sensuality is actually an independent sin experienced by most women, which parallel the sin of pride experienced mostly by men. Failing to develop sensuality as a primary source of sin, Plaskow says, Niebuhr is guilty of overlooking a significant human sin and trivializing the seriousness of sinful self-negation. If the refusal to admit finitude is a terrible sin, likewise the refusal to face freedom is also a serious sin, because it is in nature the contempt of God’s wonderful creation:

Human beings can ignore their finitude, but they can also fail to live up to the obligations of their freedom. The refusal of self-transcendence ought to be if one uses Niebuhr’s categories, no less a sin than pride—a sin against oneself, against other persons and against God. If pride is the attempt to usurp the place of God, sensuality is the denial of creation in

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 62.
Like Saiving, Plaskow doesn’t deny the importance of Niebuhr’s analysis and the capability of women to commit the sin of pride. However, she points out that the theology of Niebuhr deals mainly with the problems of the powerful and strong, not the oppressed and weak. The deficiency of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin, Plaskow believes, makes his understanding of grace one-sided. She understands that for Niebuhr grace is a response to human sin. Yet since Niebuhr does not take sensuality into account in his discussion of grace, it turns out that grace only responds to the sin of pride. Plaskow argues that when Niebuhr maintains that grace enables human being to shatter the old, self-centered ego, and the fruit of grace is self-sacrificial love, he is marginalizing the situation of women, because most women don’t even have a complete, independent self, not to mention there is no need to break that self. The self-sacrifice Niebuhr advocates to cure the sin of pride is not only unhelpful for women’s shrinking self, but also, it might reinforce their servitude and cause destruction rather than healing.

2.2.3 Daphne Hampson

Like Saiving and Plaskow, Hampson believes that when Niebuhr uses the word “man” to describe the universal condition of human being, he means more literally than he knows. Hampson also agrees with Saiving and Plaskow that Niebuhr ignores women’s sin of lacking the sense of the self. Kierkegaard, whom Niebuhr is largely indebted to, Hampson points out, understands human situation more properly than Niebuhr by distinguishing between “manly” and “womanly” ways of sinning. Quoting Kierkegaard, Hampson contends that since man wants to find sureness through achievements, he is desperately determined to be himself,

189 Ibid., 68.
190 See ibid., 6; 67.
191 Ibid., 84-87.
or even more, he wants to be more than himself. When he cannot succeed to be what he wants, despair and distorted pride emerge. However, in the case of woman, the desperate desire of becoming a self is less experienced. On the contrary, woman’s despair comes from her wish of becoming “his”: “she does not want to be herself—she wanted to lose herself by becoming ‘his’,” “so now she is in despair because she has to be a self without him.”193 In this way, woman’s problem is not self-inflation, but the shrinking self. What woman needs, Hampson contends, is to find herself, not through others or men, but to become an independent, self-determinate and differentiated self.194 To say pride is sin, she says, will definitely reinforce the feminine sin:

To tell such a woman that it is the sin of pride to seek self-fulfillment is to reinforce her form of sin: her dispersal of herself in others, her unwarranted serving of them, her attempt to live through them, and her self-disparagement. Rather should she dare to love herself, to see that she has a self—that than which, as Kierkegaard says, next to God there is nothing as eternal.195

According to Hampson, what makes men and women sin so differently, is their different senses of social relation. She believes that apart from physiological factors and social roles, women and men are also different in relation-establishing patterns. Hampson uses psychologist Carol Gilligan’s findings to prove that women and men have different ways to experience relationship. For example, Gilligan notices in her research that when dealing with dilemmas and crises, most women would consider from the angle of relationship. Not hurting others is the key standard that most of them choose to solve conflicts. Female interviewees of Gilligan’s research assess their self-worth in relationship of care and responsibility. That is why when they are asked to describe what a moral person is like, most of

193 Ibid., 48.
194 Ibid., 49.
195 Ibid.
them say, “a moral person is the one who helps others.” Morality for them is the “obligation to exercise care and avoid hurt.” “The inflicting of hurt is considered selfish and immoral in its reflection of unconcern, while the expression of care is seen as the fulfillment of moral responsibility.” On the other hand, men are more concerned about the integrity of “truth” rather than relationship and intimacy. They are more willing to sacrifice people to the supremacy of their convictions. This is the difference, Gilligan says, between Abraham and the woman who comes before Solomon. Unlike Abraham, the woman “verifies her motherhood by relinquishing truth in order to save the life of her child.”

Hampson agrees with Gilligan that women are “more naturally integrated, more contentedly creatures” because they define themselves relationally. Women construct relationships by the models of “web,” she says, and men by the model of “hierarchy.” She shows that herself, Gilligan, and many other feminists like Ruether agree that in contrast with men who think in terms of hierarchy, fearing close relationships, women know the loving relationship in inter-connectedness more than men do. Hierarchal mode of thinking tends to make men aggressive, less friendly and thus easily fall into the pit of anxiety and pride. Yet women experience less in that way. Women are related, rather than isolated. As a matter of fact, what they need is necessary differentiation from others: “The task for men is then to learn to find themselves in relationship; the task for women, to learn to find themselves in relationship.” Like many male theologians, Hampson contends, Niebuhr also has an isolated concept of the self, which makes him fail to develop “a social conception of the human.” Even though Niebuhr considers human beings a lot in the context of society, Hampson says, his concept of human being is monadic rather than connected, and he doesn’t realize that human being has an essential relationality. Niebuhr accepts the Kantian concept of the

196 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 66.
197 Ibid., 73.
198 Ibid., 105.
200 Ibid., 54.
201 Ibid., 55.
transcendent self and “understands the individual to be essentially free and autonomous,” Hampson points out, while she, Judith Vaughan and Ruether, among other feminists, hold “a Marxist-Hegelian perspective,” which views “persons as caught up in social relationships and believe that the external relations of the self form the understanding which a person has of him or herself.”

Hampson also faults Niebuhr for interpreting sin as essentially a ruptured relationship with a transcendent God. She believes that this understanding of sin is established within the framework of legalism. In this horrible picture, human beings are portrayed as criminals who break the law of God. God is going to punish and destroy those who disobey him. Jesus’ sacrifice makes atonement for sinners, but eventually, those who do not believe in Jesus’ name will face eternal death. Hampson claims that the tyrannical and legalistic view of sin as “offending God” has an androcentric basis. She contends that when God is described as Father, King and Judge, the image of God is like the most powerful male:

The God of the tradition, as we have seen, fits the male system. Indeed he seems to have been modeled on the worst image of the human male. He is isolated, powerful, and at the top of the hierarchy…Moreover his supremacy qualifies others. It is by comparison with his goodness that men are to know themselves sinners.

For Hampson, a God as the “wholly Other” is basically a male imagery. However, if men have conceived God by their individual image, then women have the right to conceive God by their collective image. Since women’s model of relating is web-like, then God is to be conceived by women as involved and supportive in the web. The God who women experience, as Hampson says, is not transcendent but immanent, not isolated but relational, not impassive but caring: “God no longer competes with us, a separate entity, superior to all others, but is that which is creative of our relatedness. God does not stand in

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202 Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 124.
204 Ibid., 57.
contradiction to, but is commensurate with, our vision of human relationships and society.\textsuperscript{205}

2.2.4 Susan Nelson (Dunfee)

Nelson’s description of feminine sin is analogous to those of the feminist theologians we’ve discussed above. She criticizes Niebuhr for equating male experience to universal human experience, and complains that Niebuhr’s dealing with the sin of sensuality is inadequate. Women’s sin, according to Nelson, is not pride but sensuality, not self-inflation but “not becoming a self.” Put simply, sin can be defined as “hiding.” The sin of hiding, as Nelson sees it, is “a conscious effort to suppress talents, desires, and possibilities which was rooted in the twin assumptions that care for others was supreme and that self-care, assertion, development would threaten those connections.”\textsuperscript{206} Based on this understanding of sin, Nelson contends that as long as sin is regarded as pride, and virtue as sacrificial love, the humanity of women will be sacrificed. The worst part of the Niebuhrian doctrine of sin, Nelson argues, is that it actually changes women’s sin to a virtue: “One makes the sin of hiding into a virtue as well, and thereby encouraging those already committing the sin of hiding to stay in that state. One then becomes glorified for never truly seeking to become fully human.” By doing this, women are pushed deeper into hiding. The “virtue” of excessive sacrificial love not only makes women sin willingly, but also cut them off from the possibility to repent:

Niebuhr’s theology has no understanding of how the one guilty of the sin of hiding can be judged in his/her sin and called to actualize his/her freedom. There is no judgment upon the one who escapes; there is no call to emerge from the state of hiddenness.\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 58.
The vicious circle will never end, Nelson says, until women realize what their sin really is and repent for it. For Niebuhr the self knows it is sinning through the feeling of guilt revealed by its uneasy conscience, but for Nelson defining sin as “hiding” means to leave the feeling of guilt behind. Guilt, as she sees it, stems from the identification of self-assertion with sin and self-sacrifice with virtue—but guilt keeps women from getting out of the sin of hiding. What women need, Nelson says, is the courage to refuse the twisted conception of humanity by declaring that the guilt enforced upon women is false, and moving on.\textsuperscript{208}

Nelson also notices the fact that corresponding to Niebuhr’s basically individualistic understanding of sin, the feminist critique of Niebuhr often makes the impression that women’s sin is an individual phenomenon, nevertheless most feminist theologians view sin from a larger range of social reality. For feminists, Nelson contends, since women are oppressed to hide in underdeveloped humanity—which means that the society has its responsibility of pushing women to commit the sin of hiding, it will be misleading if individual sin is being considered separately from social sin. From the perspective of women’s experience, women are not only sinners—they also are the sinned-against. Paralleling Niebuhr’s interpretation of anxiety as the precondition of sin, Nelson develops the concept of brokenheartedness to show that how the experience of being refused and denied in inter-personal relationships could be a precondition of sin.

Refusal has three aspects: the refusal for oneself, others and the world. Each of it signifies a refusal to accept people or the world as they really are: women and other oppressed groups refuse to develop their full humanity and to be free, human beings don’t accept each other, and they refuse to accept the vulnerability and limitedness of life and nature, and so on.\textsuperscript{209} The “posture of refusal” as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{208} Susan L. Nelson, “Pride, Sensuality and Han: Revisiting Sin from the Underside,” 422.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Susan L. Nelson, “For Shame, For Shame, the Shame of It All: Postures of Refusal and the Broken Heart,” in The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-against, Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson eds. (Albany : State University of New York Press, 2001), 73.
\end{itemize}
Nelson sees it is sin, but it actually comes from the experience of being refused. In other words, refusal is both sin and the consequence of sin. If we leave the hurtful experience of being refused unhealed, Nelson says, the experience may turn into a brokenheartedness that becomes a life-destroying experience. In this way, people who are being refused by other people or by the world are highly likely to hide parts of themselves from other people and even themselves, or, they begin to refuse others and the world, participating “as perpetrators in ongoing situations of refusal.” Therefore Nelson argues that beneath sinful behaviors, there usually exists a deeper layer—sin comes from the experience of being sinned against, abused, refused and suffering. Even anxiety and pride could be traced back to the experience of being hurt and refused.211

To acknowledge that the heart-breaking experience is a precondition for sin, Nelson contends, is significant for the development of the doctrine of sin. First of all, it makes the doctrine more realistic since the experience of damage and pain is prevalent and inevitable in life. Furthermore, brokenheartedness is not always passive. When the victims of brokenheartedness decide to get even, brokenheartedness may change into “the active desire for revenge or restitution,” and there will be “a ready-made justification for their actions that does not entail Niebuhr’s uneasy conscience.”212 Finally, if we view sin only as transgression without realizing that it is caused by brokenheartedness, no comfort and hope is offered for those who are being sinned-against. Sin in this case is reinforced: “they have also, perhaps inadvertently, compounded the confusion and brokenheartedness of those who have been refused by reinforcing their sometimes inappropriate construal of themselves as wretched sinners.”213 However, by acknowledging sin as the product of brokenheartedness, rather than inherent wickedness, as Nelson sees it, the theology of sin gains a new power of healing.

210 Ibid., 74.
211 Susan L. Nelson, “Pride, Sensuality and Han: Revisiting Sin from the Underside,” 421-430.
212 Ibid., 429.
213 Susan L. Nelson, “For Shame, For Shame, the Shame of It All,” in The Other Side of Sin, 75.
2.2.5 Conclusion

Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, Daphne Hampson, and Susan Nelson (Dunfee) all question Niebuhr’s interpretation of sin as pride. Saiving focuses more on the biological basis of women’s pattern of sinning, while others recognize the importance of social construction. However, all of them conclude that women’s major problem is not self-inflation but self-loss. To name sin as pride, they claim, not only ignore women’s experience, but also reinforce women’s sin of self-abnegation.
2.3 The Re-visioning of the Doctrine of Sin

Getting to know what women’s sin really is, feminist theologians contend, helps women to find ways to deal with their sin. As we have seen, unlike Niebuhr, many feminist theologians point out that women’s sin is sensuality (self-loss/self-abnegation/hiding), rather than pride. Some feminist theologians propose a new virtue based on pride for women. Reuther, for example, says that there should be more pride in women. However, the pride that women need is not like men’s sense of pride that dominates other people, but is the “basic self-esteem” which will shake off the shackles of sexism, and help women to gain the power to fight against unjust ideologies.  

After pointing out that the insistence on the primacy of the sin of pride is androcentric, feminist theologians set out to reconstruct the doctrine of sin according to the experience of women.

2.3.1 Celebrating Womanhood

If for women sin means not having a self, and their redemption comes through the process of finding the self, then, what is woman’s true self? Many feminist theologians claim that the true self which is damaged by the sin of sensuality/hiding/self-negation, theologically speaking, is the image of God within every woman. If women want to find their true self, feminist theologians accentuate that they need to realize that they are the image of God. This belief is very important for women since according to feminist theologians, woman is not fully respected as the image of God in patriarchal religions. Traditionally, theologians define the image of God in human being mostly from a male perspective. *Imago Dei* is often identified with rationality, spirit, freedom, and so on. It seems that women do not conform as close to these definitions as men. They are constantly viewed as the opposite—sensuality, body and boundedness. So what does it mean to call women God’s image? Do they have to be like men and discard their sexual identity, and only then they can finally be called the image of

God? If not, how can women declare themselves the image of God without hesitation while at the same time remain female?

Many feminist theologians maintain that what makes a woman a woman is part of the *imago Dei*. Women’s differences from men should not be ontologically taken as inferior. Their closeness to nature and relatedness also should not be devalued. Ruether criticizes early liberal feminists’ mistake of assuming that women and men share the same nature based on some capacities like rationality which are identified regularly with men:

> It claims that women, while appearing to have lesser capacities for these attributes, actually possess them equally; they have simply been denied the educational cultivation of them and the opportunity to exercise them. Opening up equal education and equal political rights to women will correct this and allow women’s suppressed capacities for reason and rule to appear in their actual equivalence to men.\(^\text{215}\)

Ruether agrees with early liberal feminists that women should have equal opportunities with men, but she points out that by accepting “male characteristics” as normative, liberal feminism has no mechanism to criticize the patriarchal ideology functioning within the public sphere. Daly, like Ruether, declines to accept “masculine stereotype, which implies hyper-rationality, ‘objectivity,’ aggressivity, the possession of dominating and manipulative attitudes toward persons and environment, and the tendency to construct boundaries between the self (and those identified with the self) and ‘the other.’”\(^\text{216}\) She suggests that women could develop a counterforce. In other words, women should be proud of being themselves, rather than always try to be like men. Nevertheless, Daly also warns that some attributes of women might be used by patriarchal ideologies to reinforce women’s subordination. Like Ortner, who reveals in her study that women’s direct connection with nature binds them to a sphere close to nature,

\(^{215}\) Ibid., 109.

Daly reminds women that the passive stereotype of “eternal feminine”\textsuperscript{217} would create an illusion that women fit only into the domestic area. Daly points out that this in turn will restrain women’s social mobility and finally makes them victims of androcentrism:

There has been theoretical emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service. Part of the problem with this moral ideology is that it became generally accepted not by men but by women, who have hardly been helped by an ethic which reinforce their abject situation.\textsuperscript{218}

The objective of feminism, then, many feminists believe, is to remove the passive stereotype that has been imposed upon women for the purpose of serving men. Women need to regain the control of their own bodies and selves, release them from the enslavement of patriarchy in the form of sexual abuse, depreciation of women’s values and denial of their bodily experiences. According to many feminist theologians, there are two basic characteristics in woman’s true self: naturalness and relatedness. Since both can be used as tools to oppress women, the mission of feminist theology is to remove the negativity enforced upon women’s naturalness and relatedness, and let women be proud for and celebrate their naturalness and relatedness. As Carter Heyward says,

If we are to appreciate ourselves as sexual beings, really appreciate ourselves and learn more and more how to enjoy ourselves/our bodies and those of other people in ways that are mutually empowering and creative, we who are Christians are going to have to participate in articulating and offering some quite radical theological alternatives to what has been given by our fathers.\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{217} Daly defines “eternal feminine” as “hyperemotional, passive, self-abasing, etc.,” ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 60.
The celebration of women’s naturalness, first of all, is a constant theme in feminist theology. We’ve heard some feminists stress again and again that woman is closer to nature than man. Whether based on biological or sociological reasons—or both, for many feminist theologians it is a fact that most women don’t share men’s experience of separation from nature. Plaskow, for example, faults Niebuhr for depreciating creatureliness. For her, sensuality in a large measure is the failure to identify the self with “the world’s vitalities.” She thus criticizes Niebuhr:

Presupposing a negative understanding of human creatureliness, he is then constrained to worry about its implications. Just as his view of the relationship between nature and spirit may hinder his perceiving the temptations of sensuality, it may also keep him from seeing the ways in which creatureliness, differently understood, can curb and discourage human destructiveness.220

As Plaskow sees it, women’s closeness to nature is ultimately a positive factor. Even feminine spirituality, she points out, is not speculative, but bound to nature and life: “For the feminine ego, it is said, the spirit always makes itself known through physical events and process,” “the spiritual is not divorced from sexuality and everyday life but is experienced through it and represents a deepening of it.”221 For Plaskow, women regain their power by returning to nature. Women find moments of “transcendence” in nature. These quasi-mystic experiences of nature enable them to go beyond the definitions of the society and therefore find their true selves:

Like the young girl, the woman too can turn from all that confuses and defines her to experience herself in relation to nature as a free being. Trapped as she generally is by the people and things around her, it is ecstasy to find herself on a hillside, alone, fully conscious,

220 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 69-70.
221 Ibid., 28.
and ruler of all she sees. Before the mysteries of the natural order, her husband’s supremacy fades away, and she finds herself a free individual, living not for others but for herself.  

In this way, menstruations, pregnancy, lactation, motherhood…experiences that relate women closely to nature, though once were taken passively, now transform to new experiences of confidence and joy in the light of feminism. The first bleeding of a girl, for example, may seem to her as uncontrollable, unclean and even shameful from the traditional perspective. However, although easily associated with anxiety and negativity, there are factors in menstrual experience that can help women establish positive attitudes toward themselves:

The graceful experience of menstruation would be to accept it as a symbol of the potential of one’s body for the enrichment of self and others…to emerge enriched from the life crisis of menstruation implies finally trusting and liking one’s body. Trusting it means being peaceful with it, knowing its potential, relaxing with the new experience of menstruation, understanding the possible good offered by the female body structure…today’s woman can celebrate the mystery, not from ignorance and obscurantism, but from the knowledge of exactly what happens and how potential fertility may be best used in the ongoing quest for self-identity.

Woman’s involvement in relationship is also dealt with in a similar way. Some feminist theologians point out that there are negative factors in relation, as Keller says:

Many women would insist that the last thing they want is more relationship. Often we hear woman say that first, or finally, they must get separate and develop their own autonomy: an especially pressing move among women coming up to breathe after long immersion in

222 Ibid., 34.
223 Penelope Washbourn, “Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge,” in Womanspirit Rising, 256.
marriages, families and disappointing love-affairs.224

Nevertheless an important feature of the feminist understanding of the self is that they understand the human self to be fundamentally social, as “selves-in-relation.” Hampson finds that it is through relation that a self becomes a self. What women need is not condemning their relatedness, but to “learn to find themselves in relationship.”225 Keller also denies that women who want to find themselves would really renounce the feminine pattern of relationality and welcome the masculine pattern of separation. Rather, what they want, she says, are new forms of connectedness.

Feminists like Keller contend that the feminine pattern of the self does not stand in antagonism with body, nature or other human beings. Different selves in connection are like a web, which cannot be divided. Unlike man’s hierarchical pattern of relation, selves-in-relation respect other people’s otherness, they influence each other, feel for each other, and echo each other. As Keller describes,

My many selves as the fabric of other persons, plants, places—all the actual entities that have become part of me…these selves are all there; if I acknowledge their influence, they become part of the community of my psyche, working together…to produce the integration of a greater complexity of feeling. If I cannot claim these many…they may wait to pull me into depression or to erupt into destructive violence.226

In short, women find their strength and their selves in connectedness, not in separation. Women also find their freedom in the context of relationality. In the patriarchal world, the feminine self is defined by others or relationships, but the genuine freedom of human beings, as Nelson says, is the freedom not to be defined by relationships, but in relationships:

226 Keller, From a Broken Web, 227.
One becomes fully human when naming oneself not ‘in oneself’ but from within oneself...freedom is...grounded-in-connections...freedom means not being defined by connections or relationships. Freedom means the agency to name oneself within those relationships.\textsuperscript{227}

It may be strange to some theological minds that some feminist theologians’ analysis of women’s sin does not really point to some kind of spiritual or moral corruption. Nevertheless, given the fact that for these feminists women’s sin is self-shrinking, and like Nelson says, knowing what women’s sin is means to leave the guilt behind, or like Delores S. Williams shows, the development of female consciousness about sin “proceeds from feelings of personal unworthiness to a sense of somebodiness bestowed by an encounter with Jesus,”\textsuperscript{228} it won’t be surprising that the feminist critique of the doctrine of sin is accompanied at the same time with the celebration of woman nature. Many feminist theologians believe that the celebration itself has liberating power—after long periods of being devalued by the other half of human race in injustice, it is time for women and men to rediscover the value of women. If the sin of women is to escape from being a self, or in theological language, it is the denial of God’s image, then what women should do is to let the beauty and goodness that God creates in their nature shine.

2.3.2 The Horizontalizing of Sin

Besides the celebration of womanhood, there is another notable characteristic in feminist theology of sin, that is, the emphasis upon horizontal sin. In Niebuhrian and traditional discussion of sin, sin basically refers to the breach of relationship between human being and the transcendent God. Sin in this sense is vertical.

\textsuperscript{227} Susan Nelson Dunfee, Beyond Servanthood: Christianity and the Liberation of Women (Boston: University Press of America, 1989), 4-5.

\textsuperscript{228} Delores S. Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in a Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 140.
However, in many feminist discussions of sin, as we have seen, the interpretation of sin from the perspective of divine-human relationship is almost absent. As Joy Ann McDougall notices:

The providential agency of a transcendent God has become superfluous to many feminist analysis of sin. Either the notion of the human being’s dependency on a radically transcendent God disappears altogether from feminist theologies, or if it does appear, this relationship does not actually fund the author’s analysis of sin.229

When talking about sin, many feminist theologians would like to focus more on social or cultural, rather than individual or spiritual perspectives. Asian feminist Kwok Pui-lan explains thusly:

Asian feminist theologians find that they have to reinterpret sin and redemption anew in the contemporary context. The traditional emphasis on the individual and spiritual dimension of sin proves to be less than helpful for woman. Women are not just sinners; they are the sinned against too. Many Asian women suffer as outcasts of their society, not because of any innate human depravity or moral deficiency, but because of the social and institutional violence that dehumanizes and marginalizes them. A new understanding of sin must reflect the socio-political and the religio-cultural realities.230

The new understanding of sin, as Kwok Pui-lan and other feminist theologians promote, is an understanding of sin which concerns more with horizontal sin rather than vertical sin, socio-cultural sin rather than religious sin. In this way, the divine no longer plays a vital role in the feminist interpretation of human sin. As Ruether says, only human beings can take responsibility for sin and do something to change it since sin is basically a human-made disorder, and it has nothing do to

with “offending” a transcendent God. 231 Nevertheless, many feminist theologians realize that their grounding of sin primarily on the socio-cultural dimension cannot be justified if they do not explain their doctrine of God accordingly. Therefore, in many feminist theologies of sin the horizontalizing of sin necessarily accompanies with the rejection of divine transcendence.

Plaskow confines her study of feminine sin within the domain of theological anthropology. 232 While leaving the problem of sin as a breach of relationship with God untouched in most of her analysis, she deals with “the religious dimension” of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin at the end of her study by questioning the legitimacy of Niebuhr’s model of God as creator, king and judge. She contends that Niebuhr’s analysis of sin as human being’s usurpation of the place of God is a product of male mentality:

Niebuhr also images God in terms of authority, power, initiative, and creativity—terms borrowed from the male side of the stereotypic masculine/feminine sex polarity…his view of the relationship between humanity and God echoes the culturally sanctioned relation of male and female in society, humanity playing an essentially feminine role before God. 233

Since in Niebuhr’s eyes sin is human being’s attempt to replace God with the self, Plaskow argues, on the human side sin is always active for Niebuhr. However, Plaskow points out that the turning away from God doesn’t necessarily lead to the tuning to the self. Women who could not find their true selves are active only in their passivity and self-losing. Besides, for Plaskow a hierarchal, subordinate relationship with God is less than a true relationship: “imaging the divine/human relation as hierarchal with a male God in the superordinate position may foster a conception of human life which ultimately undermines the relationship to God it seeks to preserve.” If self-loss and self-sacrifice are toxic in interpersonal relationship, they also will be in divine-human relationship. Thus the sin of

231 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 182.
232 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 4;
233 Ibid., 165.
sensuality can be applied to human being’s relationship with God, Plaskow says, especially when the relationship is hierarchical.\textsuperscript{234} In other words, women are guilty of the sin of sensuality, when they submit their selves to a hierarchical God.

While Plaskow challenges the pattern of understanding sin as the rebellion against God, Hampson, Ruether and many other feminist theologians go further to question the Christian concept of a transcendent God. According to a widespread theory in feminist theologies elaborated by Ruether and developed by other feminist theologians, the concept of transcendence is based on dualism inherited from the classical world. When the symbolic language of a male God is combined with this dualistic heritage, some feminist theologians contend, it legitimates the hierarchical system which promotes the sin of domination and manipulation:

This dualistic mentality opposes soul, spirit, rationality, and transcendence to body, flesh, matter, nature, and immanence. God is identified with the positive sides of the dualism, and “the world” with the negative sides. In this view, human beings stand between God and the world, spirit and nature, and must learn to subdue the irrational desires of the flesh.\textsuperscript{235}

The notion of transcendence, then, is believed to be hostile to woman and nature. In the dualistic theological system, God transcends the world and is beyond the world, as a ruthless judge he rules the world, like men rule women, masters rule slaves, and human being rules earth. In fact, some feminist theologians claim that the relation between a transcendent God and human being is similar to the relation between man and woman. One is high, one is low; one is spiritual, one is physical; one gives orders, one obeys.

Many feminist theologians point out that dualism inevitably causes domination and alienation since God and the world, man and woman, spirit and body are in oppositional relationships (one is superior, and the other is inferior). Like Keller argues, men project their desire for transcendence on the image of God in order to

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{235} Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, \textit{Womanspirit Rising}, 5.
justify their model of separation and domination: “The absolute separateness of deity has symbolized the separative aspirations of a Mankind created in His image.”236 The general rejection of dualism in feminist theology leads many feminists to conclude that the concept of a transcendent God is incompatible with the feminist vision of liberating the woman race. Likewise, the notion of human self-transcendence is also generally rejected as a masculine ideal. Keller charges Niebuhr’s concept of the transcendent self as “the separate self”: “Self-transcendence, in other words, is equated with self-objectification, and spirit with reflexive self-identity. Niebuhr explicitly affirms the ability to make oneself an object and divide oneself from the ‘others.’”237 What Niebuhr does not realize, Keller claims, is that the masculine model of the transcendent self that separate itself from the world is the source of sin:

The sin of pride derives precisely from the self-enclosure of a separate self, paradoxically seen as the self’s virtue…it expresses an ineluctably self-perpetuating cycle: self-objectification in the image of a separate God resulting in an opaque self-preoccupation called evil.238

Many feminist theologians point out that the human self is fundamentally related. Genuine relationships, they argue, cannot be understood in a vertical/hierarchal way. However, not only human beings are related, some feminist theologians contend that God is also related to us in this world. God is not the separate entity outside the world, or against the world, but the power present in the world. Carter Heyward contends that God is the power in relation and God loves human being in relation. Since love is reciprocal, God is also affected by human being. God cannot be separated from human being and the world. “If God is not incarnate,” Heyward claims, “then God is completely useless to us. Such a ‘God’ is a destructive controlling-device, manufactured in

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236 Keller, From a Broken Web, 37.
237 Ibid., 42.
238 Ibid., 42.
the minds of men…” God lives, speaks, and acts with human being in the world. In other words, the divine is radically immanent in the world.

If God is radically immanent in the world and sacralizes ordinary life, many feminist theologians argue, we cannot rightly understand sin as pride or the opposition to God. In this divine-human relationship, feminist theologians see partnership, not domination or hierarchy. God is the sustaining and renewing power of life and nature who dwells in the present world. There is no corruption inherent in human nature, only sin that does not recognize the divine that shines within human beings and the nature. Some feminist theologians still talk about sin in relation to God or Goddess. Nevertheless in the context of radical immanent theologies, the substance of God can hardly be differentiated from nature, vitalities, communities, or even human beings. As Cynthia Eller finds, most spiritual feminists “insist on the goddess's immanence as a foundational principle: she is in us, with us; she is you, she is me; she is not beyond this world, but is this world.” In this way, talking about sin from the perspective of the divine-human relation loses its practical meaning since in this context sin is fundamentally a social, or to be directly, a human issue. Like Joy Ann McDougall says, the feminist theologies of sin are “radically immanentalized.”

The shift of focus from individual sin to social sin is the major consequence of the horizontalizing of sin. In the traditional and Niebuhrian analysis, some feminists argue, since sin is defined as unbelief or rebellion against a transcendent God, individual sin becomes the foremost sin, while the collective dimension of sin is largely ignored. Although feminist theologians have a lot to say about individual women’s sin as sensuality, self-loss, hiding, and so on, their primary concern is the resistance to social sin which oppresses and makes women sin that way. Many feminist theologians argue that sin reflects distorted relationships

prevailing in human society and institutions. Among all relationships, the one between man and woman is most basic. Woman is the first and oldest group being oppressed;\(^{242}\) even racism can find its model in sexism.\(^{243}\) Therefore patriarchy is not only the root of evil, but also the archetype of all other forms of oppression and exploitation.

As the “original sin” of the world, patriarchy contaminates every human being in the world. No one, not even women can be free from it, and everyone is inevitably the product of the sin of patriarchy. Ruether maintains that women are also responsible for the sinfulness of this world:

This systematic and historical aspect of sexism does not mean there is no personal responsibility. Sexism as a system was originated by human persons and perpetuated today by human persons, male and female, continuing to cooperate with it…we are entrapped by our own collective, historical selves.\(^{244}\)

The fact that individuals are shaped and affected by sinful ideologies makes the necessity of opposing social sin more urgent. Sin could be committed by individual men or women who prejudice against women or other disadvantaged groups, but more likely, sin is transmitted through injustice that pervades in institutions and society. Not only the offenders, but also the beneficiaries that keep silence or condone violence are sinful. And what needs to be noted is, from the perspective of collective sin, many feminist theologians argue that women are not only sinners, but also the “sinned-against.” To address women as the “sinned-against” means women are violated by the unjust social system that bring men up and bring women down. As Ruether says, even though women also benefit from “other historical oppressions along race and class lines” and collaborate with sexism “in lateral violence toward themselves and other women,” still, “sexism is gender privilege of males over females. It is males primarily who

\(^{243}\) Daly, “After the Death of God the Father,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 61.
\(^{244}\) Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 182.
have originated this form of oppression, benefited from it, and perpetuated it, legally and ideologically.”

Feminist theologians refuse to tolerate social sin in the name of forgiveness and peace. For the people who are sinned against, whose rights for survival and freedom are deprived, “peace alone is of no value,” says womanist Dolores S. Williams, “peace and justice connect in an examined faith.” According to many feminist theologians, traditional doctrine of sin is considerably inadequate for its negligence of collective sin, which frequently leads the church to become the defender of oppressing systems and does no good to the sinned-against. Only by confronting the sin of patriarchy bravely, feminist theologians contend, a brighter future will come. Like Ruether says, “we can unmask sexism as sin. We can disaffiliate with it. We can begin to shape at least our personal identity and then our more immediate relationships with others in a new way.”

2.3.3 Conclusion

The feminist reconstruction of sin rejects the interiorizing and individualizing of sin. Sin for many feminist theologians does not come from inner corruption. On the opposite, sin, especially women’s sin, is basically a failure to recognize inner goodness. Therefore many feminist theologians promote a celebration of womanhood in their discussion of sin. Feminist theologians like Plaskow, Hampson and Ruether don’t share with Niebuhr the assumption that sin is fundamentally individual human being’s rebellion against God, which explains the fact that in their theologies of sin, sin is less explored from the religious or spiritual perspective. It does not mean that the feminist doctrine of sin has no spiritual or religious aspect, but in some feminist theologies, spiritual or religious sin is equated with socio-cultural sin. For many feminists, the understanding of sin

245 Ibid., 165.
247 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 182.
cannot be divorced from the social situation of the world. Sin is the act to disturb the present world, not the world beyond. There is no vertical sin, only horizontal sin that destroys the harmony and interconnectedness of divine-human/inter-human/human-nature relation.
Chapter III. A Niebuhrian Response to the Feminist Critique

We have seen some feminist theologians’ critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin in the last chapter. In the following chapters, I set out to respond to the feminist critique from different perspectives. In this chapter, by revisiting several important concepts in Niebuhr’s and the feminist understanding of sin like pride (section 1), the self (section 2), and love, justice and the family (section 3), I demonstrate that there are many misunderstandings in the feminist interpretation of Niebuhr.
3.1 The Two Dimensions of Pride

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Plaskow points out that Niebuhr has two different definitions of sensuality. The inconsistent understanding of sensuality, she contends, leads Niebuhr to downplay sensuality in its broader sense. However, Plaskow overlooks the fact that Niebuhr also has two different views of pride. In the first place, pride is a synonym for arrogance or will-to-power. It is concerned primarily with human being’s social existence and their relationship with each other. Pride in this sense is associated with a tendency to dominate or oppress others. While this kind of pride is closer to the daily use of the word, Niebuhr employs pride frequently and basically in another meaning. Here pride is the pretence of not being limited: “Man falls into pride, when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance.”248 It reflects human being’s destructive attempt of self-glorification, of turning the devotions for the incorruptible God into worship of a relative and corruptible existence. It therefore is human being’s effort to usurp the place of God by placing itself at the center of its life. This view of pride is theological since it is concerned mainly with humankind’s relationship with God.

Like the term “sensuality,” Niebuhr’s use of “pride” is not explicit. Sometimes he views pride and sensuality as two equal sins arising from anxiety—only one responds to anxiety with the denial of contingency, the other with the escape from infinite possibilities. However, in most of his discussions Niebuhr only considers the sin of pride, in those places the differentiation between pride and sensuality disappear, the sin of sensuality is absorbed by the sin of pride and pride is equated with sin. Many feminist theologians consider the unbalanced treatment of pride and sensuality as the fatal flaw in Niebuhr’s interpretation of human condition. Plaskow claims that Niebuhr has no reason to be so insistent on the primacy of pride other than an a priori commitment,249 yet a closer examination of Niebuhr’s understanding of pride will show that Niebuhr may subordinate sensuality to pride

249 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 62.
for a reason. As stated above, Niebuhr has two views of pride—the pride against God, and the pride against other people. Niebuhr points out that the former is sin in its religio-theological sense and the latter is sin in its socio-moral sense:

The religious dimension of sin is man’s rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God. The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice. The ego which falsely makes itself the centre of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life. 250

For Niebuhr the pride against God is the most basic sin. As Terry D. Cooper interprets, “Niebuhr is already assuming a distrust of and break with God as the source of our security. This is pride with a capital P.” All other forms of pride can only be regarded as pride “with a small p.” 251 In other words, pride as the rebellion against God precedes the socio-moral dimension of sin, whether it manifests itself as pride or sensuality. For Niebuhr sensuality is not derived from moral pride. Sensuality as the destruction of harmony within the self is equally a sin like moral pride or selfishness, which destroys the harmony of other’s life. Yet sensuality and moral pride both derive from the fundamental sin of theological pride. Talking about the sin of sensuality, Niebuhr constantly relates it with the loss of center in God:

…the sins of lust (more particularly unnatural lust) are fruits of the more primal sin of rebellion against God.

Sensuality is…the inordinate love for all creaturely and mutable values which results from the primal love of self, rather than love of God.

Sensuality represents a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God as the centre of existence. 252

According to Niebuhr, the self commits the sin of theological pride when it doesn’t regard God as the true center of its life. In some cases, the self makes itself god (the sin of pride); but in some other cases, since the self knows the inadequacy of itself being the center of its life, it escapes self-love by the worship of finite realities like sensual desires or other people (the sin of sensuality). Nonetheless, in both situations pride and sensuality will not appear if the self does not firstly fall into the sin of theological pride of forsaking God. Plaskow claims that Niebuhr’s subordination of sensuality to pride is untenable, as he cannot prove that sensuality always comes after the attempt to dominate.\(^\text{253}\)

However, Niebuhr does not regard sensuality as a derivation of domination. As we have suggested, when Niebuhr concludes that sensuality is a sin consequent of pride, the “pride” he refers to actually is not our common sense of pride as domination or arrogance, but the theological pride that pretends human beings do not need God. Like Plaskow, many Niebuhr’s feminist critics completely ignore Niebuhr’s different understandings of pride. They usually end up barking up the wrong tree by directing their critique of pride as women’s sin to the moral pride rather than the more basic theological pride.

The feminist confusion about Niebuhr’s two kinds of pride is understandable since in most of his discussions Niebuhr rarely distinguishes them explicitly. If Niebuhr is more specific in his usage, maybe there will be much less confusion. For example, some scholars suggest that “distrust” or “unbelief” could have been a more adequate word to denote the religious dimension of sin.\(^\text{254}\) For Niebuhr himself says: “The sin of the inordinate self-love thus points to the prior sin of lack of trust in God,” and “…Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride.”\(^\text{255}\) It is not entirely

\(^{253}\) Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 62.


clear why Niebuhr uses the somewhat ambiguous word “pride” instead of “distrust” or “unbelief” to denote the theological dimension of sin. However, “pride” does contain something important in its meaning—it reveals that the sin against God is active, rather than passive. For Niebuhr, the tendency of humankind to defy God is not ultimately determined by the environment. In other words, human beings are not forced by external factors to sin. Rather, they choose to sin by their freewill actively. As we have seen in chapter one, Niebuhr holds that sin can be committed deliberately or inadvertently, but in either case human beings are responsible for their own sin, as they are free beings rather than robots manipulated by social and natural necessities. This view of sin is in stark contrast with some of his feminist critics’ view of sin as being victimized by structural sin or the preceding sin of others.

Susan Nelson tries to bridge the gap between Niebuhr’s and the feminist understandings of sin by suggesting that there is a room in Niebuhr’s theology for her understanding of brokenheartedness as the precondition of sin. Since Niebuhr holds that there is evil antecedent to any evil human action, says Nelson, there must be external factors (like brokenheartedness) “enticing human beings in their weakness and vulnerability to misconstrue situations of refusal” and eventually causes sin. However, this is apparently a misreading of Niebuhr. In his critique of Pelagianism, Niebuhr clearly states that human being’s bias toward evil resides inside. In his words, the bias toward evil cannot be understood as just “a lag of culture.” It is true for Niebuhr that any particular sin is presupposed by an antecedent sin, but the antecedent sin is far from being social or historical factors: “Sin can never be traced merely to the temptation arising from a particular situation or condition in which man as man finds himself or in which particular men find themselves.” The antecedent sin is human being’s distrust of God. Niebuhr does acknowledge the sin of passivity or the fact of human behaviors being conditioned by circumstances, but for him all the sins that seem to be

256 Nelson, “Pride, Sensuality and Han: Revisiting Sin from the Underside,” 428.
caused by exterior factors are eventually the consequences of the most basic sin of theological pride. If there is no prior sin of refusing God actively, he argues, the exterior factors will not become temptations and occasions of sin:

While all particular sins have both social sources and social consequences, the real essence of sin can be understood only in the vertical dimension of the soul’s relation to God because the freedom of the self stands outside all relations, and therefore has no other judge but God.²⁵⁸

Niebuhr follows the Christian tradition to regard the most basic sin—not all sin, to be noted—as vertical and individual. For this reason Plaskow complains that although Niebuhr is attentive to social relevancy of the Christian thought, he cares more about the social effects rather than the social origins of sin.²⁵⁹ Plaskow’s observation is not wrong since for Niebuhr the final cause of sin is not to be found in the social context, and in this way it cannot be explained entirely by social interpretations. From this perspective, the feminist charges of Niebuhr’s understanding of sin as only applicable to the problems of the strong and powerful, so to speak, men, rather than the weak and oppressed women can be responded to, since on the theological or existential level, pride is no longer the privilege of the strong and powerful. Even the most oppressed people can say “no” to God, although they dare not say “no” to anyone. Moreover, no one is strong or powerful enough to be proud before God, but everyone, including the weakest can commit the sin of pride when he or she refuses to go beyond himself or herself to meet God. In short, human beings’ relationship with God does not depend on their social existence. This is why Niebuhr claims that human beings sin in their freewill, and therefore sin before they act. Social and historical factors are important in the understanding of human misbehaviors since human beings are involved in the flux of history. In this sense, moral sin and religious sin can never

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 257.
²⁵⁹ Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 168.
be totally separated. However, the human self also has transcendence over the natural process, and on an existential level, when all other things recede, the self is left alone to face God.

To evaluate the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s theology of sin, a question need to be asked: is the feminist critique applicable to Niebuhr’s interpretation of sin? Niebuhr’s feminist critics provide rich analysis of women’s experience from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds to counter Niebuhr’s claim of pride as a universal human problem, but what if Niebuhr’s understanding of sin in its most fundamental sense entirely transcends the social circumstances? To overturn Niebuhr’s theology of sin his feminist critics will need to prove that both moral pride and theological pride are inapplicable to women’s situations. However, in most places feminist theologians go to great lengths to deal with the former, while simply dismissing the vertical aspect of sin as meaningless without appealing to women’s religious experience. Yet a feminist theological reconstruction of the doctrine of sin does not speak for all women if it only articulates the secular experience of women. The feminist critique of Niebuhr is valid, only when it realizes the double-level nature of Niebuhrian pride and can overturn Niebuhr’s conclusion from both socio-moral and theological perspectives. In the following chapters of this study, I will focus on the exploration of women’s secular and religious experience, to see if Niebuhr’s feminist critics fulfill this task.
3.2 “The Self” Revisited

3.2.1 Niebuhr’s Dialectical Understanding of the Self

As we have seen in chapter one, one fundamental characteristic of Niebuhr’s theology is that it is dialectical. Niebuhr is concerned with the tensions between ideal and reality, the absolute and the relative, revelation and experience, eternity and history. He recognizes that each of these polar realities is true and therefore crucial to our understanding of the world. For him any slide to one extreme or disregard of the other pole will cause problems. To understand Niebuhr properly, it is very important to know that he regards many seemingly contradictory ideas such as justice and love, transcendence and immanence as dialectically linked, rather than either-or concepts. Successful or not, Niebuhr always tries to maintain the balance between extremes in his theology by using the method of dialectics. Like Larry Rasmussen notices: “Niebuhr always thought dialectically and paradoxically, though many of his readers have been prone to relax the tension of his extremes. Niebuhr never relaxed the tension.”

Unfortunately, Niebuhr’s critics often overlook the paradoxical characteristic of his thought. William John Wolf finds that many of Niebuhr’s critics make the mistake of ignoring his dialectical method, pushing one aspect of Niebuhr’s position to the extreme without seeing the whole picture. Many feminist critics of Niebuhr, I have to say, sometimes make the same mistake.

For example, among other feminists, Daphne Hampson and Catherine Keller criticize Niebuhr for having a separate and autonomous view of the human self, which, as they claim, ignore the fact that humankind is molded in society and connected in social relationships. However, for Niebuhr a real self is by no means an isolated, closed self: “The self cannot be truly fulfilled if it is not drawn out of itself into the life of the other.” Niebuhr clearly realizes the fact that humankind is shaped by social realities and interactions. To use his words, the self who stands

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in the flux of history “is an object among other objects in space and time.”263 He also writes,

The fact is that the human self can only be understood in a dramatic-historical environment. Any effort to co-ordinate man to some coherence, whether of nature or of reason, will falsify the facts; because the self’s freedom, including both its creative and destructive capacities, precludes such co-ordination.264

What Niebuhr means here is that the human self is historically situated, and it is impossible to understand human condition if detached from specific social situations. Nevertheless, it is also true for him that human condition cannot be captured by general theories that regard humankind as socially determined or manipulated. Human being’s capacity of freedom and transcendence enables it to preclude the co-ordination of nature or reason to understand it just as a given “product” of the environment. Humanity’s ability of making history proves that they can transcend the given circumstances to create a more ultimate possibility. In other words, the human self as both bound and free is a creature as well as a creator of social realities. As a child of nature human being is subject to the necessities of nature. But it is at the same time more than a part of nature, but a spirit who can stand out of the nature. Despite bound in the limits of nature and circumstances, the self also has radical freedom. For Niebuhr “radical freedom” is not an abstract ability of the mind to transcend the body and the cultural environments that his feminist critics find suspicious, but a possibility of not being bound inevitably:

When we speak of man’s ‘radical’ freedom, we do not suggest that his creaturely limitations should be obscured…His freedom must be defined as ‘radical’ to indicate that, when man rises above the necessities and limits of nature, he is not inevitably

263 Ibid., 35.
Niebuhr’s interpretation of the human self as a synthesis of nature and spirit is far from being what feminists call “dualism.” While patriarchal dualism subordinates nature, body and sensibility to spirit, mind and rationality, and identified the former with men and the latter with women, Niebuhr regards the human self as not being a pure spirit or a pure nature. He tries to maintain the tension between nature and spirit without devaluing either of them. Niebuhr will not agree with some feminists’ claim that the feminine self is far away from spirit, since for him “spirit” is more than mind, reason or rational faculties, but the capacity of the human self to transcend and criticize rationality and the given circumstances. Niebuhr holds this capacity of humankind as common and indispensable to the self of both women and men. So when Niebuhr asserts that the self is also a spirit, he is not devaluing the naturalness of human being, nor should he be interpreted as being androcentric in this aspect. Rebekah Miles, for example, points out that Plaskow does not interpret Niebuhr correctly when she criticizes Niebuhr for having a negative attitude toward creatureliness: “…any claims that Niebuhr devalues creation are met with Niebuhr’s insistence throughout his work that creation is a good gift of God.” Niebuhr refuses to place sin in human being’s finitude, nor does he regard boundedness as the source of sin in any sense. Miles agrees that Niebuhr’s language about creatureliness can be quite ambivalent sometimes, yet she argues that Niebuhr also talks about transcendence and freedom quite negatively. Niebuhr’s emphasis upon human nature as an organic unity of boundedness and freedom, according to Miles, provides an effective reply to the feminist critique. She also affirms that the capacity of transcendence is pivotal to human nature. It lifts human beings beyond the givenness of oppressive social patterns, gives them strength to transform the

265 Ibid., 10.
266 Like Valerie Saiving says, “Yet if it is true, as Niebuhr says, that man stands at the juncture of nature and spirit. Then woman’s closeness to nature is a measure of the distance she must travel to reach spirit.” See Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in Womanspirit Rising, 32-33.
natural and social boundedness and therefore is good for feminism’s vision of liberating women.268

To be noted, both Plaskow and Niebuhr regard the sin of sensuality as self-loss, but what they think of the meaning of “the self”, is quite different. Plaskow explains sensuality in this way, “sensuality, broadly understood, is not equivalent to identification of the self with some natural impulse or some aspect of the world’s vitalities.”269 The true self that women keep running from is the “world’s vitalities” or natural impulse, in other words, the “creatureliness” which women are close to. A sense of continuity with nature, claims Plaskow, is women’s source of freedom.270 For Niebuhr, however, a simple return to nature or spirit cannot provide the self genuine freedom since the self is a unity of both nature and spirit. On the one hand, since the self’s capacity of transcendence is conditioned by its nature, it is an expression of pride if the self forgets its boundedness in the temporal process and pretends that it can transcend completely over history.271 On the other hand, a too immanent view of the self is also problematic for Niebuhr. From his perspective, to identify the human self completely with nature while forgetting the self has the possibility to transcend the given materials of nature is to deny the possibility of freedom and thus falls into the sin of sensuality.

Now it is clear that Niebuhr and Plaskow also have different understandings of the term “sensuality” even in its broader sense as the escape from freedom. For Plaskow sensuality is the failure to embrace women’s creatureliness. According to her, the real self is always there inside (every woman’s) nature, women just need to take courage to find it, and by finding it, they will also find genuine peace and freedom. In contrast, Niebuhr rejects the possibility of finding ultimate freedom and truth in the finitude. He claims that sensuality is the indulgence in creatureliness, or in his words, it is an “unlimited devotion to limited values.”272 However, Niebuhr is by no means trying to belittle the human self here. For him it

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268 Ibid., 57-58; 62-69. For more discussions about transcendence please see chapters five and six.
269 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 69.
270 Ibid., 72.
272 Ibid., 185.
is in its freedom the self points beyond itself to what is ultimate and infinite: “The self is too great to be contained within itself in its smallness.”273 Put differently, the self is not the ultimate ground and source of existence; therefore it cannot make itself its own end. Even the self without any awareness of the divine knows that it is not able to provide the ultimate meaning for its life. That is why human beings constantly fall into the sin of sensuality by worshiping something greater than them, nevertheless less than the true God.

If women’s sin is the loss of the self, or as Hampson says, the failure to value themselves sufficiently,274 women’s problem of sin will be solved when they choose to find and become themselves. Nevertheless, for Niebuhr to counter sin it is not enough by just finding the self since the self is not the true self when it pretends itself as self-sufficient. For many feminist theologians, the escape from freedom is the escape from the feminine self, but for Niebuhr it is the escape from the source of freedom, from God. Hampson is right by concluding that for Niebuhr the self becomes itself in its relationship with God, and the social relations come next. However, I do not agree with Hampson’s insistence that the human self’s essential relationality with God is negative or even incompatible with its social relationality.275 Human being’s relationship with God has liberating power in both personal and social existence since by returning to God as the fundamental source of the self, not only the self is renewed, but also the way that the self relates to the world and other people around is renewed.

3.2.2 Self-realization, Self-love and Self-worship

It is a common misunderstanding among many Niebuhr’s feminist critics that Niebuhr denies the legitimacy of self-realization since he claims that the sinful self should be “shattered” or “destroyed.” As Mary Grey says:

275 Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 124.
Niebuhr...sees the fundamental human sin as one of pride. It follows, then, that there can be no redemption without “the shattering of the self”. Self-seeking, self-assertion and self-realization are all considered by Niebuhr as part of the sin of human pride, only to be uprooted by the sacrificial love revealed by Christ on the cross.  

However, self-realization is as important to Niebuhr as to his feminist critics. Niebuhr repeatedly stresses that the Christian understanding of the self does not involve self-negation but self-realization: “The self is, in other words, not evil by reason of being a particular self and its salvation does not consist in absorption into the eternal.” However, for Niebuhr the self who centered its life on contingent and arbitrary realities is not the true self. The true self as the image of God will not go against God by devoting unconditioned love to the conditioned existence. The highest self-realization of the self is to preserve its particularity in the loving will of God. The old self obstructs the fulfillment of the true self. It is in this context Niebuhr claims that the old self who becomes the prisoner of its own desires and vanities should be shattered by grace, and only by doing that, the real self can be released.

Nevertheless, the feminist critique is not completely wrong. As Plaskow observes, if women and other groups of people who have low self-esteem don’t have complete selves, or their selves have already been shattered by themselves or their circumstances, the theology that proclaims the destruction of the old self will not only be irrelevant to them, but it will also reinforce their self-negation, or as Nelson says, it will push them deeper into the sin of hiding. For Niebuhr the old self is so absorbed in itself that it can only be broken by the power from beyond itself. However, as feminist theologians show, the self also can be shattered actively by itself. Therefore an over-simplified teaching that preaches the shattering of the old self can be dangerous and defective, especially when it

278 Ibid., Vol. II, 115.
encourages people to shatter their sinful selves for the sake of God while forgetting sin can only be conquered by the power of God rather than the work of humankind. Niebuhr recognizes that when the old self is broken by God’s grace, the true self is fulfilled from beyond itself, but an important message is missing in his interpretation, that is, when the old self is shattered by itself, rather than by God, the true self might be shattered too.  

Considering the fact that many women are lost in endless self-giving and self-sacrifice to the need of their family because they are told to identify themselves with the suffering of Christ by living for others, the worry of feminist theologians that Niebuhr’s interpretation of the self might be reduced to the tool of manipulation that reinforces servitude is reasonable. Being accustomed to the underdevelopment of the self, many women often forget that they are more than secondary creatures to men, but the *imago Dei* that is equal to men in every aspect. The denial of creation in God’s image, I agree with Plaskow, is quite a severe sin. The feminist emphasis upon self-affirmation and self-appreciation therefore is not only important to women, but important to all who forget they are the good creation of God and thus noble in origin.

However, it is necessary to differentiate between self-love and self-worship, for in some feminist theologies the latter frequently appears in disguise of the former. As we have seen in 2.3.1, the celebration of womanhood is a major characteristic of the feminist reconstruction of the doctrine of sin. Many feminist theologians claim that self-love is an antidote of women’s problem of self-loss. Unfortunately, in some feminist theologies of sin, I contend, the celebration of womanhood becomes a dualistic assertion that magnifies the feminine self against the masculine self. In these theologies, firstly, some characteristics of women (often in stark contrast with that of men), like women’s closeness to nature or relatedness are generalized and deemed as the most essential qualities of the feminine self; then those characteristics or what are relevant to them (like nature, body or

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279 However, since Niebuhr holds that the old self that need to be shattered can only be shatter by the grace of God, rather than other powers. I think if Niebuhr has the chance to defend himself, he will not object feminist theologians’ conclusion that it is a sin to let the self be destroyed by itself.
relationality) are transformed into ultimate norm of goodness. Since the ultimate goodness in women’s “essential nature” is stressed, many feminists regard the opposite attributes as incompatible with or even hostile to the feminine self. They conceive a related, sensual and bounded self as the true feminine self in contrast with the masculine self as separated, spiritual and autonomous. Therefore the notions such as rationality, individuality and transcendence over the nature are rejected as products of male mentality—some feminist theologians even go so far to regard any affirmation of these “masculine traits” as the depreciation of women.

However, the rejection is unwarranted since these notions are not exclusively male as they also constantly appear in women’s experience. Women’s experience precludes a too simple identification of them with merely body/nature, whether these terms are understood positively or negatively. Without denying their difference from men, many women find the so-called “masculine qualities” fitting well with their lived experience just like those “feminine qualities”. For example, many modern women enjoy individuality; they choose to be single or not to have children; they are competitive and ambitious in the work place; most of the time they are pragmatics who weigh interests rather than saints who always think of others; they regard the capacity to reason as very important in their life. Does this mean all those women who regard “masculine qualities” such as individuality, rationality and self-transcendence valuable or even indispensable in their self-development have been brainwashed by patriarchal ideologies and their experience cease to be the “authentic” experience of women? I hardly think so. If Ruether is right, women’s experience, rather than authority, is the only legitimate starting and ending point for feminist theology. Therefore when some feminist theories fail to capture fully women’s experience, it loses its legitimacy: to borrow Ruether’s words, “it becomes dead or must be altered to provide a new meaning.”

However, many feminists constantly accuse women who find some feminist

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assertions in opposition to their experience as having a false consciousness, without realizing they may have narrowed “women’s experience” to “feminist experience.” As a result, they make the mistake of ignoring women’s voices just like the male chauvinists whom they are attacking. Rebecca Walker shares her concern about this kind of feminism that beautifies the feminine self, yet distances itself from the actual experience of women:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen and understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad. ²⁸¹

If some characteristics of the feminine self are emphasized stereotypically, feminism is at danger of being reduced to authoritarianism that causes internal splits among different women. Likewise, when female characteristics are identified with the ultimate criterion that cannot be questioned, feminism is reduced to a woman-man dualism that segregates the sexes. While a patriarchal dualism divides man from woman, culture from nature, mind from body and deems the former superior to the latter, a feminist dualism does not challenge the dichotomy itself, but only reverse the two parties by claiming the “masculine traits” are sources of oppression, but what woman is associated with (nature, body, and et cetera) is the source of goodness and a common ground for both genders. Needless to say, this simple dichotomy is groundless for it cannot prove “the feminine attributes” are better than “the masculine attributes” just like patriarchal ideologies cannot prove man is superior to woman.

If the feminine self or woman’s nature is claimed to be the ultimate norm of

goodness, it is safe to say that the healthy self-concern that every woman should have is turned into excessive self-worship. In some feminist theologies, the feminine self is regarded not only as a source of confidence, but also as a source of truth since God is defined according to the criterion of women’s experience. Some feminist theologians even move further to identify the feminine self with the divine. The deification of the feminine self is mostly manifested in some feminist theologians’ endeavor to recover the goddess worship. To be noted, the worship of goddess is not to worship a deity/deities beyond—since for these feminists “the symbol of a divinity ‘out there’ is part of the legacy of patriarchal oppression,” but a deity/deities not separated from the feminine self. Therefore the true essence of goddess worship is a process of empowering the feminine self—it is fundamentally self-worship: “…the Goddess is symbol of the affirmation of the legitimacy and beauty of female power.” As Judith Antonelli says, “The Goddess represents nothing less than female power and woman’s deification of her own essence. It is external only to the extent that this power is contained within the cycles of nature as well as within ourselves.”

While the self with appropriate self-love sees in itself and every other self the image of the divine, the self with inordinate self-love regards itself as the ultimate norm and end. The self with proper self-love has genuine confidence, which enables it to hold on to its particularity while respecting the particularity of others rather than just considering them as rivals. But the self who sees only the goodness of itself has no respect for others who are different from it. And this is what Niebuhr calls pride. In their justified efforts to free women from patriarchal ideologies, I contend, some feminist theologians go too far to identify the feminine self with the ultimate ground that provides for women final meaning and truth. While it is necessary to counter patriarchal oppression by affirming the inherent goodness of the feminine self, feminist theologies that set women up in

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282 Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections”, in Woman'spirit Rising, 278.
God’s place is as corrupt as patriarchal theologies that project the wills and desires of men onto the reality of God. Therefore, whenever feminist theologians declare that pride is not women’s problem, yet regard the feminine self as the norm of truth and goodness, they are confronted by Niebuhr’s prophetic voice warning the danger of the sin of pride.

3.2.3 Conclusion

The marked contrast between Niebuhrian and some feminist understandings of the self and sin is partly a result of the differences in the experiences of the sexes as some feminists suggest, yet it is also true that theologians’ understandings of sin are determined in turn by their understanding of the final object to which sin is against. If the feminine self is the ultimate norm, as in some feminist theologies, the sin against the self must be the most fundamental sin and the exaltation of the self becomes the cure for sin. Yet if God who transcends nature and the self is the ultimate norm, as in Niebuhr’s theology, the most basic sin is the sin against God and only God can forgive sin. While I agree with Niebuhr’s feminist critics that the attempts of women to find their particular selves should in no way be compromised, I also want to point out that there is danger that the legitimate appeal for self-love being corrupted by the idolization of the self, feminine or otherwise.
3.3 Love, Justice and the Family

3.3.1 The Relation between Love and Justice

Niebuhr views love as the essential and final moral law for human being, which is revealed and fulfilled in the suffering of Christ who seeks nothing for himself. The sacrificial love of Christ on the cross as boundless self-giving therefore is the pinnacle of ethics, which all human moral achievements approximate to and are judged by. Saiving, however, points out that the understanding of sacrificial love as the solution to human predicament is problematic. According to her, since the concepts of love and sin are mutually dependent, if Niebuhr’s analysis of human condition fails to fit with women’s experience, his understanding of self-giving love as the law of human being is also irrelevant to women.²⁸⁴ Plaskow follows Saiving on this point by further arguing that the ideal of sacrificial love is not only irrelevant to women’s situation, but destructive to those who are suffering from the sin of self-loss and simply have no self to sacrifice:

Self-sacrifice may be relevant to a self whose primary impulse is toward self-assertion…The language of self-sacrifice conflicts with personhood and becomes destructive when it suggests that the struggle to become a centered self, to achieve full independent selfhood, is sinful.²⁸⁵

Both Saiving and Plaskow understand Niebuhr as preaching the full embodiment of the ideal of love in human motives and actions, as Saiving writes:

Love, according to these theologians, is completely self-giving, taking no thought for its own interests but seeking only the good of the other. Love makes no value judgments concerning the other’s worth; it demands neither merit in the other nor recompense for itself but gives itself freely, fully, and without calculation. Love is unconditional forgiveness…Love is personal; it is the concrete relatedness of an I to a Thou, in which the I casts aside all its

²⁸⁵ Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 86-87.
particularities, all its self-affirmations, everything which separates it from the Thou, and becomes wholly receptive to the other.286

However, Niebuhr’s understanding of love is more profound than that. To be noted, for him the discussion of love cannot be separated from justice. The relationship between love and justice is a persistent theme in his writings. Niebuhr repeatedly stresses that the norm of sacrificial love cannot be regarded as a simple possibility. It is rather an “impossible possibility.” To say that disinterested love is a possibility means love is relevant to human existence as a standard and norm. Love is possible in terms of being “a perpetual source of judgment upon every other norm which may be used tentatively to describe the self’s duties and obligations.”287 To say that disinterested love is impossible or not a simple possibility means such love can only be approximated in varying degrees, rather than fully realized in personal and public life. The ethical teaching of Jesus as an absolute standard by which both personal and social righteousness are judged is “unattainable” in history.288 If we are realistic about human condition, Niebuhr claims, we’ll admit that life never relates to life in such a perfect and loving way that there is total conformity of will with will. Human beings cannot love each other unconditionally in pure love—even in the most intimate relationships there is careful calculation of rights and interests. So the intermediate norm of justice, rather than the ultimate norm of love, should be regarded as the foundation for a possible social ethics in order to prevent one life from taking advantage of another:

The intermediate norm of justice is particularly important in the institutional and collective relationships of mankind. But even in individual and personal relations the ultimate level of sacrificial self-giving is not reached without an intermediate level of justice. On this level the

287 Niebuhr, Faith and History, 179.
first consideration is not that life should be related to life through the disinterested concern of each for the other, but that life should be prevented from exploiting, enslaving, or taking advantage of other life.289

For Niebuhr justice as the application of love is closer to existence than the ideal of love. It is love in rational form that both approximates and contradicts love under the condition of sin. Since justice rests upon equilibrium of powers, it admits the claims and interests of the self. So in this sense justice is less than the law of love, yet without justice, love degenerates into sentimentality which is indifferent to evil.

Saiving and Plaskow complain that sacrificial love as an essential norm is irrelevant and destructive to women. However, for Niebuhr pure love is irrelevant and harmful to everyone if it is divorced from the law of justice and presented as a simple possibility: “But any illusion of a world of perfect love without these imperfect harmonies of justice must ultimately turn the dream of love into a nightmare of tyranny and injustice.”290 In particular Niebuhr criticizes the fallacies of idealistic moralism which degrades the love commandment into sentimental versions that simply counsel people to be more loving and less selfish. Being blind to the reality of human condition and the “depths of evil,” Niebuhr faults religious idealism of having no power to counter the sinfulness of the world—it may easily become an accomplice of unjust institutions, and the love it proclaims thus becomes a cover of pretensions:

…moral idealism tends to create hypocrites who underestimate their own selfishness and the persistence of selfishness in society.291

Love in the form of philanthropy is, in fact, on a lower level than a high form of justice. For philanthropy is given to those who make no claims against us, who do not challenge our goodness or disinterestedness. An act of philanthropy may thus be an expression of both

291 Niebuhr, “When Will Christians Stop Fooling Themselves,” in Love and Justice, 42.
power and moral complacency. An act of justice on the other hand requires the humble recognition that the claim that another makes against us may be legitimate.\textsuperscript{292}

Niebuhr argues that it is the demand of justice that the church’s teachings of sacrificial love should be directed to the powerful, rather than the powerless, not only because the privileged has greater responsibility than the disinherited, but also, it is the privileged “who makes professions of Christian idealism” and deforms the ideal of love into a mechanism of control:

If the church wants to insinuate the spirit of love into the social struggle, it ought to begin with the privileged groups...If the portion of society that benefits from social inequality and which is endangered by a rising tide of social discontent attempts to counsel love, forgiveness, and patience to the discontented, it will convict itself of hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{293}

Love cannot take the place of justice: “a religion which holds love to be the final law of life stultifies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love.”\textsuperscript{294} Yet it is also true for Niebuhr that justice is made possible by love: “anything short of love cannot be perfect justice.”\textsuperscript{295} Love makes people sensitive to the needs and rights of others, without love one only wants justice when his/her interests are threatened, while being heedless of justice for others. Niebuhr warns against those who think the law of justice is the final end in itself that “justice degenerates into mere order without justice if the pull of love is not upon it.”\textsuperscript{296} Justice without love is at danger of being corrupted since “the justice which even good men design is partial to those who design it.”\textsuperscript{297} Every structure of justice, he says, contains

\textsuperscript{294} Niebuhr, \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness}, 131.
\textsuperscript{295} Niebuhr, “Christians Faith and Natural Law,” in \textit{Love and Justice}, 49.
\textsuperscript{296} Niebuhr, \textit{Faith and History}, 185.
\textsuperscript{297} Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, 266.
“elements of injustice that stand in contradiction to the law of love,” and therefore it also contains “higher possibilities of justice that must be realized in terms of institutions and structures.”\(^{298}\) In the same way that love cannot substitute for justice, justice also cannot substitute for love.

3.3.2 Does Niebuhr Promote Private Idealism?

In their criticisms Saiving and Plaskow omit Niebuhr’s discussion of justice and its dialectical relationship with love. As a result, they misread Niebuhr as an idealist who views sacrificial love as a simple possibility, which is quite the opposite of Niebuhr’s thought. Acknowledging Niebuhr’s emphasis upon justice in social life, some other feminists, however, charge Niebuhr for dividing the public and private spheres. It is said that for Niebuhr justice is relevant to the public life, while love is more likely to be fulfilled in the private realm of family. Since the private realm is usually the realm of women, these feminist theologians argue, women are encouraged to sacrifice, and love becomes the highest norm for them. Beverly Harrison complains that it never occurs to Niebuhr that there are dynamics of power and distortions in domestic life just like in the public sphere. As a result, the family is romanticized: “Niebuhr…characterized familial relationships as the sphere of human life in which mutuality and sacrifice can express themselves directly in human action.”\(^{299}\) Hampson also suggests that there is a private/public split in Niebuhr’s thought: “Niebuhr moreover has a different ethic operating for the private sphere of the family than for the public world. In the family love should rule, but in the public sphere no more than justice is possible.” She argues that Niebuhr’s treatment of love as a moral norm more applicable to intimate relationships is particularly dangerous to women since it undercuts “women’s justifiable attempts to assert their equality.”\(^ {300}\)


\(^ {300}\) Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 126.
For Ruether the division of private and public moralities in Niebuhr’s ethics represents a tendency of Protestant theology to sanctify the split between the home and the workplace. “Morality becomes appropriate only to the individual person-to-person relation exemplified by marriage. Love morality is ‘unrealistic’ in the public sphere. Here the only possible morality is that of a ‘justice’ defined as a balancing of competitive egoism.” This “essential dichotomy in bourgeois culture between the home and public life” has two implications, says Ruether. Firstly, morality is privatized and eventually associated with women, thus women are expected to exhibit sacrificial love and to be “moral” and they “become pre-eminently the symbol of the private sphere of altruistic ‘morality.’” This recognition of women’s “morality,” Ruether argues, serves to restrict them to domestic sphere: “The domestication of morality and religion in bourgeois culture also becomes a new ‘law’ by which women are morally forbidden to ‘leave the home’ and participate in the public world of men.” Second, Ruether contends that the privatization of morality more or less rationalizes or justifies the “competitive male egoism” in public sphere: “the male sphere of public life becomes rational in a way that is emptied of human values…A morality defined as ‘feminine’ has no place in the ‘real world’ of competitive male egoism and technological rationality.”

Ruether understands “justice” in Niebuhr’s ethics as a balance of “competitive male egoism” which leaves the interests of the powerful intact. However, for Niebuhr the fundamental character of justice lies exactly in its apprehension of the concurrent interests, rather than subordinating the interests of the weak to the interests of the strong, or merely coordinating the interests of different privileged groups. Ruether’s interpretation goes too far from the original meaning of Niebuhr’s understanding of justice. As Miles sees,

Consequently, for Niebuhr, political structures should secure justice or the balancing of

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301 Ruether, New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 199-200.
powers and interests for the sake of the weak. Contrary to Ruether and Collins’s argument, this move certainly does not leave the public realm devoid of morality. Justice is a moral value, even if it is not the highest value.302

Niebuhr’s feminist critics are not wrong about Niebuhr regarding the ideal of love as more possible in family than in societal groups. Nevertheless, in Niebuhr’s defense, he is not trying to split the public and private realm in a way that justice and love become unrelated guiding principles in each sphere. He is more concerned about maintaining the balance between love and justice, rather than separating them. The distinction of the public and private realm in Niebuhr’s thought is overly stated by his feminist critics. Niebuhr often uses family to illustrate the relation between love and justice. Yet what he tries to demonstrate is contrary to what his feminist critics charge him in many aspects. It is clear that Niebuhr does think that in the family love is more possible than justice since in the family “where lives are closely intertwined, happiness is destroyed if it is not shared...Justice by a careful calculation of competing rights is equally difficult, if not impossible.” 303 Nevertheless, this is more a description based on the observation of facts than an assertion that claims love should rule—or more important than justice in familial life. I think Niebuhr’s is quite a faithful description of human experience in family. With no doubt, people are more likely to exhibit self-giving love to those they have intimate relationship with than strangers in the street. Love is more effective in personal relations where people are more willing to make sacrifice rather than calculating interests. As Jodie Lyon-Baldwin sees,

I do not see anything inherently wrong with Niebuhr’s assertion that the family provides a purer and more possible approximation of the love ideal than a societal group...The ties of kinship and the intimacy of friendship serve to mitigate human sin in a way that the looser

302 Miles, The Bonds of Freedom, 41.
303 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 266.
In fact, the reason Niebuhr thinks love is more possible in the family is not because the family is the realm of “virtuous” women, or as Ruether suggests, women are deemed “pre-eminently ‘moral man,’”\(^{305}\) but because the family is a small-sized community where love and power are more likely to be coordinated.\(^ {306}\) Niebuhr says,

> A relation between the self and one other may be partly ecstatic; and in any case the calculation of relative interests may be reduced to a minimum. But as soon as a third person is introduced into the relation even the most perfect love requires a rational estimate of conflicting needs and interests.\(^ {307}\)

> The larger the group, the more difficult it is to achieve a common mind...\(^ {308}\)

Even in a small intimate group like family, a perfect coordination of love and power is impossible:

> Even in the family, in which the spirit of love may prevail more than in any other human institution, the careful calculation of rights is an important element in the harmony of the whole, though it must be observed that rights are so complexly intertwined in intimate relations that the calculations of justice lead to friction if love is not constantly infused into them.\(^ {309}\)

> Even the love within a family avails itself of customs and usages which stereotype given adjustments between various members of the family in such a way that each action need not be oriented by a fresh calculation of competing interests.\(^ {310}\)


If love cannot be fully realized even in most intimate relationships, Niebuhr argues, how can it be regarded as a simple possibility in larger communities? Some feminist theologians misinterpret Niebuhr as suggesting the possibility of love in the family and the impossibility of love in the public sphere. Yet for Niebuhr the impossibility of love in larger groups is implied by the impossibility of perfect love in the family and other intimate small groups. Niebuhr never restricts the norm of justice to the public sphere, instead, he stresses again and again the indispensability of justice in every fabric of social existence. For this reason, Niebuhr’s view of the family is hard to be described as idealistic or sentimental. He recognizes that there are injustice and manipulations in the family: “the family is also the source of that ‘alteregoism’ which is a more potent source of injustice than the egoism of the individual.” Therefore equilibrium of power is not only important, but necessary to familial life: “Without the balance of power even the most loving relations may degenerate into unjust relations, and love may become the screen which hides injustice.”

For example, Niebuhr sees the possibility of love being used as a tool for the parental power in the family. The parents may not be aware of their desire to control in their sacrifice and love, but the children know, and constantly and naturally, they resist the love of the parents, which they suspect is compounded subtly with power impulses. Niebuhr also criticizes the male dominance in the family and church. The sin of “male arrogance,” according to Niebuhr, is embodied in theories that maintain the supremacy and headship of men as the order of creation:

For the supremacy of the male over the female, all orthodox Christian theory finds additional support in Pauline-Biblical thought so that its assurance about its supposed absolute standard is made doubly sure, having the support of both the Bible and the law of reason. It is important to realize that no definition of the natural law between the sexes can be made

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312 Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 27.
without embodying something of the sin of male arrogance into the standard…any premature fixation of certain historical standards in regard to the family will inevitably tend to reinforce male arrogance and to retard justified efforts on the part of the female to achieve such freedom…\(^{314}\)

Contrary to Hampson’s claim that Niebuhr’s realism is conservative and supports the *status quo* because he “fails to speak of the need for those who are powerless to stake a claim for power,”\(^{315}\) Niebuhr does speak of the need for women to challenge “the unjust dominance of the male in traditional society” by gaining economic and political power: “Even in the family relationship, where love has been a more potent force than in less intimate social organization, the autocracy of the male was not challenged until the women gained a measure of economic independence.”\(^ {316}\) According to him women cannot trust their appeal for equality merely upon rational arguments and persuasion, hoping men will simple give up their privileges. “Even when the individual is prompted to give himself in devotion to…the family,” he writes, it “does not exclude the possibility of an autocratic relationship toward it. The tyranny of the husband and father in the family has yielded only very slowly to the principle of mutuality.” Therefore women need to secure sufficient power in order to maintain a balance of powers and interests which is a basic condition of justice:

> It was not until they [women] could avail themselves of the weapon of economic power and independence that they were able to gain a complete victory. Nor could they remove various economic disabilities from which they suffered without first securing political power in the state.\(^ {317}\)

As we can see, Niebuhr emphasizes the role of justice in the private realm the

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\(^{315}\) Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 125.


same as he emphasizes it in the public realm. If like Ruether and other feminist theologians say, private justice is the justice which works in the family, and public justice is the justice which rules in the public sphere—Niebuhr never distinguishes these two in his works, the necessity of maintaining justice in the private sphere (a relatively more loving environment) exactly manifests the urgency of fighting for it in the public sphere. However, he also warns that if justice excludes love, it will become intolerable not only because there will be tensions and frictions, but also the relation between human being will degenerate into mere calculation.318 Therefore there must be the norm of love as both a foundation and counterpart of justice, initiating it, preserving it, balancing it, and judging it—no matter in the public realm, or in the private realm.319

3.3.3 Conclusion

Like many other antitheses, Niebuhr views love and justice dialectically. For him these two cannot be separated either in the public sphere, or in the domestic sphere. The feminist critique of Niebuhr on the issues of love, justice and family, as Miles notices, “simply do not fit the textual evidence within Niebuhr.”320 We can say Niebuhr and his feminist critics actually have a lot in common regarding the issues of love, justice and family: they both promote justice in the domestic realm, criticize the supremacy of the male over the female in the family and in the church, and speak of the need for women to gain economic and political power.

318 Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, 27.
319 Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, 43.
320 Miles, The Bonds of Freedom, 43.
3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have revisited several important concepts in Niebuhr’s theology of sin and the feminist critique of his thought. In section 1, I point out that Niebuhr has two different views of pride—moral pride and theological pride. For Niebuhr, the most basic sin is theological pride rather than moral pride, while his feminist critics mainly talk about pride on a socio-moral level. A failure to recognize the double-level character of Niebuhiian pride results in a mismatch in the feminist critique. In section 2, I clarify that Niebuhr and his feminist critics also have different understandings of the self. Niebuhr regards the human self as a synthesis of nature and spirit, while for some of his feminist critics the feminine self is the creatureliness or nature that women is close to. For Niebuhr the self becomes itself in its relationship with God, therefore sensuality as the escape from freedom is the escape from the source of freedom, from God; while for Niebuhr’s feminist critics the escape from freedom is the escape from the feminine self as woman’s nature. While feminist theologians deliver a very important message: self-love is important to women, some feminist theologians’ identification of the feminine self with the ultimate ground that provides for women final meaning and truth is in danger of becoming idolization of the feminine self. In section 3 I point out that the feminist misreading of Niebuhr on the issues of love, justice and the family is prevalent and argue that Niebuhr and his feminist critics in fact have a lot of similar viewpoints on these topics.
Chapter IV. The Problems with the Feminist Critique: Methodological and Worldview Considerations

This chapter is my attempt to lay the foundation for my response to the feminist critique. In section 1, I question the methodological plausibility of the feminist critique. In section 2, two presuppositions of feminist theology of sin—the idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity—are analyzed. In section 3, I respond to the idea of innocence, and leave the issue of secularity to be dealt with in the next chapter.
4.1 The Methodological Problem with the Appeal to Women’s Experience

4.1.1 Historical Conditioning of Women’s Experience

The appeal to women’s experience is a main characteristic of the feminist critique of traditional theology. As mentioned earlier, feminist theologians realize that theology is far from being unbiased or objective in terms of disclosing the truth of Christian faith. Theology is not infallible; it is in fact affected by the lived experience of the theologian. Traditional theological reflections, many feminist theologians find, are infused with male prejudices and ideologies, which exclude voices of women. It is then crucial to maintain the subjective character of theology, they contend, so that various experiences of women can be included in the doing of theology. Otherwise the voices of men alone—which are in fact highly subjective, are objectified as truth. The use of women’s experience enables feminist theologians to situate theological reflections within a new context. It reveals in many aspects how irrelevant traditional theology can become regarding women’s joys, hopes, fears, and doubts. Women’s experience therefore is feminist theologians’ most basic, as well as most powerful, weapon against patriarchal prejudices and stereotypes. Many feminist theologians believe that with its source and foundation being concrete female experience rather than abstract theories, feminist theology has a vantage point of getting in touch with the actuality of women’s lives and their understandings of the Christian faith.

However, in spite of this, women’s experience could become some feminist theologies’ worst enemy. Since the credibility of some feminist claims is dependent entirely upon their solidarity with women’s experience, in this way, when “feminist” theories are not in accordance with women’s experience, their validity will be questioned. Many feminist theologians regard themselves as faithful advocates for women’s experience since their critique draws from the experience of individual women as the criterion of truth and is therefore “empirical” in nature. Nonetheless, every feminist theologian knows that personal experience has no credibility for the public if it stays personal. Since validity comes from the confirmation of experience, a feminist theology loses meaning if
it only articulates the personal experience of the theologian. Subjective experience is powerful, only when it is resonant with the experiences of many other women and consequently becomes less than subjective. Therefore while holding on to the importance of personal experience, feminist theologians need to prove what they advocate are not just personal feelings and opinions, but also common to other women. The implication here is that there are some essential characteristics or commonalities in women’s experience that is mirrored and manifested by the feminist’s discourse.

Nevertheless, particular experiences of women usually do not fit into universal categorizations. As a matter of fact, while many women share feminists’ notion of economical, political, and intellectual equality of women with men, there are plenty of them who feel negative toward feminism. Some feminists believe women’s resistance against feminism is a backlash that undermines the gains of feminist movement. They argue that those women are so shaped by patriarchal traditions that they suffer from a “false consciousness.” In other words, those women are in denial because they “have not shaped or even known their own experience.”321 It rarely occurs to these feminists that maybe some women reject feminism not because they don’t know their experiences, but because they know their experiences so well that they find some feminist theories have stopped listening and speaking to them.

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, for example, point out that young women shun the feminist label because “they don’t want to be associated with spooky stereotypes about feminists and their freaky excesses.”322 Naomi Wolf notices that mainstream feminism has become “a checklist of attitudes” produced by a minority. She believes that it is the primary reason many women feel an aversion to it: “Just because they resent ‘men’—or sexist stereotypes—defining them from one side, they resent what they see as a feminist stereotype defining them on the other.” Ironically, says Wolf, women who feel irritated by feminism

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321 Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, Womanspirit Rising, 6.
and its “package of attitudes” are indeed “feminists in the best,” since they know they are particular individuals and thus “resist being boxed into someone else’s overloaded agenda.”323 Endowing themselves the right to decide what is true and false for women (or for particular groups of women), some feminists somehow repeat the same mistake of the men they criticize. By doing that, they assume an authority that most women don’t recognize as being valid. “Feminism” thus becomes an elitist club, which includes the minority “enlightened” women, in contrast with other “blinded” women who need to be enlightened—those who Mary Daly disdainfully refers to as “parasites.” In this way, as Wolf sees, the definition of feminism is clearly “ideologically overloaded.” It is not just ignorant of, but hostile to female experiences that are at odds with its claims: “Instead of offering a mighty yes to all women’s individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined in the popular imagination as a massive no to everything outside a narrow set of endorsement.”324

It thus gives rise to the suspicion that whether the fundamental claims in some feminist theories are merely generalizations of women’s immediate experience. If “feminism was committed to the liberation of women’s creativity,” as Angela West asks, “why was it that so much of feminist writing and activity based on these assumptions followed such a very predictable stereotype?”325 What some feminists ignore here is, if men’s experience is so conditioned by gender identity so that their experience is inapplicable to women’s condition, the experience of feminists may also be conditioned by their class, race, nationality and personal circumstances that it becomes irrelevant to women who stand in different traditions. Sheila Greeve Davancy points out that “feminist theology’s emphasis on commonality, its essentialist undercurrent, and its prioritizing of gender as an analytical tool all conspired to conceal the racial and class differences among women, and hence allowed white feminists to avoid responsibility for our

324 Ibid., 62.
complicity in the oppression of other women.” 326 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite also criticizes white feminists for offering analyses about women regardless of class and race. She writes,

The absence of an analysis of class and race in white feminist thought is not due to the fact that white women have no experience of class and race along with their sex, but to the fact that they have not allowed their consciousness of the interconnectedness of these social forces to become central. I believe that class and race solidarity have been a source of the bonding among white women, and what is often labeled as sisterhood is in fact sometimes economic and ethnic solidarity. 327

Thistlethwaite argues that a fundamental theory of female sin like Saiving’s is misleading, as it only seeks to articulate the differences between the sexes, yet being blind to the diversity within women. In the end, it makes the mistake of regarding the single voice of white women as normative for all nonwhite women. For African-American women, Thistlethwaite notices, sin is not so much a failure to gain selfhood than losing a sense of community. 328 Despite Niebuhr’s feminist critics accusing him for making an unwarranted claim of pride or self-centeredness as being a primary sin for human being, their claim of sensuality or self-loss as a primary sin for women is also over-generalized. And as I will show later, it is not as empirical as they tend to think.

West sees that the hunger for the essence of women’s “real experience” in some feminist theologies is “an understandable instinct for self-preservation” which will continue to haunt “until a new metaphysical place of safety is perceived.” 329 Thus here comes the dilemma of these feminist theologies: on the one hand many feminists realize that the experience of women is too diverse to be homogenized

327 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 45-46.
328 Ibid., 78-79; 85-86.
329 West, Deadly Innocence, 28.
into fixed categories; on the other hand, however, they constantly yield to the temptation of universalizing particular experiences so that their theories don’t have to be built on the shifting ground of relativity. In theory, particularity and differences are crucial; but in reality, universal validity also matters. Many feminist theologians employ the experiences of individual women to dismantle the edifice of traditional theology. However, when it comes to the constructive work, they are repeating many mistakes they often to criticize. The distance between feminist theological methodology and theological construction thus makes feminist efforts continuously move back and forth between exalting subjectivity and seeking fundamental certainties.

West suggests that there is a commonality between feminism and the male chauvinism that it criticizes. While many feminists accuse traditional theology for silencing women’s voices, she says, they in turn silence the voice of Christian tradition, creating a seemingly impassable gulf between women’s experience and the thought of male theologians. By doing so, the rejection of traditional theology is justified. Yet these feminist theologians only replace the old faith with their new beliefs and prejudices, while pretending they can do justice to the full spectrum of women’s experience. The myth of women’s experience thus conceals more truth than it reveals, since in feminist theology women’s experience now becomes a “concealed dogma,” an authority that cannot be challenged:

This is because as women’s experience the implication is that it cannot be subject to criticism from men. And because it is women’s individual experience, the implication is that it is unique and therefore cannot be subject to the criteria of public discourse. Thus, cleverly, it achieves a quasi-dogma status while fiercely denying connection with dogma of any sort. It represents women’s claim to authoritative utterance.330

Obviously, many feminist theologians recognize the inevitability of theological thoughts being conditioned—except for their own thoughts. Due to their

330 Ibid., 65.
obsession with pure empiricism, many feminist theologians fail to realize the fact that like the theology of pure reason, the theology of pure experience is a fairy tale. Any generalization of the raw experiential materials is a process of reframing and retelling influenced by the theologian’s inclinations. No one (feminists included, of course) can be an absolutely faithful interpreter of other people’s experience—though it does not mean any interpretation of the sort is necessarily wrong or impossible.

4.1.2 The Role of Experience: An Epistemological Reflection

On the role of experience, Niebuhr is clearly more realistic comparing to his feminist critics. He is well aware of the limitation of modern mind’s uncritical acceptance of human experience as the criterion of truth. As we have seen in 1.2, Niebuhr sees that there is an illusion in modern social science that scientific inquiry is possible without a conceptual framework. He recognizes that every empirical observation has a framework of meaning as its presupposition to guide and direct its conclusions:

Thus modern culture, which imagines itself engaged in a purely “scientific” analysis of historical events, invariably betrays that a faith is guiding its inquiry…And the faith determines the conclusions which the scientist reaches, though he assumes that these conclusions are the fruit of his empirical inquiry.331

The guiding presuppositions are less than neutral. They are otherwise held as convictions, or to be more precisely, specific faiths, acting as filters for the immediate data of experience. Niebuhr never considers his interpretation of human condition as presuppositionless. On the contrary, he acknowledges that in his discussion of the problems of life, the Christian answer is assumed.332

truth of Christian faith, as Niebuhr sees it, comes from the mystery of divine grace, which transcends human grasp and therefore cannot be determined by experience. Theology should not be just the summation of the theologian’s lived experience. It must be “dogmatic” in the sense that it is essentially the reflections upon the revelation of God. However, to say theology is dogmatic in nature does not mean it is unempirical or untrue. Guiding presuppositions and empirical data do not necessarily stand in opposition. In fact, the validity of presupposition is usually verified by its coherence with experience. As Niebuhr says,

Guiding presuppositions do indeed color the evidence accumulated by experience; but they do not fully control experience. Presuppositions are like spectacles worn by a nearsighted or myopic man. He cannot see without the spectacles. But if evidence other than that gathered by his sight persuades him that his spectacles are inadequate to help him see what he ought to see, he will change his spectacles.\(^{333}\)

For Niebuhr, Christian faith does not contradict experience but illuminates and makes sense of it.\(^{334}\) He also tries to prove in his works that compared to alternative faiths (classical and modern), Christian faith is more adequate to understand human experience.

Like Niebuhr, many philosophers of science realize that empirical observations are theory-laden.\(^{335}\) Harold I. Brown, for example, counters the distinction between “seeing” and “seeing as” by pointing out that “seeing” is always “seeing as” since any scientific observation is shaped by prior knowledge:

In every case in which I see that something is the case I gain information as a result of my seeing, but what information I gain depends not only on what visual events take place in my

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\(^{335}\) This is not an uncontroversial issue in the philosophy of science. I am not an expert in this field. However, although the following content doesn’t stand for the views of all philosophers of science, it is a general trend in the philosophy of science which is relevant and helpful to our discussion.
eyes, nerves and brain, but also on what information I bring with me…But as long as these observations remain on a purely phenomenal level, they do not become a part of our knowledge and the very possibility of their becoming relevant to our knowledge depends on their already being related to some body of information.

The pure, observable data become aware to our perception through meaning: “in all cases of significant perception it is only meanings that we are concerned with and meanings that we see.” And meaning is conferred on experience by the theories we hold. If an observer has no relevant knowledge of the observed data, then it will be impossible for her or him to learn things from this observation. In scientific research, scientists cannot suspend all their presumptions to conduct an unbiased search for facts. What they do, Brown points out, is to employ the theories they hold as grounds to recognize which of the observed data are significant or relevant, and which are not.

The scientist does not record everything he observes but rather only those things which the theories he accepts indicates are significant. A physicist examining cloud chamber photographs, for example, will ignore any number of streaks as spurious marks due to dirt or to scratches on the photograph.

Our experience of the external world is “determined” to a certain extent by various prior presuppositions. However, presuppositions or theories are not the only source of experience. What we perceive is also subjected to the theory-independent world:

Rather, the objects of perception are the results of contributions from both our theories and the action of the external world on our sense organs. Because of this dual source of our

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337 Ibid., 89.
338 Ibid., 90.
percepts, objects can be seen in many different ways, but it does not follow that a given object can be seen in any way at all...A variety of interpretations of, for example, the Critique of Pure Reason have been proposed, but no matter how widely scholars differ on what is correct reading of the text, no one can open the Critique and read the Nichomachean Ethics or Moby Dick.\textsuperscript{339}

Presumptions cannot entirely dictate experience. When theories don’t fit with experience, Brown says, recalcitrant data will eventually lead to the overthrow of scientific theories:

Whenever the structure of theory and the structure of the physical world fail to mesh, anomalies will appear and although many anomalous events may eventually be interpreted in terms of accepted theory, it is the recalcitrant anomalies that eventually lead to the overthrow of one theory and its replacement by another, i.e., to scientific revolutions.\textsuperscript{340}

Nicholas Rescher also states that coherence with data is crucial for the validity of presumptions. He understands presumption as “a thesis that is provisionally appropriate,” or in other words, it is “a contention that remains in place until something better comes along.”\textsuperscript{341} Presumption or belief is indispensable in practical cognition, Rescher says, without which we cannot accept any empirical facts as provisionally real to start our inquiry. However, the indispensability of presumptions does not provide it incorrigible justification. Presumptions are not established truths. They are just truth candidates:

…theses that can serve as acceptance-candidates in the context of the inquiry, plausible contentions which, at best, are merely \textit{presumptively} true (like the “data of sense”). These are not certified truths (or even probable truths) but theses that are in a position to make some

\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{340} Ibid., 109.
claims on us for acceptance: They are *prima facie* truths in the sense that we would incline to grant them acceptance-as-true *if* (and this is a very big IF) there were no countervailing considerations on the scene.342

Rescher contends that the validation of a presumption require a check of both theoretical and pragmatic validation. It is important that the presumption is theoretically consistent and therefore can provide rationale to justify itself and minimize its implausibility. However, cognitive systems are not validated just by theoretical coherence since coherence by itself is not preliminary determination of truth (a fiction can be perfectly coherent, too). The static theory needs to be tested and corrected by examining the empirical facts. What fits more with eventual experience gains more legitimation than its available alternatives. As Rescher says, “Initially we look to promise and potential but in the end it is applicative efficacy that counts.” “Legitimation is thus evidenced by the fact of survival through historical vicissitudes.”343

To go back to our original subject of the methodology of the feminist critique, we will find that when some feminist theologians claim that their theology of sin is based on no *a priori* commitment but only women’s experience, it seems that their theology of sin has already got inherent coherence with experience, providing their theories with more plausibility. Yet these advantages are in fact illusions. As pointed out above, all theories have presuppositions. By presuming that their own theories are purely empirical, Niebuhr’s feminist critics miss out a very important point: it is not whether a theology is grounded on a certain presupposition or not, but on what kind of presupposition or faith it is grounded. Only by identifying the guiding presupposition of feminist theology of sin, I contend, can it be possible to examine whether or not (or to what extent) is the presupposition confirmed by the lived experience of women, namely, whether the feminist interpretation has both theoretical value and applicative fruitfulness. And

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342 Ibid., 132.
343 Ibid., 96; 142.
only in this way can the feminist critique of Niebuhr be better understood and evaluated.
4.2 The Presuppositions of the Feminist Critique

4.2.1 The Idea of Women’s Innocence

Niebuhr’s feminist critics have much to say about the patriarchal assumptions that underlie the traditional/Niebuhrian doctrine of sin—some of these critiques make good sense, others do not. However, upon what presupposition is their critique based? In this section, I will point out two major presuppositions of the feminist critique: the idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity.

We have seen that many feminist theologians reject the idea of self-centeredness being the major problem of women, and replace it with self-abnegation, which is quite different from the traditional/Niebuhrian understanding of sin. For now sin is not something women have done, but something they haven’t done. It gives rise to a question: is feminist theology of sin really about sin? For people who do nothing but are only passive recipients of injustice are to be more accurately called victims rather than sinners. What Christian doctrine of sin primarily concerns is the human condition of sinfulness—being victimized by sin is one of the consequences of sin, but it is not the whole of it. Feminist theology of sin, however, focuses often not on women’s sin, but on how women are sinned against. It is theoretically insightful and practically important to approach the issue of sin from the perspective of the sinned-against. But a robust explanation of women’s sin also requires an honest examination of the concrete sins of women, which the feminist descriptions lack. Feminist theologians point out that the Christian tradition is guilty of blaming victims for sins that are committed against them. Calling victims to repent for the sins against them will of course involve injustice. However, if Christian theology of sin says anything, it is that no human being who is involved in social and historical existence can be regarded as a pure victim. As Apostle Paul says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”344 “All have sinned” means that all human beings have committed sin in this way or that. Their state of being sinned against doesn’t negate the fact that they often play the role of active sinners.

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344 Romans 3:23, NIV.
too.

In the feminist discussion of sin, women’s capability of sinning actively against others is almost unmentioned. If women sin actively, many feminist theologians contend, they only do so by sinning against themselves. For these feminist theologians, women’s sin is an unwillingness to shoulder the responsibility to become a self, to claim power and fight back sins that are committed against them, or as Plaskow says, women’s sin is to leave the sin of pride to men. Put differently, women’s primary sin is the sin against their selves, while men’s primary sin is the pride that sin against other selves. Here women’s sin is measured by their sufferings and losses, rather than behaviors that will bring about the sufferings of others. This understanding of sin, I contend, is supported by a hidden myth of women’s innocence. Its implication is that women’s sins hurt no one except for themselves; it is men alone who are responsible for the evils and injustice of the world. Niebuhr’s feminist critics may argue that their theology doesn’t promote the innocence of women since the sin against one’s self is as severe as the sin against other selves. I totally agree with that. But is it really true that women just either sin against themselves or are sinned against? Denying women’s capability of sinning against others does make women less sinful and more innocent than those who can sin against both their own selves and other selves. In many feminist theologies of sin, women are depicted as sacrificial, loving, caring and kind creatures. In this way, these feminists develop a myth of women being the opposite of selfishness, dominance, cruelty, and in the end, immorality.

Some feminist theologies of sin, I argue, are not so much about women’s sin than about men’s sin and women’s innocence. However, the idea of women’s innocence is not just the presumption of feminist theology of sin, as Patricia Pearson observes, but it is in fact the “transcendent theme” of feminism and thus is “one of the most abiding myths of our time.” Wolf also finds that in the belief

345 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 92.
system of feminism

...all evil—from environment desecration to meat eating to child abuse—is seen to derive from the will to power, which is confined to men and institutionalized in patriarchy. Men are responsible for hierarchy, and hierarchy is the original sin of all social organization. Women are not hierarchical but egalitarian, inclined to organize in a “web” rather than a “ladder.” Men want to dominate and separate; women want to communicate and connect. Men—especially western men—are individualistic autocrats; women are communitarian healers...Men kill; women give life. If women ran the world there would be no warfare.347

However, the image of woman that feminists create is so idealistic that it often contradicts empirical facts. For example, despite the tendency to regard violence as masculine and women as ones who suffer from it, Pearson points out that

Women commit the majority of child homicides in the United States, a greater share of physical child abuse, an equal rate of sibling violence and assaults on the elderly, about a quarter of child sexual abuse, an overwhelming share of the killings of newborns, and a fair preponderance of spousal assaults.348

How, Pearson asks, can we “affirm ourselves to be as complex, desirous, and independent as men without conceding the antisocial potential in those qualities?”349 Pearson suggests that instead of insisting on women’s innocence, we might “insist on the capacity of all women to bring their force of will to bear upon the world.”350

It is not that women don’t have arrogance, violence, or malice in them, but as I will show in the next section, numerous facts that dispute women’s innocence are ignored in the feminist analysis. This ignoring of certain empirical facts can be

347 Wolf, Fire with Fire, 144.
348 Pearson, When She Was Bad, 7.
349 Ibid., 32.
350 Ibid., 24.
ascribed to a commitment to presupposition. Ironically, the presupposition behind feminist theology of sin is not the idea of human sinfulness, but the purity and perfectibility of woman. However, the idea of female innocence is not the only “faith” held by Niebuhr’s feminist critics. There is another correlated, but more essential belief that determines the trajectories of feminist theories, that is, the spirit of secularity.

4.2.2 The Spirit of Secularity

Secularity, or secularism here refers not to the process of secularization, but an attitude toward life and the world, which is both the cause and effect of the socio-structural process of secularization. According to Langdon Gilkey, the secular spirit has a this-worldly mindset, which radically affirms human existence and destiny in the visible, physical world bounded by space and time in which humankind live and die now. It is within the immediate environment of this world, not the realm beyond, that the secular spirit finds meaning, truth, and end. In other words, though finite and relative, the world is seen as self-explanatory, requiring no transcendent or other-worldly dimension to understand itself. 351 The transcendent God therefore becomes superfluous to the secular mind. We could say secularity implies atheism, but it should be noted that secularity is quite different from traditional atheism. As Hans Küng says,

There are many people today who no longer fight passionately for their atheistic convictions but are even less inclined to speak out passionately for a belief in God. Between skepticism and affirmation, we now find all too often an atheism that is not indeed militant but practical, everyday, and banal. 352

Secularism does not necessarily mean self-conscious atheism. As Steve Bruce

notices, it would merely be God-indifferent.\footnote{Steve Bruce, \textit{God is Dead: Secularization in the West} (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 42.} For many modern people, the discourse about God is hollow and unnecessary—it is irrelevant to their understanding of the world and their ways of living. In this way, Alistair McFadyen refers to secularity as a form of pragmatic atheism, as distinguished from a straightforward one:

This is…an atheism mediated, not so much by argued or reasoned conviction, as by basic and habitual \textit{practice}. For what characteristics the basic secularity of our society is not so much that there are publicly accepted arguments against the existence of God, positive reasons for disbelieving in God, but that there is a \textit{de facto} exclusion of God from public rationality, reference and discussion. Arguments against God are not needed where mentioning or invoking God makes no perceptible difference to the way in which we understand and explain the world…We live in our world as if there were no God.”\footnote{Alistair McFadyen, \textit{Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8-9.}

McFadyen suggests that the operational atheistic belief that marks the secular mind is the main cause for the problematization of the traditional sin-talk: “Losing our ability to speak of the world’s pathologies in relation to God represents a serious, concrete form of the loss of God that is a general characteristic of contemporary, Western culture.”\footnote{Ibid., 4.} In order to preserve the meaningfulness of the Christian doctrine of sin in the secular world, some theologians try to be conformable to tastes of the secular mind that find God-talk redundant. However, as McFadyen points out, with no reference to God the theology of sin loses its fundamental and functional core since it has no difference from what is offered by secular disciplines like psychology, sociology, or ethics—other than the fact that it uses an empty theological terminology of sin. The theology of sin therefore is “reduced to a rhetorical flourish added to secular discourses. Where the terminology remains in public use, it tends either to be trivialized or deployed as
an emotive device for passing judgment and attaching blame.”

Is feminist sin-talk caught up in the practical atheism McFadyen describes above? I believe this is largely the case. The eclipse of God-talk in feminist theologies of sin is obvious. Hampson herself admits:

What strikes me then about much modern theology—and this is not least true of feminist theology—is how profoundly secular it is. It is as though theology has lost its moorings. In the case of feminist theology, what seems to have replaced talk of God is largely talk of women’s experience. It is not even women’s experience of God: it is simply women’s experience.

The absence of God-talk in feminist theologies of sin can be justified by a secular premise. For the secular mind, anything goes beyond the tangible world is questionable. So God is either excluded from the secular sin-talk, or described as a radically immanent force (power-in-relation, vitalities of nature, power of finitude, et cetera.) connecting and sustaining the world. We have elaborated in chapter three that for Niebuhr pride as the primary sin is not just the will-to-power directed toward our fellow human beings, but is essentially a description of human existential condition, namely, a centering and glorifying of the self in front of God. However, in the critique of Niebuhr’s understanding of sin, many feminist theologians take up the minor issue to evade the major one. Sin in its theological sense—as a rupture of relation with God is either ignored or easily dismissed by the reason of “it doesn’t fit into women’s experience.” The reason why Niebuhr’s feminist critics avoid and thus respond negatively to Niebuhrian sin in its fundamental form, as now becomes more clear, is not just because it is unempirical, but because God is not needed in their analysis of women’s sin. According to the feminist sin-talk, women’s sin is not transgression committed against a transcendent God, but against the feminine selves. Since women’s sin

356 Ibid., 11.
357 Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 170.
does not violate God, God’s forgiveness is apparently irrelevant. The redemption of women doesn’t come from God’s grace manifested by the love of Jesus Christ on the cross, but from women’s love for themselves. Clearly there is no reason to waste time talking about God if women’s sin has nothing to do with God.

The secular mind is not able to fully appreciate the depths of the Christian doctrine of sin, since its angle of vision is only horizontal. After rejecting the transcendent aspect, the only legitimate way for the secular mind to understand sin is to understand it within a secular framework, that is, from an immanent, social-moral aspect. However, while a thoroughly secular analysis of human corruption can be God-indifferent, a theological explanation will require a little more than that. Understanding human corruption from the perspective of divine-human relationship is the most essential part of the Christian doctrine of sin. Like MacFadyen comments, if theology of sin stops “speaking of concrete pathologies in relation to God” and conforms itself “to the standards or reference afforded by non-theological discourses,” it is self-defeating in the process.358

Appealing only to secular experience as the source of analysis of women’s sin, as I see it, is a fundamental flaw in the feminist critique of Niebuhr. This is because it implies an a priori commitment to secularity and thus excludes many forms of religious experience, from which the Christian doctrine of sin finds validation. Moreover, the dimension of the transcendent is arguably indispensable in human life, without which we cannot even fully understand our secular experience. As Langdon Gilkey contends, to live a life on a strictly secular basis is nearly impossible since it cannot thematize or articulate the depth dimension of our actual life experiences. The modern man and woman in fact do not live as “secular” as they think—theyir desperate effort to create ultimate values (sisterhood, democracy or Marxism, for example) out of finite, relative, and transient realities betrays the fact that a dimension of ultimacy in human existence may well be inescapable:

358 McFadyen, Bound to Sin, 5-6.
The virtual absence in modern secular life of fundamental symbols, myths, and rituals concerning our human origins, our identity, our values, and our destiny does not mean that anxiety about these matters is never present or questions about them raised. What it does mean is that pseudo-myths and futile answers to these issues dominate our hopes and our fears.\textsuperscript{359}

The secular account of the human situation is not completely wrong, Gilkey says, but it is too thin to “reveal the wonder and meaning of life, or of its demonic depths and ever threatening nothingness.”\textsuperscript{360} The predicament of secular modernity is that on the one hand it denies the dimension of the absolute or transcendent; yet on the other hand, it desperately wants to grasp something certain, something more than the chaos of anarchism. That is why it is so hard for the secular narrative to escape imperialism, i.e., its drive to smash all standards while secretly universalizing and absolutizing its own ideological claims. As we will see in the following, this inherent self-contradiction of secular spirit will lead to some insoluble dilemmas that downplay the credibility of the feminist analysis of women’s sin both in theory and in practice.

4.2.3 Conclusion

The two presumptions of the feminist narrative of sin are interrelated. Secularity provides an ample basis for the belief in women’s innocence. It holds that once the transcendent reality, or any other external powers that prevent human beings progressing toward autonomy and self-actualization are removed, human beings are free to exercise benevolence. The feminist analysis of female nature confirms this by suggesting that women are essentially peace-loving, nurturing, related and contradictory to everything that comprises the sinful patriarchal

\textsuperscript{359} Gilkey, \textit{Naming the Whirlwind}, 305-306.
society. The two presuppositions of the feminist critique, I contend, need to be put under scrutiny by women’s experience, in order to evaluate their theoretical and practical fruitfulness. We will deal with the secularist presupposition of the feminist critique mainly in the next chapter, where we explore women’s experience of the transcendent which Niebuhr’s feminist critics left out in most of their analysis of women’s sin. But now, let us see if the idea of innocence fits with women’s experience.
4.3 Women and Pride

4.3.1 Self-loss and Secret Pride System—Karen Horney’s Psychoanalytic Analysis

As previously noted, for many feminist theologians women are passive victims other than active perpetrators. Women’s sin (self-loss) comes from the injustice being inflicted upon them. However, in the feminist discussion of sin, the fact that women can actually be selfish and arrogant is largely ignored. In response to Niebuhr’s claim that the love of dedicated mothers may be used as instrument to gain parental power upon children, Plaskow concedes that women in their traditional feminine role could be ambitious by controlling their husbands or children, yet she denies that such “female pride of power” derives from “pride.” In fact, she claims that it comes from the opposite: it is “the failure to take responsibility for becoming people in their own right that leads women to seize on the only power offered them.”

In this way, according to Plaskow, the will-to-power of women manifested in family life is not like the pride of man. Men’s pride is the real pride, while women’s pride is merely a by-product of women’s self-loss. However, does all of women’s pride come from their lack of pride? As one of those who explore the human self on both sides of pride and self-contempt, psychoanalyst Karen Horney suggests that the two are in fact inseparable. In her analysis of one pattern of neurotic strategies which she calls “moving toward people tendency” or “self-effacing solution,” Horney makes a sketch of self-effacing persons that resembles Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ description of women. Contrary to self-expansive persons who tend to glorify themselves and dominate others, self-effacing type feel the need to accommodate other people for intimacy, affection, sympathy, gratitude, or approval. They tend to subordinate themselves to others and take inferiority for granted. They try to live up to the expectations of others and become regardless of their own feelings: “He becomes ‘unselfish,’ self-sacrificing, undemanding—except for his unbounded desire for affection. He

361 Plaskow, Sex, Sin and Grace, 67.
becomes compliant, overconsiderate—within the limits possible for him—overappreciative, overgrateful, generous.”  

People with strong self-effacing tendency often find themselves being exploited or abused, but they still avoid conflicts at all cost. It is not because they do not have anger or resentment, Horney says, but because they are afraid of frictions. They try to be lovable and acceptable to others. For them, other people’s positive feelings toward them are more important than their own feelings: “His self-esteem rises and falls with their approval or disapproval, their affection or lack of it;” their “salvation lies in others.” Out of the emotional need to like and being liked by others, rather than a real faith in humankind, the self-effacing type constantly idealizes people, but the naïve optimism often makes them disappointed and become more insecure. Consequently, the thought of being despised by others reinforces their self-contempt. Self-effacing or compliant persons ease inner conflicts by smothering all their expansive desires. Their special set of values “lie in the direction of goodness, sympathy, love, generosity, unselfishness, humility; while egotism, ambition, callousness, unscrupulousness, wielding of power are abhorred.” Pride, or any selfish behavior is a taboo since compliant persons’ lives are oriented toward others. Their selves are subdued:

If we realize in detail the scope covered by the taboos, they constitute a crippling check on the person’s expansion, his capacity for fighting and for defending himself, his self-interest—on anything that might accrue to his growth or his self-esteem. The taboos and self-minimizing constitute a shrinking process that artificially reduces his stature.

It seems that the problem here is straightforward. Like Niebuhr’s feminist critics suggest, it is the problem of self-loss. Nevertheless, Horney finds that

363 Ibid., 55.
365 Ibid., 227.
366 Horney, Our Inner Conflicts, 55-56.
367 Horney, Neurosis and Human Growth, 219.
beneath self-effacing persons’ apparent selflessness, there is a secret pride system working. Since the idealized image of the self-effacing type is built upon “’lovable’ qualities such as unselfishness, goodness, generosity, humility, saintliness, nobility, sympathy,” the distance between their empirical self and glorified self not only makes them often tend to despise and hate their actual self, but also, it makes them put relentless demands upon themselves, trying to box themselves into their idealized self. Along with the coerciveness and victimization of their actual self, the process contains a special form of pride that detests the act of pride. Pride here is manifested indirectly by the awareness of moral superiority. To put it simply, self-effacing persons are often so proud of being sacrificial, humble, or selfless that they cannot allow the show of pride ruin their self-righteousness. Neurotics may present themselves in a self-effacing way, but they do so because it is the dictate of their proud idealized self. They tend to take blame and suffering easily, partly because they are not good fighters, and partly because they are bounded by the “shoulds” of their secret pride.

His need to be proud of himself is so imperative that he uses his imagination to turn these needs into virtues, to transform them into assets of which he can be proud. But only those compulsive needs which serve his drive to actualize his idealized self undergo this transformation. Conversely, he tends to suppress, deny, despise those which obstruct this drive.369

Self-effacing persons’ “shoulds” have only subjective value in terms of serving neurotic needs. As Horney points out, beneath the surface of self-loss and over-dependence on others lies a deep-rooted egocentricity:

…by egocentricity I do not mean selfishness or egotism in the sense of considering merely one’s own advantage. The neurotic may be callously selfish or too unselfish...But he is

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368 Ibid., 222.
369 Ibid., 93-94.
always egocentric in the sense of being wrapped up in himself. This need not be apparent on
the surface—he may be a lone wolf or life for and through others. Nevertheless he lives in any
case by his private religion (his idealized image), abides by his own laws (his shoulds). . . As a
result he not only becomes more isolated emotionally but it also becomes more difficult for
him to see other people as individuals in their own right, different from himself. They are
subordinated to his prime concern: himself.370

In self-effacing persons, pride and self-negation are so deeply intertwined that a
simplistic solution of establishing pride won’t do much help, especially when
neurotic pride is the force supporting the idealized, self-righteous image that
reinforces their shrinking attitude. Plaskow realizes that self-loss may hide under
the guise of pride, but she misses the fact that pride may also lurk underneath an
apparent selflessness. As Horney sees, very often pride wields selfless love as a
powerful weapon to expand:

If we understand the structure of the compliant type we can see why love is so all
important to him, why there is ‘method in his madness” . . . It promises to satisfy the need to be
liked as well as to dominate (through love), the need to take second place as well as excel
(through the partner’s undivided regard). It permits him to live out all his aggressive drives on
a justified, innocent, or even praiseworthy basis, while allow him at the same time to express
all the endearing qualities he has acquired. 371

Maybe it is because of this that others often find self-effacing persons’ love and
sacrifice suspicious, and their altruistic behaviors not as pure as claimed. Horney
regards the tendency of self-effacing as “a neurotic phenomenon in that it is an
irrational compulsive drive.” Although it is more common in women than in men,
she refuses to relate it specifically to femininity.372 For her there is no evidence to
prove that the female gender is naturally the “moving toward people” type, though

370 Ibid., 291-292.
371 Horney, Our Inner Conflicts, 60
372 Ibid.
some feminists seem to suggest so.

4.3.2 Far from Angels

It should be noted that while the pride of some women may lurk under their self-shrinking to a degree that no one notices that they are self-centered, some other women’s expansiveness may appear in a more explicit and open way. Lynne Segal puts it in this way: “I have often sought power in devious way but I have never been content to be powerless, unnoticed or simply passive. Nor has any other woman I have known.” What Segal tries to say is that although women constantly find themselves “being trapped, confined and devalued,” especially when they are under the authority of men, they “can and do find comfort and strength in the confirming consolations of their relative powerlessness.”373 It is only too often that women manage to find ways to power in things that suppress their will-to-power. As we have discussed, home is not only a place for women to display kindness and gentleness, it is also where women’s desire to manipulate and control is clearly manifested. “Mother dragons,” Segal notices, “may frighten or entrance the kids and may even threaten Father, at least within the confines of home, however much their real domestic lives may be based on financial dependence and social subservience.”374

Most women are not immune to pride or power; they just express it in various, and sometimes, devious ways. Just like Ted Peters finds after he quizzes many of his female students: “Women are just as susceptible to pride as men, they told me, but their pride does manifest itself somewhat differently. They viewed women as less given to boasting and bravado but more given to narcissism and manipulation.”375 The feminine ways of manipulation have many forms. Some women manipulate through love, some through weakness. One of the starkest

374 Ibid., 2.
examples is that women use self-hurt as a weapon of coercion and empowerment: “If you go, I will die.” As Pearson sees, female self-destruction is in fact as violent and aggressive as the destruction of others.\(^{376}\) And speaking of narcissism, it is very common that when a woman is proud of her beauty, the pride may not just come from love for the beauty itself, but comes from the satisfaction of exceeding other females and gaining power over males.

Give a closer look, we’ll find that the preference of feminist theologians’ selection of women’s experience is obvious. Not all kinds of women’s experience are taken into account in the analysis of women’s sin, but only those which will support the hidden presumption of women’s innocence. Women’s experience of being victimized and suppressed, as well as their tendency to sacrifice for their family, especially for their children, are heavily emphasized. All of these experiences confirm that women’s sin is self-loss, not self-inflation. Of course, these experiences cannot be simply dismissed as exaggerated or untrue, for they do expose women’s condition of being oppressed and their problem of self-shrinking. However, they are as one-dimensional as they are true. For example, very often in feminist theories women’s maternal capacity is linked to a close relationship with nature. Women’s involvement with childbearing and nurturing activities are used to prove that women are essentially more caring, more unselfish, and less aggressive than men. But many feminists fail to recognize that sometimes women’s selfishness can stem from their “unselfishness.” Since a mother pours much of her love and sacrifice in her family, when the interests of the little group are threatened, she will do whatever she can to protect and fight for them, even when those interests are petty and non-essential. Even doing so means exploiting and hurting people outside of the group, she doesn’t care, for she is so absorbed in her love for others (her family) that she can’t imagine her loved ones not getting things that they “should” have got. In this case, the unselfishness of a mother can be extremely exclusive and selfish. A woman may be completely selfish to her boyfriend, husband or children, to such a degree

\(^{376}\) Pearson, *When She Was Bad*, 21-24.
that she even loses herself to live for them, ceasing to be a real, independent self. But the same woman, at the same time when she is so devoted to the ones she love, she may also be completely selfish, mean or even cruel to the ones she does not care for.

“Though the victim-feminist worldview draws on the metaphor of nature to endorse interdependence and Gaia-like harmony,” Wolf reminds us, “it shies away from the fact that nature too has a dark side, an inbuilt competitiveness: the bloody, matter-of-fact-struggle when two adversaries seek the same resources, or when their relation is that of predator and prey.” 377 No matter how much sacrifice a woman gives to her family, or how subordinated is she in her played role, it still cannot whitewash the fact that the selfish drives are still inside of her, looking for an angle for herself and for her loved ones, and maybe ready to sacrifice anyone else who is in her way. We should not presume a loving and caring mother would definitely be a loving and caring boss, teacher, doctor, or co-worker. Being a mother, a wife, a daughter, and even a female, after all, does not exhaust modern women’s social existence:

The predicaments and concerns of most women could not possibly be seen as separate and separable from the material world they inhabit. It is a world which they share, to a considerable extent, with men of their own class, race, religion or sexual orientation. It is a predicament which is determined by factors other than their sex. 378

It is only too often that non-white women point out that while white or middle-class women accuse men for oppressing them, they also discriminate against colored, lower-class women; they benefit from and support the sinful system that legitimate the superiority of powerful groups and the exploitation of the earth; they did not share power with other women; they regard their experience as norm for women of all colors and classes. In a word, they are as

378 Segal, *Is the Future Female?* 23.
proud and self-centered as men.\textsuperscript{379} However, it does not mean we can conclude that given their more disadvantaged situation of subordination, non-white or lower-class women are less likely to exercise power—for human being’s egocentricity will always find an exit for itself even in a considerably oppressed condition. For example, to exert dominance in a horizontal direction, or on those of lower status, especially on one’s own children.

If the sin of pride is a problem for women, what will happen if we ignore it? The first result I can think of is that the sin of pride will not be tackled. What Susan Nelson (Dunfee) rightly says about the sin of hiding (sensuality) can also be applied here.\textsuperscript{380} If a certain sin, no matter pride or sensuality, is not aware of, then it will not be repented, and it will only get worse unless it is acknowledged and confronted. The second is, if we deny the fact that women can and often sin against others, we are obviously supporting injustice that women impose upon their victims and making the life of the victims even harder.

Largely supported by the belief that women are justified by their victimhood, the myth of women’s innocence holds that the condition of being victimized will not only make women more virtuous and pure than men, but also it somehow gives them “the power to ‘save’ others who are linked to them by gender.”\textsuperscript{381} Niebuhr, however, finds pretense and naivety in such claim. In his critique of Marxism, which defends fiercely the righteousness of the powerless proletariat, he points out that a simple social radicalism is blind to the depth of human corruption, and thus fails to foresee that when the weak seizes power, they are as arrogant and relentless as their former oppressors:

Every victim of injustice makes the mistake of supposing that the sin from which he suffers is a peculiar vice of his oppressor…Such a form of moral pride among the weak will


\textsuperscript{381} West, \textit{Deadly Innocence}, 168.
accentuate their arrogance when the fortunes of history transmute their weakness into strength.\textsuperscript{382}

Wolf calls it a “cheap historical trick” to ascribe goodness and purity to women for the reason that the violence in history is mainly brought about by men who own power.\textsuperscript{383} The truth, however, is that even if women come to own power, there is no guarantee that they will wield it for good purposes. History proves that female monarchs can be as atrocious as their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{384} Ordinary women are also found to actively participate in or support injustice, tyranny, murder or even massacre.\textsuperscript{385} The belief system of victim feminism, says Wolf, maintains that women’s power relations are web-like, which promote equality and prevent dominance, but “any power outside of personal autonomy and self-defense,” she points out, “almost inevitably involves power-over.”\textsuperscript{386} Just like men, women constantly feel the urge to secure and maximize their self-interests, which will always make them less innocent and more self-occupied.

4.3.3 Conclusion

The faith of women’s innocence comes from a misunderstanding of the feminine self and ignoring of some obvious empirical facts in women’s historical existence. As we have seen, many feminist theologians mistakenly regard social powerlessness as equal to moral innocence. Yet when we women regard ourselves as fundamentally innocent, it will not only blind us to the injustice upon our victims, but also it will also inevitably undermine feminism’s goal of promoting women as responsible and autonomous beings that fight against violence and inequality of the world.

\textsuperscript{383} Wolf, Fire with Fire, 146.
\textsuperscript{384} To name a few ruthless powerful women in history: Dynamis of Bosphorus, Jezebel the Queen of Israel; Catherine the Great of Russia; Empress Wu Zetian of Tang China; Empress Dowager Cixi of Qing China, et cetera.
\textsuperscript{385} See, for example, Claudia Koonz, Mothers in the Fatherland: Woman, the Family and Nazi Politics (London: Cape, 1987).
\textsuperscript{386} Wolf, Fire with Fire, 149-150.
4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I question the methodological plausibility of the feminist critique. I point out that some feminist theologians’ assumption that their understandings of sin come from nothing but women’s experience is unwarranted. I contend that all empirical observations are shaped by prior knowledge of the interpreter and therefore are theory-laden. I identify two major presuppositions of the feminist critique: the idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity. Along with many female scholars, I show in the rest of this chapter that the idea of women’s innocence is a myth that does not fit with women’s lived experience. Women can act selfishly and tyrannically; they often indulge in narcissism; they can seize power by manipulation; sometimes, even beneath women’s seeming shrinking self, there is an ego secretly expanding in self-righteousness. In other words, like men, women can suffer from the sin of (moral) pride.
Chapter V. A Critique of the Secular Feminist theologians’ Denial of Divine Transcendence

In the previous chapter, we have seen women’s “sin” manifested in several secular ways. That is to say, even understood from a non-religious perspective, we find that women can behave selfishly, arrogantly, cruelly, and tyrannically. And this is opposite to many claims of Niebuhr’s feminist critics. But our investigation does not stop here. As I have mentioned in 3.1 and elsewhere, for Niebuhr sin in its most fundamental form is the vertical sin against a transcendent God. Therefore if the Niebuhrian sin is to be understood (or criticized) properly, we cannot just explore women’s sin on a socio-moral level (the sin against the self, the sin against other selves and the world, and women’s condition of being sinned against), we also need to explore women’s sin in its religio-theological aspect (the sin against the divine), to see if the Niebuhrian concept of sin fits with women’s religious experience. In section 1 of this chapter, we’ll explore the most fundamental sense of the Niebuhrian concept of sin, that is, sin as a rupture of relatedness to God who transcends all human constructions. By doing that, we come to see the biggest discrepancy between the Niebuhrian and secular feminist understandings of sin. The point at issue is whether women’s sin can be understood in relation to a transcendent God. I contend that the answer is positive, and also point out that the secular feminist model of absolute divine immanence is problematic in many ways (section 2). In section 3, I show that Niebuhr’s understanding of sin as a broken relationship with a transcendent God makes sense in light of many Christian women’s experience.

387 For example, Niebuhr says, “While all particular sins have both social sources and social consequences, the real essence of sin can be understood only in the vertical dimension of the soul’s relation to God.” See The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 257.

388 By “secular feminist theologies” I mean those feminist theologies that reject the dimension of transcendence and therefore understand value and truth within a radically immanent frame. To be specific on the issue of sin, I use “secular feminist theologians” to denote some of Niebuhr’s feminist critics who assert that the vertical sin against a transcendent God is not applicable to women’s experience.
5.1 Sin, Transcendence/Immanence and the Divine

5.1.1 Sin as a Theological Concept

The existence of tragedies, vices and pains in the human world is an undeniable fact. No one can examine human behaviors honestly without having the awareness that evil exists, just like Ted Peters says, “people of every cultural tradition and religious persuasion are able to recognize the blindness of unbridled greed.”

The Christian understanding of human depravity does not differ from secular interpretations in the acknowledgement of the facts of evil, but in its attribution of evil to human being’s breach of relationship with God. The sin against God is therefore regarded as the deepest root of human depravity that causes wrongdoings of particular individuals and in the end collective immorality. For Niebuhr and many other Christian thinkers, immoral behaviors cannot be called sin—they are merely psychological problems, unsatisfied needs, or self-protective reactions, just as secular explanations keep claiming—until we see in these acts a deeper layer of estranging from God. As Xavier Thévenot clarifies:

The word *sin* points to a reality which involves our relationship with God. If God did not exist we could not speak of sin in its proper sense; there would be only failings against moral demands which mark the path to our becoming more human.

Paul Tillich points out that modern interpretations often add “distorting connotation” to the concept of sin so that it loses much of its genuine power. The common mistake that these interpretations make, he argues, is that they often confuse sin with its effects—sins:

Have the men of our time still a feeling of the meaning of sin? Do they, or do we, still realize that sin does not mean an immoral act, that ‘sin’ should never be used in the plural,

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and that not our sins, but rather our sin is the great, all-pervading problem of our life?  

For Tillich, sin is human being and its world turning away from God as the Ground of Being. The Christian acknowledgement of sin as a basic human state of separating from God is a profound understanding that penetrates the deeper levels of life and that cannot be discarded or replaced. As he says, “All attempts to make substitutions, including those I have tried myself, have failed to convey the reality that was to be expressed; they have led to shallow and impotent talk.” Therefore, to understand the Christian concept of sin properly, it is critical to recognize that sin is firstly and basically a theological, rather than a moral concept.

Theological sin is often called by many names: unbelief, distrust, disobedience, et cetera. All these indicate a broken relationship with God. Following Augustine, Niebuhr calls this most basic sin against God “pride.” Theological pride, as Niebuhr sees it, is the pretension that the finite has infinite value. He regards Apostle Paul’s words “they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man” as a summary of “the whole Biblical doctrine of sin.” Human beings’ rebellion against God is not simply ignorance, Niebuhr says, it is more of a deliberate transgression of the bounds set for their life: “His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits.” For Niebuhr the refusal of God as the true center of existence makes the sin of humanity to be properly called pride. No matter people choose to make themselves god (self-glorification), or they rather have other people or the vitalities of nature be their god (self-loss or concupiscence), they are equally sinfully for forsaking God. We can see that in Niebuhr’s understanding there is no natural connection between

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392 Ibid., 154.
394 Ibid., 181.
the pride against other people and the pride against God. In the reluctance to allow God to be God in her or his life, a self-shrinking person can be as proud before God as a self-inflated person.

However, if the sin against God is the most fundamental sin, which means, it is the sin precedes sins, will this imply a less gravity of moral sins? As a matter of fact, there are many theologians who point out that if sin as the violation of God is the only crucial sin, sin as the violation of our neighbors may be deemphasized. Process theologian Marjorie Suchocki, for example, criticizes Niebuhr for absorbing “the sin of nature” into “the sin of the spirit.” Defining sin as a rebellion against creation’s well-being, she argues that a vertical notion of sin as primarily against a transcendent God obscures the actual facts of sin in the individual, communal, and systemic level. The worry about exclusive emphasis upon the vertical aspect of sin is not without good reason since in some theologies sin is considered only from the perspective of the divine-human relationship, while devoid of historical effects. Following this one-sided mindset, people tend to regard themselves as less sinful when they have a good relationship with God, as “justified” by their faith while continuing to dominate and oppress others.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that regarding sin as basically a theological problem does not necessarily lead to an indifference to or even denial of the horizontal dimension of sin. Niebuhr does not consider the sin against God as purely “the sin of the spirit,” which is irrelevant to the existent reality as Suchocki suggests. For him even pride in the theological sense is not just a spiritual transgression, but has concrete social consequences—moral sins like pride and sensuality are two of them. A major failing in some traditional theologies of sin, as he sees it, is the ignorance of social and political realities. For this reason, Niebuhr criticizes “orthodox Christianity” for its indifference to social problems and injustice as much as he criticizes “liberal Christianity” for its uncritical acceptance of the finite norms of the world. An abstract, socially irrelevant theology is

396 See, ibid, 31-36.
equally foreign to him as a completely bounded theology with no reference to transcendence. As he states:

The ethical fruitfulness of various types of religion is determined by the quality of their tension between the historical and the transcendent. This quality is measured by two considerations: the degree to which the transcendent truly transcends every value and achievement of history, so that no relative value of historical achievement may become the basis of moral complacency; and the degree to which the transcendent remains in organic contact with the historical, so that no degree of tension may rob the historical of its significance.397

The conviction of the irrelevance of sin’s theological dimension to its socio-moral dimension is probably based upon an assumption that a radically transcendent God is unrelated to the actual world. It follows as an implication that unless God is viewed as completely within the world or part of the world, the condition of our relationship with the divine will have nothing to do with our relationship with others or the actual world around us. However, this one-dimensional view is never Niebuhr’s view. God’s intimate relation with the creation, as Niebuhr sees it, can particularly be seen in divine transcendence since it is in contrast with divine transcendence that the world is judged, relativized, and transformed. Like Gilkey rightly interprets:

Despite the fact that transcendence as Niebuhr sees it is not an aspect of the human psyche or of cultural history, this is a transcendence continually related to the world—related, that is, not only to individual persons, but even more to society, culture, and history. Transcendence is the originating and continuing ground of all human creativity, the principle of judgment and criticism on all human achievements, and the principle of the meaning and renewal of life.398

For Niebuhr, the divine transcendence can only be understood in relation to, rather than in separation from the creation. If the goodness of God is the ground of human goodness, if all moral problems stem from the lack of love, peace, justice, and harmony, of which only God is the ultimate source, a genuine reconnection with God surely has power to transform the reality of the world. Therefore, to confront sin as the breach of relationship with God is to confront what is opposite to the love and justice of God in both personal and social existence.

5.1.2 The Secular Feminist Conceptualization of the Divine

If sin in its deepest sense is a breach of relationship with God, then a question should be raised: who is God? For Niebuhr, the God of prophetic religion is known to the world as the creator, redeemer, and judge, which means that both of God’s distinction from and connection to the world are radical. Only God the creator can be both the redeemer and judge of the world since only the creator God who truly transcends not only the wills and desires of human being, but also every achievement and perfection of history is able to convict the sinfulness of the world and gives an ultimate hope of salvation. Therefore, to say God is the creator, redeemer, and judge is to admit that the world has an organic relation to God who is the center of meaning and coherence, without, however, “insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred.”

Many secular feminist theologians, nevertheless, challenge Niebuhr’s insistence on the radicalness of divine transcendence. Hampson, for example, regards the traditional understanding of a transcendent God as masculine:

The basic conceptualization of God in the West has been that of monotheism. God has been seen as transcendent above humankind, as having a will and all-powerful, so that ‘He’ is an agent who can act on the world. He has been appropriately, and not surprisingly, described

399 Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 37.
using masculine metaphors…Of course God is also thought to be related to the world, but an understanding of God as immanent has taken a second place to the transcendent God.

The monotheism of a transcendent God, according to Hampson, is built upon “a certain social paradigm and a particular understanding of human being” that favors men’s experience of separation and individuality. Therefore it is alien to today’s women whose “ideal model for human society is the web and not the hierarchy.” For Hampson the transcendent God of the tradition “is isolated, powerful, and at the top of the hierarchy. He is said to have aseity: to be entire unto himself! Moreover his supremacy qualifies others. It is by comparison with his goodness that men are to know themselves sinner.” If God-talk is to speak meaningfully to women, she contends, God should be reconceived after women’s collective image, rather than men’s individual image. In other words, God should be conceived as having “an essential connectedness,” as “not disconnected from myself and the web of human relationships.” Only in this way, can the God-talk escape the radical exclusivism that doesn’t “allow for difference, multiplicity and plurality.” Then women can realize that God is not a separate entity who stands outside of the web, or an Other who act heteronomously and competes with them, but is that who involves in their relatedness and continues to empower them.

Maybe Hampson needs to give a little more explanations about why divine transcendence necessarily stands for isolation, competition, or hierarchy, and thus is in opposition with divine immanence and hostile to human self-actualization. Nevertheless, her interpretation is a very common one in the secular feminist theological thought. Many feminists believe that the concept of divine transcendence is a projection of male power. To envision God as the supreme

400 Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism, 151.
402 Ibid., 56.
403 Ibid., 57.
405 Hampson, Theology and Feminism, 153.
Other, Plaskow argues, will legitimate dominance and hierarchal dualisms. Ruether also contends that “the ultimate theological rationale for the hierarchal symbolism of masculinity and femininity is the image of God as transcendent Father.” God/Goddess, as she understands, is not transcendent beyond Nature, but is the Matrix of life and the ground of life-giving relationality that connects human beings and other earth-beings. Sallie McFague sees “the world as God’s body,” and she offers three metaphors for the divine: mother, lover, and friend, to indicate the mutual relationship between human being and the deity. Carol Christ says Goddess is the “symbol of the life, death, and rebirth energy in nature and culture” and the “symbol of the affirmation of the legitimacy and beauty of female power.” Sharon Welch maintains that God is not just the source of power that is radically present in human relationships and communities like Isabel Carter Heyward suggests, but is “a quality of relationships, lives, events and natural process.” Put differently, the divine is exactly the relational power of finitude: “divinity is not a mark of that which is other than the finite…Divinity…is the resilient, fragile, healing power of finitude itself.”

In her article “‘Immanence’: Catalyst for Women's Theologies,” Mary Farrell Bednarowski contends that women are “historically” and “cross-culturally” drawn to a this-worldly orientation, in contrast to “an overreliance on the transcendent nature of ultimate reality—its apartness and otherness—and theologies of human nature that insist on human sinfulness and powerlessness.” While in many feminist theologies the term “transcendence” is regarded as negative, Bednarowski points out that the emphasis upon an immanent understanding of the

divine becomes a discernible pattern in feminist theologies:

Among the most striking and pervasive of these themes is the emphasis on "immanence": the indwelling of the divine or ultimate reality—in nature, in the human psyche, in every atom of the universe, as the Theosophists say. The concept of "immanence," defined variously and with different emphases depending on the particular tradition, functions as an immensely powerful catalyst in women's theological work.413

According to Bednarowski, the immanent models of the divine are favored because it allows women to understand their nature, body, and life in a new way. Traditionally, women are related to passivity and moral weakness, which, along with the doctrine of inherent corruption, aggravates women's often experienced self-despising and inferiority. The concept of the inclusiveness of the deity, however, offers new visions of the self:

The insistence that the divine dwells within each person is perceived by many feminist theologians as a powerful antidote to theologies of human nature that traditionally have stressed pervasive, inner sinfulness…For some women a conviction of the immanence of the divine brings with it a sense of self-trust.414

For women who are oppressed by racism, for example, Bednarowski argues that it is crucial for them to see themselves as a reflection of the divine. She quotes Deborah Bey-Turner as saying:

We suffer the consequences of racism because we cannot envision God in dark skin…It is high time we...remove God from a throne in the sky and place God where God is—in everything we call good, in that which we call evil, and certainly in that which we call the

413 Ibid., 3.
414 Ibid., 9.
human mind. It is time we begin to see God not as other but as ourself.  

In the search for wholeness in the inclusive divine, the feminine self, as well as the female body and the ordinary of life are now not only acceptable, but also sacralized. Bednarowski sees that the emphasis upon divine immanence often makes feminist theologies subject to the criticisms of pantheism and idolatry, yet she still maintains it as valid since it fits into the way many women experience the world.

The conceptualization of the divine as radically immanent is very common in feminist theology. The general rejection of the model of divine transcendence not only directly influences many feminist understandings of human sin; it is also the theological foundation of the feminist critique of Niebuhr. As elaborated in 2.3.2, many feminist theologians’ critique of Niebuhr parallel with an intense focus on the socio-moral dimension of sin. For if God dwells entirely within the world and every human being, the sin against God then is inevitably assimilated into the sin against the self, other human selves, communities, or Nature. Sin is not defined by a vertical relationship between humanity and a God who transcends it. Sin is to be understood as “a distortion of all the relationships of our body-mind-spirit to ourselves and others,” or as Rita Nakashima Brock states, it is “a sign of our brokenheartedness”, “a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others.” Since many Niebuhr’s feminist critics believe that the model of transcendence does not fit with women’s experience of the divine, the Niebuhrian understanding of sin as fundamentally a rebellion against a transcendent God is also rejected as alien to women’s experience. This is why in their theologies of sin, these feminist critics of Niebuhr seldom deal with the problem of sin from the perspective of divine-human relationship—in their interpretations the theological dimension of

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415 Ibid., 10.
sin is equated to, or at least has no substantial difference from the socio-moral dimension of sin.

If divine transcendence is really alien to women’s experience, then it is safe to say that the Niebuhrian understanding of sin as a broken relationship with a transcendent God is irrelevant to women. However, as I contend in the last chapter, one of the biggest problems of some feminist theologians’ appeal to women’s experience is that they assume there is a total continuity between their feminist understanding of women’s experience and women’s actual experience. We cannot take for granted—like Bednarowski and some other feminist theologians do—that the general preference of radical divine immanence among feminist theologians indicates that most women favor the model of radical divine immanence. As I point out in 4.2.2, many feminist theologians’ hostility toward the concept of divine transcendence may not come from a demand of women’s consciousness, but from an ideological overtone that favors the secular worldview. In this case, I suggest that we firstly need to put some feminist theologies’ presupposition of secularity under scrutiny, to see whether or not it has theoretical value and practical coherence with women’s experience. Secondly, we need to listen to different voices of women, especially the voices of women who stand in different traditions from that of secular feminists’, lest the voice of secular feminist theologians alone be regarded as the only legitimate way of understanding women’s conceptualization of the divine.
5.2 The Critique of Secular Feminism

5.2.1 The Theoretical Inadequacies of the Secular Model of Radical Immanence

It is not hard to find that in secular feminist theologies of sin, the concept of God becomes superfluous in the end. When “God” is reduced to the name for something that can be easily replaced by non-theological words such as communities, relationality, vitalities of nature, or the feminine self, the ubiquitous presence of the radically immanent divine amounts to an absolute absence effectively. Nevertheless, how can a theology of sin keep its rich theological implications while banishing God? If sin is basically a relational language that refers to human being’s estrangement from God, I contend, both the connection and difference between God and the creation need to be maintained. In other words, like McFadyen says, if a sin-talk cannot speak effectively of God and the world together, if it only speaks of God—in the case of some conservative theologies, or only speaks of the world—in the case of some totally “immanentalized” theologies, it is at danger of either ceasing to have explanatory power to the world, or becoming a rhetorical flourish that offers no valuable religious insights as distinguished to secular discourses.418

In what way, we should ask, can a theology that is dissolved completely into anthropology or sociology be distinguished from secular discourses—except the empty name of “theology?” Maybe, as I suggested in the last chapter, it would be helpful to our understanding if we situate the feminist rejection of divine transcendence in the larger picture of secular modernism. As a matter of fact, to conceive God in an entirely immanent way is not a unique feature of these feminist theologies but a long tradition of modernity. From Spinoza to Hegel to Gilles Deleuze, the tendency of rejecting transcendence in favor of immanence is always there. Modernity or secularity, as characterized by a process of “disenchantment,” is especially in tension with the concept of transcendence as it rejects the authority of religious entities from beyond, and supplants them with the

inner authority of subjectivity.

However, as we said in the last chapter, secular modernity does not challenge religion so much as to replace the religions that it detests with a secret, unrevealed religion. On the one hand, it questions the legitimacy of the absolute; on the other hand, however, it constantly absolutizes the finite and empirical reality in its identification of human flourishing with the standard to judge all things, and in some occasions, with the divine. The total presence of the divine in the world as interpreted by the secular mind, however, does not indicate a permeation of the sacred among the mundane; it is rather a humanistic model of divine immanence, which holds that the concept of the divine is meaningful only when it is considered in the light of and by the standard of the finite. In this way, the meaningfulness of God-talk (as well as sin-talk in the theological sense) is negated.419

In his famous book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor challenges the interpretation of modern secularism as a consequence of the rise of reason and science, or a breaking out from external forces that limit human horizons. He argues against this interpretation as an overly simplistic “subtraction story” that fails to see that Western modernity, or secularity is not something impeded in the past and now can see the light of day, but is itself “the fruit of new inventions” that has “newly constructed self-understandings and related practices.”420 Put simply, secularity is not so much about liberation as about self-authorization. Taylor writes,

The story line here is this: once human beings took their norms, their goods, their standards of ultimate value from an authority, outside of themselves; from God, or the gods, or the nature of Being or the cosmos. But then they came to see that these higher authorities were their own fictions, and they realized that they had to establish their norms and values for themselves, on their own authority. This is a radicalization of the coming to adulthood story as


it figures in the science-driven argument for materialism. It is not just that freed from illusion, humans come to establish the true factors about the world. It is also that they come to dictate the ultimate values by which they live.421

If we come to see secularity as a framework of belief, Taylor points out, rather than just manifestation of facts, we will recognize that the immanent frame that limits value and truth to human flourishing is not so natural and self-evident. For Taylor, the immanent frame is something that permits, though not necessarily demands, closure. The closed stance of the immanent frame regards the transcendent as a threat, an obstacle to human being’s greatest good, while forgets that even though human beings “slough off” the old traditions and the reference to any transcendent reality, they are left not only with human good, but also with human concerns that don’t see universal human welfare as the final goal. According to Taylor, this close-mindedness, which is not instinctual but ideological, is bad for human quest for a fullness or richness in life, which advocates mutual enrichment rather than exclusion.

Taylor particularly identifies three “malaises of immanence” that beset the secular mind: “(1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.”422 The eclipse of transcendence in the secular age brings along with it a deep sense of emptiness. Like Langdon Gilkey, Taylor notices that “there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age”423 that yearns for “something more,” something that can provide ultimate answers, meaning, comfort, sacredness and solemnity, especially in the crucial moments of human life like birth, marriage and death.

When she criticizes the feminist critique of the Jewish traditional liturgy’s emphasis upon divine transcendence, Lois C. Dubin also affirms the

421 Ibid., 580.
422 Ibid., 309.
423 Ibid., 29.
indispensability of divine transcendence in times of vulnerability:

Speaking honestly, I do not want to pray to myself or to ourselves as humans. I do not want to pray only to a human community or to the forces immanent in nature. When I pray, I want to maintain a sense of transcendence, of Otherness beyond. Without the dimension of transcendence, I and we run the risk of narcissism, self-congratulation, and self-gloryification. I consider undue emphasis on the self and subjectivity a form of idolatry… I want to celebrate our human selves, our abilities, our adequacy, our creativity, our autonomy. At the same time, I do not want to assert falsely that these are the only measure or a full measure of ourselves as humans. Especially at moments of distress, suffering, illness or tragedy, though sometimes in good moments too, we know that we face limits, we know that we are neither the creators nor masters of our fates. To claim or to imply that we are is also a form of dishonesty, certainly as great as mouthing words that imply that only men matter in this world, or that God is really and exclusively male.\(^{424}\)

For Dubin, the notion of divine transcendence is too valuable to be assimilated by divine immanence. She considers gender and transcendence to be two completely different issues. It is “a mistake”, she says, for feminists to “equate divine transcendence solely with maleness.” The human yearning for divine transcendence doesn’t need to be expressed with self-submission or demeaning of women. Praying to a transcendent God shows dignity/strength (“we are proud enough to speak to God”) and humility/frailty (“we do so as God’s creatures”) at the same time. It is in fact a positive empowering process for both women and men—since as Dubin points out, taking a balanced measure of the self and facing the truth of human limitations honestly is more empowering than just ignoring the fact that we human beings are not fully empowered beings.\(^{425}\)

Claire Colebrook is another one who notices the close-ended nature of many contemporary philosophies and feminist thinking. Transcendence, as Colebrook


\(^{425}\) Ibid.
finds in these theories, is defined as “the submission of thought to images not of its own explicit and self-inaugurating power.” Put differently, transcendence is “the symptom of thought’s capacity for self-enslavement,” and it “takes the form of subjection to norms, to givens, to opaque figures, or to unthought assumptions.” However, Colebrook argues against modern mind’s refusal of transcendence as “profoundly infantile.” The idea that any subjection of the self to the images or power other than the self is a form of alienation, she contends, is based on radical Western subjectivism that refuses to recognize any otherness. The rejection of normativity—whether this normativity manifests itself as given laws or gendered concepts—is not itself a denial of normativity or liberation from subjection, but a new process of subjection—to the norm of selfhood and subjective experiences. In other words, for secular mind only the immanent can become the legitimate norm and “the only possible way of approaching normativity.”

However, the concept of the self as totally self-deciding is not only an imagination that “one’s world be nothing other than one’s own world,” but also, according to Colebrook, is an infantile denial of difference, contingency, risk, exposure, as well as temporality. Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre, she points out that the desire “to be a being for-itself and in-itself, to be both absolutely freely self-determining and not subjected to the burdens of decision and contingency” is a desire for omnipotence, or to be precisely, it is a desire to be God. As we can see in a humanistic model of divine immanence, the self is sacralized and equated with the divine—it becomes the norm. Yet as Colebrook sees it, it also becomes a pure existence that is not open to potentiality. The sacralization of the ordinary not only runs against the social actuality of evil, but also, it leaves too little place to cultural changes, since if there is no dimension of transcendence, and the

427 Ibid., 92.
428 Ibid., 93.
429 Ibid., 94.
immanent is the only norm, how can we question the unjust *status quo* or patriarchy, rather than adapt ourselves to it as the fixed reality? On this point, Colebrook finds that feminism lands in a predicament:

Unless we assume a radically liberal mode of feminism—where all subjects are recognized as nothing other than a formal capacity for decision making, with the body as the vehicle or site for the mind—then we need to explain how criticism can at once appeal to the presently unjust nature of social relations without assuming that individuals will necessarily decide to be free. That is: can we appeal to the revolution or a mode of life *other than the present* if we do not have transcendent criteria?430

Like Colebrook, Rebekah Miles points out that some feminist theologians’ over-emphasis upon immanence is bad for feminism’s goal of promoting social transformation. In her criticism of Sharon Welch, who rejects the idea of an omnipotent and transcendent God as a projection of human values that supports systems of domination, Miles sees that Welch’s immanent model of God as the power of finitude ironically reflects and confirms the existing *status quo*. In a radical relativism like Welch’s, where all perspectives and “truths” are relativized and thus give priority to mutual critical interactions of communities—which according to Welch is the “battle for truth,” Miles argues that people who win will not be the weak and marginalized as Welch expects, but the powerful and privileged. Without any sense of radical self-transcendence over the social context, Miles points out, people will not see the partiality of their perspectives and “truths” even though they are exposed to other perspectives in an open community. Since for Welch the divine is not the judge of human systems of power and domination (like in Niebuhr’s theology), but a power of relationships, the divine also is naturally defined by what wins: “both God and moral truths are intimately tied to whatever perspective has sufficient power to define itself as true and to connect its

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430 Ibid., 88.
own values with the divine.”431 In this way, the status quo is inevitably enshrined: “Welch’s God, contrary to her stated intention, does not encourage radical social transformation but reflects the relationships that exist, whether liberating or oppressive.” 432

The lack of normative grounding in many feminist theories usually results in normalizing the present and the immanent—and this, Miles contends, is troubling for feminism since it will leave us “ultimately bound to the contingencies of a given patriarchal culture and history.” 433 Even Ruether, who often speaks negatively of divine transcendence, admits that “premature immanence” is dangerous for women and the oppressed: “Such immanence…naturalizes the systems of domination and sacralizes them as the work and will of the divine. Rather what victimized people and all of us need is the Holy One who can free us from the systems of sin and their sacralizing ideologies.” 434 However, as Miles points out, since Ruether’s model of God as the natural evolutionary process is in profound continuity with the world, “it lacks a critical relativizing aspect over nature claims.” 435

Of course, secular feminist theologians who advocate radical divine immanence have no intention to maintain the status quo, but the closed stance of the immanent system and a lack of mechanism to judge and relativize the powers and consciousness of secularity lean towards such a conclusion. However, based on the fact that many secular feminist theologies do pose continuous challenges to the patriarchal status quo, we find that the immanent and the present are not all that secular feminists wish to affirm. They also affirm norms (such as “women’s political and economic autonomy,” “gender equality” or “the right to overturn unjust social systems”) that “transcend” or run against sinful ideologies. On this point, secular feminists’ theoretical insistence upon radical immanence is not so

431 Miles, The Bonds of Freedom, 145.
432 Ibid., 153.
433 Ibid., 145.
congruent with their pragmatic practices. Here we see an unacknowledged dimension of transcendence appear in secular feminism nevertheless: if the divine is radically immanent in the ordinary, then secular feminists should not be questioning the present status quo; if they do question the oppressive patterns of daily life, they are acknowledging that there is something more than the present, that is, there are some norms supporting the liberating and transforming alternatives whose validity transcends the given patriarchal social reality.

5.2.2 Transcendence and Immanence—Mutually Exclusive?

If we move from theories to religious practices, we will find women are more drawn to the concept of transcendence than secular feminists are willing to admit. Cynthia Eller, among others, sees the difficulty of adhering to only one side of the dialectics of divine immanence and transcendence in religious practices. “Many thinkers throughout history have tried and are still trying today to establish coherent and plausible accounts of god that make her/him either fully immanent or wholly transcendent,” she writes, “but rarely—perhaps never—have I seen or heard an example of a religious tradition that in practice adheres to any such firm placing of the divine at one end or the other of the immanent/transcendent spectrum.”436 Like Taylor and Gilkey, Eller realizes that the attempts to restrict our experience of the sacred totally with the immanent realm are more or less plausible in theory, but they are not so convincing in day-to-day religious existence. Investigating a variety of feminist spiritual texts, she finds that although feminist spirituality “aggressively positions itself as a religion of immanence” as it fiercely condemns patriarchal religions for their transcendent theologies, still “a persistent spring of transcendent sentiment comes burbling up in its poetry, ritual, and prayer.”437

Eller gives many examples: here is an invocation of feminist spirituality in a

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437 Ibid., 29.
solitary ritual: “Thus has Our Great Mother spoken to us saying, These are the words given to me from the eternal spirit: Seek knowledge. Revere wisdom. Be joyful. Know pleasure. Love one another. Protect life. And live in peace.” A famous spiritual feminist song dedicates to goddess sings: “Lady, Lady, listen to my heart’s song; Lady, Lady, listen to my heart’s song. I will never forget you. I will never forsake you. I will never forget you and I will never forsake you!” A prayer says: “Oh Mother of the Universe. Fill me with thyself. And make thy presence felt in my heart. That all my impurities and unworthy feelings may be burned to ashes.” The following description comes from a fervent advocate of neopaganism: “the Goddess is eternally trying to amuse herself by creating moments of beauty, pleasure, humor, and drama. To aid her in this project she evolves human beings, perhaps her most complex and weird children, at least on this planet. Like all children, we do things she would never have thought of and might not necessarily approve of.” Eller notices that in these prayers and songs the goddess not only appears to be personal and monotheistic, but also stands outside and beyond humanity. Sometimes the goddess is described as having a definite moral agenda—although she does not necessarily enforce the agenda, but “neither is she neutral, indiscriminately encompassing all.”

The existence of “a discrete, divine, single goddess” who gives birth to and empowers the world in feminist spirituality suggests a differentiation between the divine and the world. As Eller explains, “when a woman lights a candle to the goddess and requests that the goddess bring her a promotion at work, one might assume she is addressing a deity who is outside her, in a position to do favors for her.” Eller finds that it is no accident that even in feminist spirituality, of which the aim is to commune with a radically dwelling divinity, the “immanent rhetoric is not the beginning and end of its relationship to the divine.” Only a deity having a transcendent edge, she contends, is able to stand as a judge to patriarchy and gather people together for common interests: “the more spiritual feminists

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438 Ibid., 31-33.
439 Ibid., 30.
440 Ibid., 33.
feel themselves to be oppressed, the more they crave an arbiter, a power on women’s side that is inherently liberating for them and never oppressing.”

Therefore we should not be surprised when we find an explicit description of divine transcendence in feminist works like this:

Ancient ideas of the Earth Mother included fear about her possible vengeance if she was insulted, as a child fears to insult Mother. She was seen as the primordial lawgiver. The tablets of the law, handed down on the mountain, were originally hers, you know. She was implacable about punishing lawbreakers, those who hurt others. Why, she punished even the gods if they got out of line.

Or read Zsuzsanna Budapest as saying:

Great Mother, I come to you… the wealth is all in the hands of the masters, mostly men. They have had the power now for ten thousand years. Great Mother, we are asking you to help. You are the true owner of the wealth; please blow the karmic winds in our favor. Let my cupboard fill up with food, and my checkbook with balances. Allow me the livelihood of the daughters of Isis; be my nurturing mother. I invoke Thee.

As we can see, it may be theoretically possible that the divine is conceptualized not as something beyond, but as a part of ourselves, yet in actual religious practices, even in those systems which are allegedly immanent, we often find hidden element of transcendence. I agree with Eller that secular feminist theologians’ either/or approach to the concepts of divine transcendence and divine immanence is unnecessary. The conviction that divine transcendence and divine immanence are mutually exclusive, as I contend in 5.1.1, may stem from an identification of transcendence with isolation (in the closed system of secularity, it is very easy to define negatively anything other than the immanent). However, for

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441 Ibid., 39.
442 Ibid., 38.
443 Ibid., 39.
many people—this is at least true for Niebuhr—to say God is the transcendent wholly Other is not to say God is isolated from the creation, but to say God transcends completely beyond the human psyche. These people hold that the reality of God is not determined by human desires and wills: it is God who created human beings, not the other way round. The transcendence of God does not contradict God’s relatedness to the world, as Mayra Rivera says, “God is irreducibly Other, always beyond our grasp. But not beyond our touch.”

In this sense, the implication of divine transcendence is not God’s power over the creation, but God’s radical freedom. If secular feminist theologians deny such transcendence, I think they also deny difference, autonomy and freedom. However, if the divine is understood as having no difference from the human self, then what’s the difference between religion and atheism? What’s the point of believing a deity or deities anyway?

In the secular feminist understanding of the divine, an openness to divine transcendence is needed, both theoretically and pragmatically. As we have seen above, if even those who consciously devote to radical immanent models cannot abandon the idea of divine transcendence completely, I suggest secular feminist theologians need to reexamine the rationality and practicality of their insistence on absolute divine immanence. I believe that the dimension of transcendence is not as alien to women’s experience as secular feminists suggest. In fact, as we will see in the next section, the notion of divine transcendence plays a very important role in many Christian women’s understanding of faith and sin.

5.3 Retrieving Transcendence from Women’s Experience

5.3.1 Experience and Faith

Many secular feminist theologians contend that it is an experiential fact that women favor immanent models of God, while men prefer transcendent models. However, a necessary connection between immanence and femininity is hard to be proven sociologically. It is true that women often are more likely than men to be drawn to religions or spiritualities that favor the immanence of the divine, but it is also true that in religions which emphasize divine transcendence such as Christianity, there usually is a significantly larger percentage of female believers than male believers. Surveys show that comparing to men, women’s participation in religions and spiritualities—no matter these religions and spiritualities favor transcendent or immanent models of the divine—is considerably high. 445

The sociological fact that there is disproportionate number of women who actively participate in religions that emphasize the idea of divine transcendence is hard to deny. 446 Therefore a common secular feminist approach of justifying the completely immanent model is to demonstrate that women who favor transcendent models of the divine are so blinded by patriarchal ideologies that they lose touch with their female nature and don’t know what they want or need. However, doesn’t this move repeat exactly what many feminists criticize: the substitution of lived experience with presumed ideas? The secular feminist promotion of divine immanence, I contend, sometimes is not so much about women’s experience as about an ideological reconstruction that stems from the need of secularity’s expanding power. Yet in the process of expansion, the logic of secularity will inevitably create tension between women’s experience and secular feminist theories—which are often incongruent with the actual experience of

446 For example, in Mainland China’s evangelical churches, there is an obvious unbalance of sex proportion. The ratio of female to male is usually two or more (in some churches up to three or five) to one. See, Kun Lu, “The Problem of Gender Imbalance in China’s Urban Churches,” Church China, 26 (November 2010). (In Chinese: 陆昆, “中国城市教会中性别失衡的问题,”载于《教会》2010 年 11 月总第 26 期 https://www.churchchina.org/no101103)
many women (especially those who belong to religions that value divine transcendence), but still try to dictate what women should experience. As we have seen, experience is subjective, unique, and personal. Only with guiding presuppositions can abundant and chaotic empirical facts be organized into coherent understandings of experiences. Diverse presuppositions aggravate the discontinuity in experiences; therefore it is almost impossible not to contradict the experiences of people who hold one specific faith when enforcing another.

In the case of Christian faith, I think most female Christians do not acknowledge the authority of doctrines out of blind obedience to experiences that are alien to them. They may view others’ experiences of faith as alien, until their own experiences overlap with those experiences. In other words, it is because of their subjective experiences that others’ subjective testimonies presented in traditions and doctrines become objective for them. On the one hand, the subjective and bounded nature of experience restrains it from being the ultimate norm of guidance. On the other, when some experiences are being tested and verified again and again in the past and present, they are viewed by those who share them as having objective merits.

Does this mean only those who share the same faith can understand the experiences being particular to this faith? The answer is yes in a sense. The principle of “credo ut intelligam” or “crede, ut intelligas” does not tell us to believe blindly in some doctrines so that we can understand them. It rather reveals a fact: only when we have the experience of faith, of the moments of trusting and longing for God, can we understand the contents of faith, and only then can we realize that the Christian faith is in conformity with our experiences and is able to be verified by our experiences. The author of the book of Hebrews writes thusly: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Faith hereby opens up a whole new world, which is unimaginable for those who lack this kind of experience.

447 Hebrews 11:6, NIV.
Of course, in a pluralistic, ever-changing modern world, women’s experience of the divine is changing fast. Traditions and our understandings of them also are not invariable. Secular feminist theologians have offered and will continue to offer insights into the complexities of being Christian women. Nevertheless, they cannot assume that secular feminist experiences are superior over other experiences of women and thus have the power to enlighten women who stand outside the secular feminist tradition. It is not a problem if secular feminists or some women have no experience of sin against a transcendent God, but it is seriously troubling and also extremely tyrannical if they then conclude that all women don’t have such experiences. Secular feminist theologians who regard the secular feminist models of absolute divine immanence as the only legitimate kind of women’s experience of God, I may say, are arrogant. This is as absurd as claiming atheists have the profoundest religious experience or a Buddhist’s religious experience can only be understood in the light of a Christian’s religious experience.

For Christian women and men, faith is the only way they enter into a genuine relationship with God. They regard the Christian faith as true and valid exactly because it is in dynamic relation with their special experience of relating to God. Some secular feminist theologians find a great gulf lying between the Christian faith and women’s experience. They are not completely wrong in the sense that there indeed are many women who find the Christian faith being at odds with their experiences, but by universalizing these women’s experience, secular feminists not only marginalize some other women’s experience, but also miss many insights in the Christian faith that are valuable to women.

Historically, Christian women may be the underprivileged in regard to church leadership and pastoral power, but they are never so ignorant as to believe in something completely alien to their experience as females. This is not to gainsay the significant observations of secular feminist theologians that some Christian traditions regarded as normative are indeed patriarchal. I simply want to point out that being the half (or majority) of the Christian church, women never stop
contributing their power in the formation and development of the church. We cannot reject women’s experience confined in the traditions of the so-called “patriarchal religions” as entirely false consciousness without denying the value and individuality of these religious women. Furthermore, I doubt whether the notion of secular feminism as women’s rebellion against the totalitarian claims of Christianity fits into the reality of a pluralistic modern world where the Christian faith is not the only choice of faith, but one choice out of multiple choices. Most Christian women are constantly exposed to secular feminist beliefs before or after they become Christians. Although there are many women who choose to step out of the church, there are even more women who choose to stay or step in. In a secular world where the givenness of religion is shattered, women’s commitment to the Christian faith, I contend, is exactly supported by their personal experience of a meaningful religious life.

5.3.2 A Return to Transcendence

As we have seen, there is a double-level character of the Niebuhrian understanding of sin. Moral sin is the sin committed on the surface of life. Theological, or existential sin is sin in its most fundamental sense, which indicates a rupture of relatedness to God who transcends all human constructions. The awareness of moral wrongdoing requires no religious experience. With or without knowledge of God, people can recognize the reality of human depravity by the empirical facts of life manifested in both personal and social existence. Feminist theologians especially offer many significant accounts in this regard by appealing to women’s experience of self-loss and being sinned against. However, to recognize sin on the existential level, the prerequisite of a genuine relationship with the transcendent God is indispensable. Niebuhr points out that only those who know the truth of God—that is to know God is more than an extension of the human self—are able to realize the seriousness of the theological sin, and are
willing to admit themselves as sinners. The Bible records many of these experiences, one of the most typical is what Isaiah the prophet says when he meets God:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple… ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’

Isaiah’s reaction is natural and spontaneous. It is the sight of God, not other things, which makes him immediately realize he is a sinner. Many secular feminist theologians are suspicious of this kind of experience. They argue that to know the sinfulness of the self in the encounter with a God with awesome majesty totally contradicts women’s experience of the divine as loving, caring, and completely immanent. I believe these feminist theologians are partly correct: for some women the experience of sin as a result of encountering God is completely alien. Yet it is exactly for this reason the concept of sin as a broken relationship with a transcendent God cannot be refuted by the experience of those women who don’t have the experience of theological sin. Rather, it can only be understood by the experience of women who do have the experience.

Like I contended earlier, faith is the only way we enter into a meaningful relationship with God. Without faith, there is no relation; without relation, the experience of God is impossible. It is pointless that secular feminist theologians constantly try to deny women’s experience of theological sin using the experience of women who know nothing about sin as a breaking of divine-human relationship.

448 “If a man does not know the truth about God, who is more than an extension of his self (a truth to be known only by faith), he cannot repent of the premature and self-centered completion of his life around a partial and inadequate center.” “For without the ‘wisdom of God’ apprehended in faith, and standing partly in contradiction to human wisdom, men are never conscious of the seriousness of sin; for the judgment of God against their sinful pride and self-assertion is not perceived.” See, Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, 100; 120.
449 Isaiah 6:1; 6:5. NIV.
450 See, for example, Mary Grey, Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition (London: SPCK, 1989), 44.
Maybe it is the time we listen to the other side of the story. I’d like to emphasize two points in my discussion of women’s experience of theological sin. First, Niebuhr’s understanding of sin as pride can be justified by women’s experience of refusing God. Second, women’s experience of theological sin is paradoxically the negation of both women’s self-loss and self-assertion.

In previous chapters, we have elucidated that the word “pride” in Niebuhr’s works indicates human being’s efforts to raise their “contingent existence to unconditioned significance,” which he believes is best depicted by the Pauline verse: “they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like into corruptible man.” In this sense, we can understand pride as a loss of the true center of life in God. Human beings are guilty of theological pride because they believe they can choose the ultimate without choosing God. Whenever women and men give unlimited devotion to themselves, other selves, or things other than God, they are proud before God because of their refusal of God. Marguerite Shuster reminds us that in the story of the Fall, Eve is the one who is moved by the idea of becoming God. In the narrative, the sin against God is demonstrated as the beginning and foundation of all sins committed in personal and social existence. Women’s tendency of self-depreciation and subordination—which often results in the exaltation of other limited beings—is not precedent to the sin of pride against God, but rather is the dreadful consequence of theological sin:

It is at least worth observing, though, that the tendencies labeled in our day as particular problems for women appear in the narrative itself as a result of the Fall (Gen. 3:16) rather than as due to the intrinsic nature of women.

Shuster argues that relying too exclusively on gender influences on behavior cannot solve women’s problems of sin: “Precisely because sin by definition has to

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do with a broken relationship to God, it is not enough—however useful—to look only at social patterns impinging on one’s behavior.” Many feminist discussions of sin, says Shuster, move away from awareness of “the need for redemption coming from outside ourselves” and the need for Christ to challenge our unfocused life. In the theological context, she writes, “‘pride’ has to do with a sense of self that asserts itself over against God and hence can never be a virtue.”

In her book *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, Kathryn Tanner gives a lucid account of sin as the refusal to receive from God. God is the giver of all good gifts, Tanner writes, who gloriously creates the world to communicate divine goodness to the creature.

The triune God is a God who perfectly communicates the goodness of Godself among the three Persons of the Trinity in perfect self-unity. Expressing this dynamic life outward in a grace of beneficent love for what is not God, the triune God brings about a variety of different forms of connection or union with the non-divine, for the sake of perfecting what is united with God, in an effort to repeat the perfection of God’s own triune life.

The fullness of the creation is only possible, Tanner contends, when humanity and the world are in unity with God the provider and sustainer: “God, who is already abundant fullness, freely wishes to replicate to every degree possible this fullness of life, light, and love outward in what is not God.” Sin in this sense is to be understood as the turn away from the triune God, who is the source of all benefits. In other words, human beings sin, when they deliberately block and oppose the distribution of God’s blessings to themselves and to others:

Met by human refusal to receive from God’s hands in God’s own time, by the creature’s

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453 Ibid., 157-158.
455 Ibid., 2.
efforts to separate itself and others from the life-giving fount of divine beneficence, met by the human refusal to minister God's gift-giving to others, this history or process of God's giving to creatures becomes a struggle, a fight to bring the graced kingdom of God into an arena marked by sin and death.456

Death and sins that follow the theological sin of refusing God, contends Tanner, are not God's punishment of us for breaking laws, but are natural and inevitable consequences of turning away from the fountain of ultimate goodness. However, despite our failings, faithlessness, and sins, the divine love never ceases. God sustain a life-giving relation to the creation unconditionally. Even though we may be blinded by our sins and other’s sins against us to ignore the reality of God’s ever-flowing gifts that freely bestowed to us, “God still gives and is willing to give more.” “God gives unity with Godself in Christ even to sinners, indeed especially to them; they ‘deserve’ these gifts simply because they need them.”457 Tanner’s understanding of sin is closely related to her understanding of God as utterly self-sufficient and loving. Nonetheless, she doesn’t see any contradiction between God’s transcendence and God’s love. As a matter of fact, she regards “a radical interpretation of divine transcendence” as the principle of her systematic theology.458 If God is the provider of all, Tanner contends, God must be in a non-competitive relation with the creature:

A non-competitive relation between creatures and God means that the creature does not decrease so that God may increase. The glorification of God does not come at the expense of creature. The more full the creature is with gifts the more the creature should look in gratitude to the fullness of the gift-giver.459

Only when God and the creature do not conflict with each other, the

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456 Ibid.
457 Ibid., 86.
458 Ibid., 2.
459 Ibid., 2-3.
communication of God’s ceaseless gift-giving is possible. And the non-competitiveness rests entirely upon God’s radical transcendence beyond the creation. Among creatures on a same plane of causality, says Tanner, even co-operation is potentially competitive. Yet there is no potential competition possible between God and humanity since divine agency operates on a totally different plane from that of human beings:

Even when we co-operate, therefore, our actions involve a kind of competitive either/or of scope and extent. Unlike this co-operation among creatures, relations with God are utterly non-competitive because God, from beyond this plane of created reality, brings about the whole plane of creaturely being and activity in its goodness.460

In stark contrast with secular feminist theologians who associate divine transcendence with dominance, Tanner regards God’s radical transcendence as the precondition of God’s ever-flowing empowerment of the creation. The dependence upon God will not take away human beings’ dignity since the more the dependence upon God’s beneficence, the more human beings receive goodness.

As we can see, there is room in Tanner’s theology for Niebuhr’s concept of sin as pride. “Pride” here can be understood as a deliberate blockage or refusal of the good gifts of grace. It is not, however, the “pride” in the moral sense. For Tanner it is mistaken to assume certain comparability between the sin against God and the sin against other creatures that on the same level of being and activity with us. As she argues, a simple contrast between activity and passivity in creaturely relationships cannot be applied in the divine-human relationship: “Passivity before God is not the same as passivity as we understand it in relations among creatures; in relation to creatures, one cannot, as in relations with God, be active in virtue of being passive.” One can be very active among creatures, but still, it is a passive recipient of God’s active grace. Likewise, passivity before God does not

460 Ibid., 3-4.
require passivity before creatures: “God’s activity as the giver of ourselves need not come at the expense of our own activity. Instead, the creature receives from God its very activity as a good.”

Here some feminist theologian’s contention that the idea of divine transcendence is based upon a dualistic heritage, as we mention in 2.3.2, can be responded to. Since the existence of the world is based entirely upon God’s non-ceasing empowerment. To say God is radically transcendent exactly is to refuse a dualistic worldview. The creation, as good and meaningful as it is, has no comparability to God. Like Søren Kierkegaard says, there is an “infinite qualitative distinction” between the finite and the infinite God. The meaning of divine transcendence is not that God surpasses the creation in power and goodness, but the creation is incomparable to God in power and goodness. Put simply, only when there is comparability between God and the world, the charge of dualism can stand up. But the concept of radical divine transcendence excludes such comparability.

If the Niebuhrian idea of sin is to be understood properly, we’ll need to note that, like Tanner and Shuster point out, there is no total continuity between human beings’ experience of sin in personal and social existence and their experience of sin in terms of divine-human relationship. Deducing the contents of theological sin from empirical observations based upon the contents of horizontal sin is often misleading since women’s experience of moral sin cannot be applied completely in analogy to women’s experience of theological sin of which the Object of sin is the transcendent God whose manner of existence is totally different from that of creaturely beings. Here the wisdom of secular feminism accumulated mostly from the fabrics of historical social life is often found not so coherent with women’s religious experience. A valid exposition of the theological sin of women, so to speak, needs to be supported by women’s actual experience of sin in terms of divine-human relationship, rather than just some manifestations of the historical

461 Ibid., 4.
and social facts about how the female gender is wronged.

5.3.3 My Sin is Forgiven: Several Christian Women’s Experience of Theological Sin

Colebrook finds that due to an unnecessary “horror directed toward transcendence,” feminists often speak negatively about religion—which is defined as a negation of the powers of the self. However, a subjection to transcendence can be empowering, when it is a positive response to the transcendent, and this, as Colebrook sees it, is obviously evidenced by “the positive practices, groupings, and styles of selfhood that religious activity enables.”

With no doubt, sin is itself an utterly negative term denoting humanity’s disconnectedness to God. Yet paradoxically, the awareness of theological sin is far from being negative—it has liberating power that frees women and men from both self-centeredness and self-negation.

To become conscious of the sin against God, one has to be firstly conscious of God. If we go back to Isaiah’s experience of sin, we’d know that recognizing the self as sinner is almost an immediate response when human beings meet with God. The experience of theological sin is a particular manifestation of divine-human encounter. It is a humbling experience in the sense that it brings self-awareness to people. It is by comparison to God as the source of ultimate goodness, not to other earth-beings, that we are able to perceive the limitedness of our goodness and know that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” However, we recognize ourselves as sinners not because God wants us to appear as miserable sinners so that God can dominate over us. The willingness to acknowledge ourselves as sinners before God is spontaneous rather than coercive. It results from the experience of knowing the reality of ourselves. A common misunderstanding

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464 Ibid., 88.
465 Isaiah 64:6, NIV.
about the Christian concept of sin reads it as bringing a deep sense of guilt and unworthiness, yet as we will see, in some Christian women’s experience of theological sin, the willingness to give the heavy burden of sin to God is followed by a transforming experience of the renewal of the self.

As the first preaching woman and also an African-American woman, Jarena Lee became conscious of sin early before her conversion: “in my early history, the spirit of God moved in power through my conscience, and told me I was a wretched sinner.”466 She felt a heavy burden of sinfulness and constantly had the thought of suicide, until her personal encounter with Jesus made her convinced that all of her sins were forgiven:

That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet, and declare that God, for Christ’s sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul. Great was the ecstasy of my mind, for I felt that not only the sin of malice was pardoned, but all other sins were swept away together.

During the latter part of my state of conviction, I can now apply to my case, as it then was, the beautiful words of the poet: “The more I strove against its power, I felt its weight and guilt the more; ‘Till late I hear’d my Saviour say, Come hither soul, I am the way.”467

Sandy was a woman who had “immense feelings of guilt and regret for making a mess of…life.” She became pregnant at fifteen and gave it up for adoption. Then after a couple of years she found herself pregnant again and she ran away with her boyfriend. When this baby was stillborn,

Sandy considered this her punishment for her sinful life, noting, “From that moment, self-destructive guilt became a driving force that shaped my life for many years.” Infidelity, drugs, divorce, and promiscuity followed. She sought help from psychologists who urged her simply to “accept myself,” which she could not do. Finally, after turning to God in prayer, she

467 Ibid., 29, 31.
felt God cleanse her completely for all her past guilt: “I cried and cried until exhausted. The burden was gone; the yoke was lifted. The ‘dirt’ was dissolved in the glory of His righteousness! I was made whole and clean, a new creature, and a child of God! I knew deep inside of me what II Corinthians 5: 17 says: ‘Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things become new.’” Even as a “new creature,” Sandy realized that God loved her just as she was, for she was the person God made her to be.468

Another woman, international Bible teacher Kay Arthur said that she didn’t even know the meaning of salvation before her conversion. However, when she finally surrendered to God, and asked God to take over her messy life, God renewed her and gave her strength immediately:

Throwing herself down on the floor beside her bed Kay cried out to God. She didn’t know that he loved her unconditionally. No one had told her that his love was personified in his Son Jesus Christ, who died for her. She had no idea that God was willing to forgive the immorality, the anger, the deceit, the terrible example she’d set for her boys. She cried: ‘God I don’t care what you do to me…I don’t care what you do to my two boys, if you’ll just give me peace!’ God gave her the Prince of Peace instead. Kay admits that she didn’t fully understand what happened to her that day, July 16, 1963…But she knew that God had met her and cleansed her. From that moment she knew innately that she couldn’t wear the clothes she’d been wearing or talk the way she’d been talking. She was different—she had a new escort, Jesus Christ—and everything had become new.469

Varying in details, these experiences of conversion all marked by an active submission of the self to God and God’s response of acceptance, healing, and transformation of the often depleted self. Examples like these are countless in different historical periods and cultures. A friend of mine, a Chinese Christian

woman told me that she never felt so being loved when she realized that she was a sinner before God. “Like most people in Mainland China,” she said, “I had an atheistic upbringing. I didn’t believe in any transcendental power, nor did I ever think that I need a God to redeem me from ‘sin’ since I always regard myself as an honest and good person.” But an experience of conversion to Christianity completely changed her understanding of her self:

When I for the first time encountered with God—not just was told by others that God exists—I immediately realized that I was a sinner. I know that all of my “goodness” was nothing before the goodness of God. I know all those trivial transgressions I haven’t paid attention to were actually sin in God’s eyes. More importantly, I know I have sinned against God by my unbelief. When I encountered with God, my moral complacency was shattered by the goodness of God. But did I feel ashamed, humiliated or heavy-hearted? Not at all! I was overwhelmed with joy! I had a new confidence I never dreamed of. This confidence did not come from any achievements or merits. It came from a conviction that God loved me for who I was. How lucky I was, to know the truth of myself—a sinner, but a sinner loved and accepted by her creator. If I haven’t met God, I wouldn’t meet my true self. Now I knew my limits. I knew that I wasn’t perfect. But at the same time I also knew that the recognition of myself as a wretched sinner would never rob me of my God-given dignity. Even the All-wise, All-good and Almighty Lord was willing to love me no matter what, I had no reason not to love myself.

As we can see, women’s humble recognition of limitedness is not in contradiction with their dignity and love for themselves. Women who cry out to God, asking Jesus to forgive their sins are willing to admit the fact that they are separated from God by sin; but they also are in this way related to God, otherwise there can be no knowledge of separation. Apostle Paul’s words are true: “But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”⁴⁷⁰ The moment that women become conscious of sin and submit themselves to the judgment of God is

⁴⁷⁰ Romans 5: 20, NIV.
liberating because it is also a moment women become conscious of divine grace. As Tillich writes,

In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. 471

The divine grace heals not only women’s sin of pride; it also heals women’s sin of self-loss. As an Indian growing up in Malaysia, Juliet Thomas suffered from afflicts of low self-esteem during her early life because of her dark skin. She regarded herself as so ugly that she refused to be included in the picture that would be put on the cover of the school magazine because Juliet and her hockey team won a very important match. Self-denial haunted her for years, until the day she accepted Jesus as her personal Saviour, and this experience totally transformed her life:

‘When I accepted the Lord Jesus,’ she recalls ‘I became turned inside out in the sense that my colour didn’t matter to me any more. All of the sense of deep inadequacy didn’t matter…I had such conviction of the blessedness of being in Jesus Christ. It gave me such a relief within me and after that, the people around me would note the glow on my face. It was the radiance of Christ within me. It can be that way for any of us when we come to know the Lord and hold that position in Christ. We are the daughters of the King. We may be very ordinary…but we are very special to him.’ 472

In a paradoxical but marvelous way, God confronts both women’s pride and self-loss with love, and give them a renewed perception of the self and God. Angela West claims that the reliance on both the judgment and grace of God “is

471 Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations, 156.
472 Lutz, Women as Risk-Takers for God, 141.
precisely not a return to the endless burden of guilt…It is, on the contrary, that which offers a way out of all these false guilt’s as from false innocence.” To acknowledge oneself as a sinner, she contends, “is to be freed from the crushing burden of self-righteousness, from the burden of having to judge oneself by the ideals one has adopted.”473

God does not want women to think of themselves more or less than whom they are for the sake that neither of these images fit with their true selves. What God unconditionally loves and accepts, are who women really are. For this reason, to repent sin before God will not result in despair since as Niebuhr says, “sin is discovered by the very faith through which men catch a glimpse of the reality of spirit.”474 And this point is not only validated by the experience of Jarena Lee, Sandy, Kay Arthur, my friend, and Juliet Thomas, but also by numerous women whose whole persons and whole lives are transformed by the divine love of their Saviour Jesus Christ. At the time when these women come to realize their sin and place trust on the grace of God, they know they are the beloved ones of God since God confronts their servitude to both moral and theological sin. And by the divine grace, God has already forgiven all of their sins.

473 West, Deadly Innocence, 144.
474 Niebuhr, Reflections on The End of An Era (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 295.
5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine the other presupposition of the feminist critique—the spirit of secularity. Rejecting the dimension of transcendence as a male projection, some feminist theologians claim that to view sin as a rupture of relationship with a transcendent God not only fails to speak to women who favor the model of radical divine immanence, but it will also assign blame and guilt to women. I refute this claim by pointing out that the secular feminist model of absolute divine immanence is problematic in many ways. I argue that women’s experience and the Christian faith in a God who transcends the human psyche do not necessarily stand in opposition. By presenting some Christian female scholars’ understandings of sin and God and several Christian women’s conversion experiences, I show that firstly, Niebuhr’s model of theological pride can be justified by women’s experience of refusing God; secondly, women’s experience of theological sin is paradoxically the negation of both women’s self-loss and self-assertion.
Chapter VI. Reconstruction: toward a More Balanced Model of Sin

For Niebuhr’s feminist critics, the Niebuhrian theology of sin fails to speak to most women. However, as I contend in this study, Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ understandings of sin sometimes are also incongruent with women’s experience. The major failing of the feminist critique of Niebuhr, I argue, is that it loses the tension between the ideal and the reality, the immanent and the transcendent. By holding on to one pole and ignoring the other, feminist theologians often end up claiming that moral pride and theological pride are irrelevant to women’s experience of sin. Yet as we have seen in chapter four and chapter five, this assertion contradicts both women’s secular and religious experience. I contend that Niebuhr’s realistic approach to the problem of sin, which carefully maintains the tension between sin (theological sin) and the effects of sin (moral sin), is more balanced than the feminist critique. This is not to imply, however, that the feminist critique of Niebuhr is completely wrong or worthless. On the contrary, I maintain that the feminist critique brings new inspirations and valuable perspectives to the understanding of the doctrine, which are indispensable in the understanding of human sin. That is why a more balanced and more comprehensive interpretation of sin that gives consideration to both the Niebuhrian and feminist insights is needed. To be noted, by “more balanced” I am not trying to fuse these two very different interpretations of sin, but only to suggest that some part of their interpretations that are taken to the extreme should be balanced with considerations that come from their counterpart. In section 1 of this chapter, I elaborate a critical reception of the feminist critique. In section 2, I incorporate the feminist understanding of sin into Niebuhr’s model of “the equality of sin and the inequality of guilt,” to form a more balanced interpretation of sin that maintains the dialectical relationship between vertical sin and horizontal sin, pride and self-loss, sinner and the sinned-against.
6.1 A Critical Reception of the Feminist Critique of Niebuhr’s Theology of Sin

6.1.1 The Strengths of the Feminist Critique

We have said that one of the weaknesses of the feminist critique is that it only emphasizes the horizontal sin and leaves the vertical sin untouched. However, we also have to admit that the feminist interpretations are especially fruitful in regard to the socio-moral aspect of sin. Here I want to point out two notable strengths of the feminist understanding of sin. First of all, the feminist theology of sin challenges social injustice and contributes a lot in the continuing fight against domination, inequality and patriarchal prejudices. Like Niebuhr, who finds sin permeating every aspect of human life, feminist theologians hold a “radical” concept of sin that acknowledges the destructive power of sin alongside human historical developments. Sin is not just ignorance, poverty, or simply natural impulses, but a very powerful force prevalent in social and individual dimensions of life that many people are being victimized by. Many feminist theologies of sin are dedicated to opposing not only the patriarchal systems that are believed to be the root of corruption in the world, but also various forms of oppression, especially the exploitation of the weak by the strong. For feminist theologians, participating actively in the dehumanization of some people for the benefit of some other people is sin, but the resistance to change the social structures of exploitation or the failure to join the liberating struggle of the disinherited is also sin.

Ruether reminds women “there can be no liberation for them…within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.”

Distorted relationships, she says, “have built up a powerful counterreality, a reality that perpetuates itself, both through socioeconomic and political structures and through ideology that shapes education and socialization at every level.” Therefore to strive for justice, women need to “envision a radical reshaping of the

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475 Ruether, New Woman, New Earth, 204.
476 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 164.
basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society” that
overthrows all kinds of social patterns of oppression.477 Womanist Emilie M.
Townes also writes, “A womanist ethic cannot accept mindless violence,
conditional justice, destructive life-styles, or complacent inertia.” Discriminating
obedience, she argues, “trusts and values anger and indignation rather than
victimization of injustice.” Following Audre Lorde, Townes distinguishes between
pain and suffering. Suffering is an outrage, it is “a way of being that prevents
effective action” and a failure to say “no” to oppression. In comparison, pain is
scrutinized and metabolized suffering. It makes people recognize the facts of
oppressive situation and seeks to change the situation by striving toward a more
just kingdom of God. In other words, suffering is a passive acceptance of injustice,
while pain “allows the victim to examine her or his situation and make a plan for a
healthy future.”478 The womanist uncompromising attitude toward injustice and
suffering, Townes points out, is grounded upon the biblical notion of God as
loving and just:

God has taken suffering out of the world through the resurrection of Jesus. Because God
loves humanity, God gives all peoples the opportunity to embrace the victory of the
resurrection. The resurrection moves the oppressed past suffering to pain and struggle and
from pain and struggle to new life and wholeness.479

Challenging the authoritarian power structure and oppressive patterns in private
and public life, the feminist emphasis upon social transformation is a very good
antidote to complacency. The employment of a hermeneutic of suspicion in social
and individual existence enables the feminist understanding of sin to get a vantage
point of detecting the sometimes hidden evils under seemingly justified systems.
The feminist interpretation of sin therefore not only challenges the indifference to

477 Ruether, New Woman, New Earth, 204.
478 Emilie M. Townes, “Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the
House of Evil,” in a Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering, 84-88.
479 Ibid., 85.
the sinfulness of the world and opposes the pride of the powerful, but also, it is a
positive force that seeks to empower the powerless.

Secondly, the feminist critique situates the problem of sin in the context of the
sinned-against, which Niebuhr’s theology of sin lacks. Niebuhr’s theology of sin
is produced against the backdrop of the two World Wars, a time of turbulence.
Niebuhr is clearly aware of the problem of the age. He rebukes the pride of
dictators and nations like a prophet. However, he does not particularly reflect on
the problem of sin from the perspective of the sinned-against.\textsuperscript{480} I believe the
feminist critique of Niebuhr fills the blank.

A holistic interpretation of sin should contain an opposition to the pride of the
powerful, but it should also contain concerns and compassions for those who are
sinned against by the powerful. Feminist theologians rightly point out that in a
world where poverty, violence and discrimination abound, human beings are
inevitably being sinned against by the sin of themselves and other selves, and
more often, they are sinned against by structural sin. Under this circumstance, the
disinherited is more prone to be victimized by sin than those who live at the
higher end of the social ladder and benefit from the unjust economic and political
system. Therefore it is a demand of both love and justice that the disadvantaged
groups deserve more care than blame. On this point, the feminist focus on the
victims of sin is congruent with biblical teachings that claim God sides with the
poor and is the protector of the oppressed:

\begin{quote}
He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will
\end{quote}
crush the oppressor.\textsuperscript{481}

\begin{quote}
I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him.\textsuperscript{482}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.\textsuperscript{483}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{480} According to Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, Niebuhr does realize the problem of the
sinned-against in his acknowledgement of the inequality of guilt, but he fails to further develop a mature
reflection upon the issue. See, Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, “Introduction: Why Do We Need
Another Book on the Subject of Sin,” in \textit{The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the
Sinned-against}, eds. Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press,
2001), 10.
\textsuperscript{481} Psalms 72: 4, NIV.
\textsuperscript{482} Job 29: 12, NIV.
\textsuperscript{483}
“Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise,”
says the Lord. “I will protect them from those who malign them.”\(^{484}\)

He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their maker; whoever gloats over disaster will
not go unpunished.\(^ {485}\)

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who
hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will
laugh... But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you
who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will
mourn and weep.\(^ {486}\)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and
widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.\(^ {487}\)

Like Andrew Sung Park says, despite the fact that the Bible is for both the
sinner and the sinned-against, it cares about the woundedness of the
sinned-against more than the well-being of their oppressors.\(^ {488}\) Although I do not
agree with some feminist theologians’ assertion that women are not active sinners,
but just the sinned-against, I do agree with them that it is very important and also
necessary to make a distinction between sinner and the sinned-against. God treat
the oppressed and the oppressors in different ways. As the above Biblical verses
demonstrate, God delivers the oppressed and crushes the oppressors. From the
perspective of the sinned-against, Rita Nakashima Brock is right: sin is something
that requires healing.\(^ {489}\)

Prophet Micah once says that what God requires of human being, is “to act
justly and to love mercy.”\(^ {490}\) “To act justly” and “to love mercy” closely
intertwine together—they are the inseparable sides of the same coin. If people

\(^{483}\) Deuteronomy 27: 19, NIV.  
^{484}\) Psalms 12: 5, NIV.  
^{485}\) Proverbs 17:5, NIV.  
^{486}\) Luke 20-21; 24-25, NIV.  
^{487}\) James 1: 27, NIV.  
^{488}\) Andrew Sung Park, “The Bible and Han,” in The Other Side of Sin, 45-59.  
^{489}\) Rita Nakashima Brock, Journeys by Heart: a Christology of Erotic Power (New York: The Crossroad
^{490}\) Micah 6: 8, NIV.
only hold on to the justice part and forget to show mercy to the sinned-against (“the sinned-against” often includes themselves), then the Christian doctrine of sin is easily turned into a legalism that simply condemns the sinners, which leaves the doctrine no room for love and compassion, but only for guilt and blame. The message that feminist theologians deliver here is crucial: being the group of people that are more prone to be victimized in the social context of patriarchy, women need to be reminded that God does not just stand in opposition with them for the sin they commit, rather, God is their shelter in distress and vindicates them by divine justice.

6.1.2 The Threat of Dilemmas

Although Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ understanding of sin has many merits, I want to point out that it also contains in itself some intractable dilemmas, which not only affect the overall validity of their critique, but also make their critique fail to address women’s condition effectively. These dilemmas arise when the feminist critique takes one side of the dialectics of relatedness and individuality, sinning and being sinned against, boundedness and freedom, immanence and transcendence to the extreme.

1) On the one hand, the feminist critics of Niebuhr claim that women’s sin is the tendency to lose the self. The problem for women is being absorbed too much in relationships that they cease to be independent selves. In this way, the cure for women’s sin should be more focus on their individuality. Put simply, women should be more self-centered. On the other hand, however, the masculine model of the self as individualistic and separated are fiercely assailed in the feminist critique of Niebuhrian sin, while the feminine way of relating the selves—connected and inseparable in a web—is highly exalted. It is said that unlike men, who find power in separation, women find strength in connectedness, especially in sisterhood. Although many
feminist theologians claim that the emphasis upon relationality will not reinforce women’s sin of self-loss, but I believe without a certain degree of individuality, the self can easily be absorbed into the collective spirit even in relationships that are based on equality—like what happened in some socialist societies.

2) On the one hand, feminist theologians argue that women need power—they need to step out of the condition of self-abnegation and claim power actively. Yet on the other hand, many of them speak negatively about power and regard it as the main force maintaining patriarchy and oppression. Some feminist theologians deny women have will-to-power. As they say, men crave for power, which results in domination, exploitation and violence; women want love and intimacy, which promotes peace and harmony. Pearson sees that this is “an awkward paradox in feminist argument.” She says: “We cannot insist on the strength and competence of women in all the traditional masculine arenas yet continue to exonerate ourselves from the consequences of power by arguing that, where the course of it runs more darkly, we are actually powerless.”491

3) On the one hand, feminists condemn victimization. On the other, like Wolf says, they secretly mold victimization into women’s identity.492 In this belief system, women possess more purity than men since they are victimized, and their powerlessness becomes their virtue. Also, as West points out, women are no longer regarded as full moral agents because of their victimhood—the law of feminism forbids others for judging females according to the moral standards because that they are the weak and the disadvantaged.493 In fact, any attempt to criticize women is at the risk of becoming the infamous victim blaming and thus being politically incorrect. In this way, it becomes a “sin” to call women “sinners.” Even if women sin, they sin because they are firstly being sinned against. However, more and

491 Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad*, 32.
493 West, *Deadly Innocence*, 167.
more women come to realize that they don’t have to play victims to strive for their equality. They know that victimhood is not in their nature. More importantly, they are not satisfied for only being treated as victims, for they know well that, as West contends, “a woman’s dignity in the long run cannot be advanced solely on the basis of how she and her sex have been wronged.”

4) On the one hand, one of the most pivotal tasks of feminism is to promote the full freedom of women. Yet on the other hand, in many feminist theologies of sin, women are regarded as totally bounded creatures in the environment. If McFadyen is right that freedom indicates the capacity “to retain self-direction and control and to resist being overpowered by,” Niebuhr’s feminist critics obviously don’t view women as free beings. For them women do not sin out of their freewill; they sin because they are sinned against, because they are “forced” to sin by various exterior factors that they cannot possibly control. Social realities stand for such an extremely overwhelming power in the formation of women’s sin that there is no way for women to escape. On the one hand, many feminist theologians hold an idealistic belief that since women’s sin does not come from inner depravity, women will be freed from sin if the social circumstances are better. On the other hand, given the human culture is formed mostly by patriarchy, these feminist theologians understand women’s ways of sinning as inevitably determined by women’s condition of oppression and subordination. In this way, both women’s freedom to choose the evil and their freedom to choose the good are restrained.

5) On the one hand, feminist theologians criticize male theologians for committing the idolatry of conceptualizing God in man’s image. On the other hand, however, many of them made a similar mistake by asserting that we need to envision God in feminine imagery or rename God according to

494 Ibid.
495 Alistair McFadyen, Bound to Sin, 131.
women’s experience. I also want to point out that even though feminist theologians especially emphasize relationality, the God-talk that claims God is radically immanent in the feminine self is less than a relational language. An actual relational language addresses mutual interactions rather than one-sided monologues. However, in many feminist theologies, as Hampson notices, women’s experience of God is reduced simply to women’s experience. \(^{496}\) Revelation is unknown in the feminist theologies that tailor the deity to women’s consciousness. In these feminist theologies, the voice of God is drowned by the talkativeness and exclusiveness of self-preoccupation.

All of these dilemmas, I contend, result from the uncritical commitment to the presuppositions of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity. The first three dilemmas arise from the inner conflicts between the nature of the theology of sin and the over-beautification of the feminine self. Many feminist theologians are reluctant to admit that women are active sinners, which makes them having a hard time trying to maintain both the ideas of human being’s corruption and innocence. As a result, their theologies of sin evolve into a strange hybrid accusing men’s sin and celebrating women’s goodness, which brings insoluble dilemmas that obstruct the way for women to get a proper understanding of themselves.

The fourth dilemma comes from a refusal of the dimension of transcendence. Niebuhr’s feminist critics suggest that most women sin passively, or suffer from the sin of self-loss. Yet the truth is, women’s ways of sinning are not as determined as they think. Whether or not a woman responds to her environment with acts of sin, or with what kind of sin is a matter of free choice—the environment itself may have positive or passive effects on the individual’s decision, but it cannot determine it. It means that women don’t have to be hurt or oppressed to protect their self-interests actively—even in a most “perfect” environment where women are respected and loved they still are human beings

\(^{496}\) Hampson, \textit{Theology and Feminism}, 170.
who have their desires and ambitions that may lead them to act immorally. Even in an oppressive condition, there are always women who refuse to be the puppets of circumstances—by leaping out of the environment-decides-all circle, they choose not to be victims of conditions but instead act creatively.

However, the secular mind has trouble understanding or accepting human beings’ capacity of self-transcendence, namely their freedom over the culture. As a result, in secular theories human beings are viewed as hopelessly bound in their given environment. Like Niebuhr notices, “a simple determinism is thus a natural characteristic of all social interpretations of human actions.” Niebuhr’s feminist critics regard freedom as an inalienable right to women, yet questionably they understand women as essentially being free, but not being free to commit sin. However, without radical freedom, morality is logically and practically impossible. It turns out that, although these feminist theologians value freedom, the freedom they advocate is actually a quite pessimistic one since for them there is no absolute, transcendent freedom, but only relative, conditional freedom. For them freedom can only be understood within the given social structure, thus inevitably, in these feminist theologies of sin “freedom” is reduced to an important accessory in a larger context of social determinism.

If the fourth dilemma results from the rejection of humanity’s self-transcendence, then the fifth dilemma results from the refusal of a true relationship with the transcendent God. In genuine human relations, we accept the others as who they are. We know relationships are built on mutual love and respect. We don’t pretend our experience and our character can determine others’ existence. Only in relation we know there is a time to talk, and there is a time to listen. We don’t have to be others to have connections with others. The self that indulges in itself hopes to absorb everything into itself, but the self in relation knows the limits and boundaries of itself. The self-willed person, like Martin Buber says, “does not believe and does not meet.”

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relationship with God can we have the courage to claim that God is the irreducible, wholly Other who is by no means an extension of our wills and our needs. To say God is the wholly Other, as we said in the last chapter, does not mean God is separated completely from creation or stands opposite to it. Rather, it affirms that God has absolute freedom and sovereignty. God is radically immanent in terms of the Spirit of God who dwells in us in relation, but God is also radically transcendent because God is irreducible to human-created images. Only in an honest recognition of finitude we come to see that our imaginations may be rendered irrelevant and pointless in the encounter with God. Therefore a meaningful God-talk as a relational language is also a language of faith. It is by faith we are related to God and see divine otherness in divine relatedness. It is in faith that we sustain openness to the word of God, which is spoken to us in general and in particular. It is also faith that not just enriches our experience of the divine, but makes our experience of God possible in the first place.

6.1.3 Conclusion

In this section we have seen both the strengths and weaknesses of the feminist understanding of sin. I agree with Niebuhr’s feminist critics on their emphasis upon social justice, their concern for the weak and disadvantaged sinned-against, and their determination to fight against all forms of oppression. Nevertheless, I find their denial of the other side of the doctrine of sin (women being active sinners, the religio-theological dimension of sin, et cetera) quite troubling. I believe the dilemmas present in the feminist critique manifest that some feminist theologians’ insistence upon only one side of the truth has seriously affected the validity of their understanding of women’s sin. To be noted, like his feminist critics, Niebuhr also regards experience as a primary source (in a weak sense) of theology. Yet for him various human experiences basically validate the Christian claim that “everyone is equal sinner (on the theological level).” In this sense, sin, at least theological sin is a gender-free experience. If feminist theologians can
consider more of Niebuhr’s insights, I suggest, their understanding of women’s sin will be more accurate.
6.2 A Preliminary Exploration of a More Balanced Model of Sin

6.2.1 Niebuhr’s Model of “Equality of Sin and Inequality of Guilt”

In Christian theological tradition there is a difference between sin and sins—the sin against God and the sins against people and the world. Sin is understood as an interior problem that has various exterior consequences. Like Langdon Gilkey explains:

Thus, the tradition has distinguished sin from sins, the acts we do that run counter to moral rules. The first, sin, is characteristic of all of us at a level below conscious awareness and even intention; the second, sins, represents the conscious decisions and actions we make on the surface of life.499

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr elucidates this double-level character of Christian interpretation of human being’s state of depravity by employing the ideas of “equality of sin” and “inequality of guilt.” According to Niebuhr, everyone is sinner in the sense that everyone sins against God by turning away from God. Therefore for every human being there is an equality of sinfulness in the sight of God. Sin ultimately stems from freewill, rather than from external forces. Internal intentions often transcend human being’s situatedness so that the actions of transgression are not completely determined or coerced. In other words, all people are equally sinners, even though the conditions of historical existence for each individual may vary. However, claiming sin to be ultimately an internal problem does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that sin is only personal, spiritual, or socially irrelevant. For Niebuhr the inward foundations and outward manifestations of sin do not stand in an either-or situation. He realizes that the Christian assertion that all men and women are equally sinners “seems to weaken all moral judgments” and

seems to inhibit preferences between the oppressor and his victim, between the congenital liar and the moderately truthful man, between the debauched sensualist and the self-disciplined worker, and between the egotist who drives egocentricity to the point of sickness and the moderately ‘unselfish’ devotee of the general welfare.\(^{500}\)

Recognizing this, he opposes the inclination of some understandings of sin to “destroy all relative moral judgments by their exclusive emphasis upon the ultimate religious fact of the sinfulness of all men.” Although for him it is “necessary and proper” that the distinctions between the powerful and the weak, the oppressor and the oppressed “should disappear at the ultimate religious level of judgment,” Niebuhr recognizes that it is very important to draw these distinctions “provisionally in all historic judgments,” otherwise the relative moral achievements of history will be endangered.\(^{501}\) In other words, Niebuhr holds that although all men and women are equally sinners on the existential level, in the actualities of history there is “an ascertainable inequality of guilt” among different individuals.\(^{502}\)

Guilt, as Niebuhr defines it, is the objective and historical consequences of sin, and “the actual corruption of the plan of creation and providence in the historical world.” Following “the prophetic note” which emphasizes the inequality of guilt as much as it emphasizes the equality of sin in both the Old and New Testament, Niebuhr points out that “men who are equally sinners in the sight of God need not be equally guilty of a specific act of wrong-doing in which they are involved.”\(^{503}\)

Whenever the history endows “an individual or a group with power, social prestige, intellectual eminence or moral approval above their fellows,” he notices, “an ego is allowed to expand.”\(^{504}\) For this reason “the men who are tempted by their eminence and by the possession of undue power become more guilty of pride


\[^{501}\] Ibid.

\[^{502}\] Ibid., 221-222.

\[^{503}\] Ibid., 222.

\[^{504}\] Ibid., 226.
and of injustice than those who lack power and position.”

Capitalists are not greater sinners than poor labourers by any natural depravity. But it is a fact that those who hold great economic and political power are more guilty of pride against God and of injustice against the weak than those who lack power and prestige.

Niebuhr points out that the biblical tradition also maintains the moral discrimination between the rich, strong, proud and the poor, weak, meek:

Specially severe judgments fall upon the rich and the powerful, the mighty and the noble, the wise and the righteous (that is, those who are tempted to spiritual pride by their attainment of some relative, socially approved standard of righteousness, the Pharisees).

Comparing to “historical Christianity,” Niebuhr finds that Biblical Christianity sees more clearly that injustice is “an inevitable concomitant” of the religious sin of pride. In other words, the strong and powerful is particularly guilty of the sin of pride since their sin expands in both vertical and horizontal directions: “Its vertical expansion its pride, involves it in sin against God. Its horizontal expansion involves it in an unjust effort to gain security and prestige at the expense of its fellows.” In contrast, the sin of the weak and oppressed usually does not expand greatly toward a horizontal direction. This is because on the one hand the limited power of the weak restrains their sin from causing destructive consequences in comparison with those who own power; on the other hand, the weak are more often the victims, rather than the subject of sin on the level of historical actualities, if not on the deeper level of the existential dimension.

However, unlike his feminist critics, Niebuhr rejects the alternative that simply infers virtue or innocence from victimhood. He realizes that the guiltlessness of

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505 Ibid., 223.
506 Ibid., 225.
507 Ibid., 223.
508 Ibid., 226.
people with less power is relative, not absolute. It is true that the poor and weak usually are less guilty of oppression and abusing power, but they are more likely to be tempted by moral or spiritual pride. Moral superiority, Niebuhr points out, is particularly the sin of “the saints and the righteous” who believe that they are better in character than those who are wealthy and powerful. However, this confidence in inherent goodness and moral ability blinds the saints and the righteous to the fact that their innocence is often conditional. As Niebuhr says,

A too simple social radicalism does not recognize how quickly the poor, the weak, the despised of yesterday, may, on gaining a social victory over their detractors, exhibit the same arrogance and the same will-to-power which they abhorred in their opponents and which they were inclined to regard as a congenital sin of their enemies…This is the self-righteousness of the weak in distinction to the self-righteousness of the powerful.\textsuperscript{509}

The demonic pretensions of the privileged community are met by similar pretensions on the part of the disinherited, who in one moment sneer at the religious sanctifications of injustice in the privileged community, and in the next moment engage in the religious divinization of their class as a messianic one.\textsuperscript{510}

In the case of people with less power, a relative lack of opportunities to exert horizontal violence does not necessarily mean that they don't have an expanded ego, and it surely doesn’t mean that they cannot exercise will-to-power under limited conditions, especially upon those who have even less status and are more powerless than they are.\textsuperscript{511}

The idea of the inequality of guilt, as Niebuhr sees it, is particularly important when estimating human sinfulness in a given historical situation, yet he also reminds us that without a profound understanding of the Christian declaration of the universality and equality of sin for all human beings, it is hard to avoid superficial analysis that favors the interests of specific groups. If the emphasis

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{509} Ibid., 226.
\item \textsuperscript{510} Niebuhr, “When Will Christians Stop Fooling Themselves,” in \textit{Love and Justice}, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{511} Please see my discussion in chapter four.
\end{itemize}
upon the inequality of guilt does justice to the weak and the powerless, the same emphasis upon the equality of sin restrains the righteous and the good from giving themselves moral advantages and thus afflicting injustice upon the “sinners and publicans.” Like the mighty and the powerful, the good and the righteous are also under the judgment of God who transcends all human constructions, cognitive schemes and unilateral wishes. While not all human persons are equally guilty in terms of the actual consequences of sin, Niebuhr stresses, all—no matter the weak or the strong, the ungodly or the pious, the foolish or the wise, the respectable or the disreputable—are equally sinful in the breaking of relatedness to God for inordinate desires.

6.2.2 The Dialectics of Sin

Comparing to the feminist critique, which focuses mainly upon the socio-moral aspect of sin and women’s sin of passivity, Niebuhr’s “equality of sin and inequality of guilt” is a more balanced model that gives considerations to both horizontal sin and vertical sin, active sin and passive sin, social sin and individual sin. Based on this model, I will revisit several crucial points in the feminist critique, and to sketch out an understanding of sin that integrates Niebuhr and his feminist critics’ insights.

6.2.2.1 Horizontal/Socio-moral Sin and Vertical/Religio-theological Sin

Both Niebuhr and his feminist critics concern about horizontal sin or socio-moral sin. They are aware of the evils and vices manifested on the surface of historical realities and criticize the powerful for inflicting injustice upon the weak. In this regard, we can say the breach between Niebuhr and his feminist critics is not as wide as it appears. As we have seen, Niebuhr believes that the powerful is more responsible for the injustice and corruption of the world. His feminist critics point out that oppressed, self-shrinking women cannot be deemed
as proud and aggressive as the traditional males who oppresses them. Both
Niebuhr and his feminist critics affirm that the “degrees” of human depravity need
to be measured by the actual effects of sin, and they both claim that the weak is
less guilty and less proud than the powerful.

With regard to vertical sin or religio-theological sin, Niebuhr views horizontal
sin as ultimately stemming from human being’s vertical sin against God, while his
feminist critics maintain that the concept of vertical sin is androcentric. Some of
them argue that the understanding of sin as fundamentally an individual
relationship with God makes Niebuhr underestimate the seriousness of social sin.
While I refute this claim in 5.1.1 by pointing out that for Niebuhr vertical sin is
not just the sin of the spirit, but has concrete personal and collective consequences,
I do agree with feminist theologians that in religious practice, if not in Niebuhr’s
theory, an over-emphasis upon the vertical dimension of sin sometimes tends to
make people think that their reconciliation with God can compensate their
concrete sins committed against their neighbor.

If, as we have suggested in previous chapters, both the socio-moral and
religio-theological aspects are important to understand women’s way of sinning,
the vertical and horizontal sin should be viewed as in organic relation, rather than
in an either-or position. On the one hand, I follow the Niebuhrian and traditional
understanding of horizontal sin as historical consequences of the vertical sin
against God. The reason why human corruption is so difficult to be eradicated is
that the socio-moral sin manifested on social and personal existence stems from a
separation from the source of love, justice, wisdom and goodness, and this source
is God. In this way, only by returning to God as the ultimate source of goodness,
can humanity gain the power to transform the given condition of social reality. On
the other hand, the content of horizontal sin is not exhausted by vertical sin. It
must be noted that while vertical sin is the sin against God, horizontal sin is not
just the sin against God—it is also the sin against the self, other selves, and the
world. The “forgiveness of God” alone cannot justify people who commit
horizontal sin. To atone for horizontal sin, the “forgiveness of the sinned-against”
is needed. If horizontal sin is to be simply reduced to vertical sin, there will be
great injustice involved not only because the actual historical effects of sin are
ignored, but also the rights of the sinned-against are demeaned. If vertical sin is to
be replaced by horizontal sin, the meaningfulness of the concepts of both vertical
and horizontal sin is cancelled since the transcendental standard to judge the
sinners is missing. Without the transcendental critical principle, the sinners will
never acknowledge themselves as sinners; they will only see themselves as the
sinned-against. On this point, Niebuhr is right:

If the church is to reduce the fury of the righteous man who does not know how
unrighteous he is, it will have to be more than a socio-moral institution. It will have to be a
religio-moral fellowship in which there is some sense of a holiness which transcends all
human perfections and imperfection. 512

A balanced interpretation of sin, in this way, should carefully maintain the
dialectical tension between the horizontal/socio-moral and
vertical/religio-theological aspects of sin.

6.2.2.2 Self-loss and Pride

Niebuhr’s feminist critics claim that self-loss is a primary sin for women. Many of their insightful viewpoints regarding the matter have been expounded in
chapter two. I am not going to recapitulate here, but simply want to point out that
it is one of the most important contributions to the understanding of the Christian
doctrine of sin, that Niebuhr’s feminist critics recognize the gravity of the sin of
self-loss. Feminist theologians are right by asserting that the sin against the self as
God’s image is a sin as severe as the sin against other selves as God’s image.
Feminist theologians recognize that by emphasizing too much upon self-sacrifice
and self-giving, the teachings of patriarchal societies and churches are sinful of

smothering the self-awareness of women. If like Tanner says, every creature is a passive recipient of God’s active gift-giving and God is the source of all benefits, then within the divine-human relationship, obedience, rather than self-assertion is a virtue. Yet from the perspective of socio-moral sin, we cannot assume obedience is a virtue. As I contend in 3.2.2, an over-simplified preaching that advocates the shattering of the self is dangerous and defective for those who are suffering from self-loss, since only the divine grace can release the true self by shattering the old self, if the old self is broken by powers other than God, the true self might be broken too. Moreover, Niebuhr views institutional sin as the most severe form of pride. It never occurs to him that sensuality can be institutional, too. Under the condition of oppression, the sinned-against might be characterized collectively by self-shrinking and self-abnegation, which leads to their political inabilities as a group and therefore in turn aggravates the current oppressive conditions.

However, pride also characterizes women’s ways of sinning. If we explore the behaviors of women, it is not hard to recognize that women can be very selfish, possessive, and tyrannical. I am not here suggesting that women and men are the same, but I am arguing that they share equality in every way, including their capability to commit the sin of pride. Many feminist theologians argue that self-inflation or selfishness is not women’s problem. At first sight, this seems to work in women’s favor, but it is actually not so. The image of women that some feminist theologians create is not completely false, but it is severely superficial. It only focuses on the good side of women, which does women no good since the real-world women can never live up to the dream-world standard of being saint-like human beings. As previously noted, many women feel highly uncomfortable to be boxed into the feminist ideological system. These women feel that what they need is not to be told who they are, either by men or by feminists, but to be respected as who they are, and they are neither demons nor angels. If “most women” are selfless, how will women view themselves if they find themselves extremely selfish? Do they cease to be “normal” women? Are they masculine for being self-centered? If not, why do they have characters that
are supposed to belong only to men? Apparently this is not the approach to understand the issue that Niebuhr’s feminist critics are expecting. They want, if anything, women to detest the tendency of being selfless—that is why they call self-loss “sin,” rather than doubting their femininity for not being unselfish. But when a quality like “pride” that marks the behaviors of all men and women is denied, questions like this will inevitably emerge.

Both pride and self-loss, I contend, are major paradigms of sinning. It is not unusual that in modern society women are more likely than ever to be arrogant, while more and more men suffer from self-contempt. This is because that on the level of social existence, gender is not the only factor that affects how women and men sin. In modern secular societies, where the value of women and men tends to be materialized and formatted—social status, educational level, outward appearances, material success, or even some trivial things like how many fans one owns on twitter—all these factors can lead to an expanding or shrinking ego.

6.2.2.3 Sinner and the Sinned-against

The “inequality of guilt” affirms the different “degrees” of depravity among sinners on the surface of social realities. It maintains that sinner and the sinner-against is not the same on the socio-moral level, although they are equally sinners on the existential level. However, to say sinner and the sinned-against have inequality of guilt does not mean that the sinned-against is entirely innocent. If as we have explained above, offending God is not just a religious transgression—it has socio-moral sins as its consequences—we will find that even from the socio-moral aspect, most people who are involved in the flux of history (including women) are not just the sinned-against, but also sinners since their breaking of the law of love and justice when sin against God will inevitably brings effects on the socio-moral level.

Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ understandings of sin lose their realistic character when trying to deny women as active sinners—and this is destined to be an
attempt to find a scapegoat for one’s own sin. Finding the scapegoat, West says, is an inevitable outcome of human being’s obstinate quest for innocence: “feminist theology’s pursuit of liberation from guilt through the maintenance of a claim to innocence is part of a very ancient pattern…Basically it is a pattern that can be found in both pre-Christian and Christian forms, as well as non-Christian and post-Christian versions.” This pattern, West writes, wants to take away “everything that spoils the picture that we have re-drawn of ourselves,” and therefore sets “the inevitable cycle of violence…on its course.”

With no doubt, women are often victimized. But feminist theologians should not forget that, while women are the sinned-against, they are also sinners, which means that scapegoats cannot be found for every sin that women commit. There are some sins of women that they do spontaneously; therefore in these cases it is not others, but they themselves who need to take responsibility. Like I said, women share equality with men in every aspect, including their ability to choose between good and evil with their freewill. If we view women’s sin entirely from the perspective of being sinned against, we can of course conclude that women are innocent. As a matter of fact, we will reach the conclusion that every human being is innocent, since every immoral act can be traced back to antecedent conditions that offer reasonable explanations of the act. The imputation of sin to social sources rather than inner depravity fits with the modern mind’s blind faith in human goodness. However, while this move is supposed to take blame away and ease up guilt, it also takes away responsibility: if plausible excuses are found for every sinful act, there is no way women will face the fact that they often hurt each other for no other reason than satisfying their unlimited desires. What’s more, being unaware of themselves as active sinners, women cannot take the responsibility of fighting against every possible evil force that they create, which oppresses and victimizes others and themselves.

Besides, if women can and often sin for the satisfaction of their self-interests and desires, if “inner depravity” is still a main reason that women commit sin,

513 West, Deadly Innocence, xviii.
regardless of their social status, it is not doing women and their victims any good by stressing blindly that women are only recipients, rather than authors of sin. To say women can and often sin against others is not to blame victims, but to be more realistic and to acknowledge that as victims, women can also be victimizers. Of course, there are some groups of people (for example, babies) who can only be called the sinned-against, rather than sinner. Yet we cannot assume women who are involved in the social realities of this world which abounds with injustice and tragedies can be included in those who are truly innocent, for this would be a great offense to whoever women sin against.
6.3 Conclusion

Both Niebuhr and his feminist critics contribute indispensable insights to the understanding of the Christian doctrine of sin. Both of their theologies of sin are not impeccable. But their debate helps to deepen the understanding of sin from many perspectives. To conclude what we have discussed in this chapter, a more balanced model of sin should take both sides of sin—horizontal sin and vertical sin, pride and self-loss, activity and passivity, sinning and being sinned against—into account. Only in this way, I contend, can human sin be better understood and be more effectively dealt with.
Conclusion

In this research, I have sought to elaborate a response to the feminist critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology of sin. For Niebuhr, there are two primary categories of sin: pride and sensuality. Pride is the denial of one’s contingent condition of being, while sensuality is the escape from freedom and an unlimited devotion to limited existence. Niebuhr regards sensuality as derived from pride. Many feminist theologians oppose the primacy of pride in Niebuhr’s understanding of sin by pointing out that it does not speak to the situation of most women. They argue that women’s closeness to nature, their preference of connectedness over isolation, immanence over transcendence and their universal condition of oppression make them less aggressive, arrogant and egocentric, but are more prone to suffer from self-negation, sensuality or hiding.

While I agree with Niebuhr’s feminist critics that self-loss is a very common sin for women, I’m not satisfied with their total rejection of pride as women’s sin and their association of the feminine self with some ideological stereotypes that only affirms women’s passivity and innocence. I believe some feminist theologians’ identification of women with innocent victims is not only incongruent with social realities, but it will also undermine feminism’s goal of striving for equality and justice. I also point out that the feminist critique of the primacy of pride in Niebuhr’s theology is a mismatch since Niebuhr views theological pride, rather than moral pride as the most basic human sin. Yet the feminist critique of Niebuhr’s pride is mostly directed to the latter, rather than the former (to be noted, many of their criticisms on the socio-moral level are remarkable). Although some scholars like Jodie Lyon-Baldwin and Terry D. Cooper have noticed this mismatch and thus defended the meaningfulness of the Niebuhrian pride, my exploration differs from theirs in its critique of the foundation of this mismatch. I argue that the ignorance of certain aspects of women’s sin in the feminist criticisms stems from the dictate of certain presuppositions. In the process of examining the two major presuppositions of the feminist critique—namely the
idea of women’s innocence and the spirit of secularity, I question the logic and empirical validity of the feminist rejection of the Niebuhrian sin of pride. Also, my study exposes the dilemmas present in Niebuhr’s feminist critics’ understandings of women’s condition (6.1.2). Other scholars (like Miles) may have vaguely mentioned one or two of these dilemmas, but I not only give them a comprehensive analysis, but also associate them to my critique of the two presuppositions of the feminist critique.

Nevertheless, although the feminist critique of Niebuhr has many inadequacies, it is still incisive and contributes a lot of valuable insights to the understanding of the Christian doctrine of sin. In this work I especially affirm feminist theologians’ focus upon social justice, the perspective of the sinned-against and women’s sin of self-loss. In the last chapter, I try to integrate these advantages of feminist theologians’ into Niebuhr’s model of sin. It is, however, just an initial attempt that needs to be further improved and refined, which is beyond the scope of this research. A constructive work that incorporate these two theological systems into a mature theology of sin is quite demanding and is worthy of a careful study.

I hope my dissertation will make more people recognize that Niebuhr’s theology of sin is not, like some feminist theologians suggest, sexist and hostile to women. Getting to know what Niebuhr really talks about, I believe, will help women, especially Christian women, to better understand the meaning of sin.
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