

DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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ABSTRACT

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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