Love, Justice, and Power: The Niebuhrian Framework of Gudina Tumsa

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Introduction

This article examines the theological influence of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) on Gudina Tumsa (1929–1979), the General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Lutheran Church (1966–1979). Niebuhr, an American theologian of German Lutheran immigrant descent, was a prominent figure in social ethics, teaching at Union Theological Seminary and Yale University. Jean Bethke Elshtain describes Niebuhr as the "most important public theologian of our lifetime."[1] His work on Christian realism, social justice, and the intersection of faith and politics resonated globally, including in Ethiopia, where Gudina Tumsa engaged with his ideas to address the socio-political challenges of his time.

Niebuhr's theological and ethical framework significantly influenced Gudina Tumsa's thought, particularly in addressing the interplay of faith, power, and social justice in Ethiopia.[2] As Jeremy L. Sabella summarizes, "Niebuhr's major contribution lies in three areas: politics, society, and religion, particularly pointing to the questions of

[1] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 106.

[2] Darrell Jodock, Gudina's classmate at Luther Seminary in the 1960s reports that John Victor Halvorson, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in those days, was a great devotee of Niebuhr's thought. He also remembers that Gudina was more intro the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr during his study, which were required readings.

'how to ethically wield power, especially the power of governments,' of 'how the categories of *love* and *justice* shape human relations,' and of 'how humans find meaning in life.'"[3] These concerns resonated deeply with Gudina, who similarly grappled with the ethical use of power amid Ethiopia's authoritarian regime, the demands of Christian *love* and *justice* in a context of oppression, and the search for theological meaning in struggle. Gudina's writings reflect Niebuhr's realist approach, adapting his insights on power dynamics and social ethics to an African postcolonial context while maintaining a firm commitment to the prophetic role of the church.[4]

A key to understanding the formation of Gudina's "theology of love and justice" lies in his exposure to the works of Niebuhr during his studies at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, from 1963 to 1966. As noted by the Norwagian scholar Øyvind Eide, this period was formative. Darrell Jodock, Gudina's roommate at Luther Seminary, and Dennis Everson, who later served as a secretary in the EECMY, both confirmed in conversations with Eide in 2001 and me (in 2016 and 2014, respectively) that Gudina was a diligent and engaged student of Niebuhr's theology.[5] This period of study provided Gudina

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[3] Jeremy L. Sabella. *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2017). 119.

[4] For more discussion, see Ezekiel Gebissa, "Guddinaa Tumsaa,"*Dictionary of African Biography*, edited by Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 509-511.

[5] See Øyvind Eide, "Integral Human Development: Rev. Gudina Tumsa's Theology, with Special Referencw to His Critique of Dominant Trends in Missiology and the Quest of Human Rights" in *The Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa:*

with a framework for analyzing power and sin in collective life. Niebuhr's critique of theological liberalism and his insistence on the church's responsibility to confront systemic injustice offered Gudina a language to articulate the struggles he knew so well in Ethiopia. The concepts of *moral man and immoral society*, the tension between *love and justice*, and the *prophetic role of the religious community*—all central themes in Niebuhr's work—became raw materials that Gudina would later refine and adapt to the specific historical and cultural context of imperial and revolutionary Ethiopia.

Reinhold Niebuhr on Christian Realism

What is Christian realism? Christian Realism is a complex set of ideas that is difficult to define in a simple way. Chen Liang, however, identifies a central organizing principle within Niebuhr's thought, contending that its clearest formulation is located in "the dialectic relationship between *love and justice*." [6] He states that: "Christian realism, a political ethic that established a dialectic relationship between love and justice, already attracted an array of religious as well as atheist followers."[7] This dialectic, wherein perfect love serves as an impossible ideal that constantly critiques and informs the

Lectures and Discussions, 2nd. ed. Paul E. Hoffman (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 2007), 41.

[6] Chen Liang, *From a Christian Socialist to a Christian Realist: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Soviet Union, 1930-1945* (Doctoral Dissertation – National University of Singapore, 2007), 120. Emphasis mine.

[7] Liang, *From a Christian Socialist,* 216.

pursuit of attainable justice, is presented as a foundational element of Niebhur's realist framework.

As Robin W. Lovin states,

> Christian realism is not a general philosophical theism, but an affirmation of statements about God drawn from what Niebuhr called "prophetic religion," the tradition that begins with the Hebrew prophets, who saw God both present in and standing in judgment on human realities with which our moral lives are concerned. For Christians, this realism culminates in Jesus Christ, who makes this divine reality present in the world, reveals God's judgment on it, and finally redeems it for God's own purposes. [8]

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism was a practical and urgent ethical response, shaped directly by the crisis of the inter-war era. Its development was a direct reaction to the deep moral and spiritual disillusionment caused by the First World War. The war's unprecedented mechanized violence, which killed millions and destroyed a generation, completely undermined the progressive and optimistic beliefs that were central to early 20th-century liberal Protestantism.[9] This liberal Protestant tradition, influenced by Enlightenment ideas and the Social Gospel movement, was founded on a firm belief in gradual moral and social improvement. It held that

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[8] Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10-11.

[9] See Justus D. Doenecke, "Reinhold Niebuhr and His Critics: The Interventionist Controversy in *World War II*," in *Anglican and Episcopal History* 64, no. 4 (1995): 459; William C. Inboden, "The Prophetic Conflict: Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and World War II," in *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 49-53.

through human effort, education, and reform, society could be perfected and even the Kingdom of God could be gradually built on earth.[10] This view assumed that human nature was fundamentally good and that history was inevitably moving toward peace and unity.[11] One good example is a optimistic reports of a distinguished American clergyman just returned from Europe in the late 1920s, who claimed that political and religious forces there were advancing toward reconciliation and a new era of "harmony and peace." Writing in the *Christian Century* in March 1931, Niebuhr criticized the clergy asserting that "the Europe about which this optimistic judgment was made is, in many respects, in a more perilous position than it was in 1914."[12] He pointed specifically to the rising threat in Germany, notably embodied by "the Hitler movement." This blindness to looming catastrophe, Niebuhr contended, stemmed from the dogmatic conviction within liberal religion that "the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation."[13] He warned that such complacency, blind to the persistent

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[10] Keith Pavlischek, "Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and Just War Theory A Critique," in *Christianity and Power Politics Today: Christian Realism and Contemporary Political Dilemmas*, ed. Eric Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008), 55-57; Doenecke, "Reinhold Niebuhr and His Critics," 460-61; Inboden, "The Prophetic Conflict," 58-60.

[11] Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 2-3.

[12] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!," *The Christian Century*, March 25, 1931, reprinted in *Christian Century* of July 4-11, 1984, 682-684.

[13] Ibid, 684.

and tragic nature of human sin and power, endangered the very foundations of Western civilization.

Niebuhr's political framework and its underlying theological anthropology are detailed in his work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*.[14] Published in the early 1940s against the backdrop of global catastrophe, this work provides the foundational argument for his "Christian realist" perspective, moving beyond political theory to ground his thought in a profound analysis of the human condition. Here, Niebuhr contends that to comprehend the tragic and tumultuous flow of human history—from the rise of totalitarian regimes to the failure of idealistic policies—one must first grasp the paradoxical nature of humanity itself, a nature poised between its creative and destructive capacities. This condition, he argues, is defined by a permanent and tension-filled state between three core elements:

> 1) It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of 'image of God' (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence, and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil.... (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity.[15]

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[14]Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, vol. 1: Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) and *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, vol. 2: Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943).

[15] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1,* 150.

This line of reasoning leads to Niebuhr's core argument: that true love and justice must be understood not just as individual virtues, but as forces that operate within and transform entire communities. This raises a critical question*: how can these ideals be practiced collectively?* Niebuhr argued that when people act together as a group—like a company, union, or government—they follow a different, often less moral, set of rules than a single person would. He argues that "Social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion."[16] Where liberal reformers believed that appeals to conscience could bridge divides, Niebuhr saw a world fractured by power imbalances. Social classes, he noted, rarely relinquish privilege voluntarily—not because people are inherently wicked, but because groups, unlike individuals, are bound by self-interest and survival instincts. Even the most enlightened ideals, he warned, "run up against the limitations of human nature," making it naive to expect societies to "perceive and affirm the rights of others as vigorously as their own."[17]

He states: "As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command." [18] This tension between

[16] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xv.

[17] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xxiv.

[18] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 9.

personal ethics and collective action lies at the heart of his critique of modern society. While individuals may strive for fairness in their private dealings, Niebuhr argues that when people organize into tribes, corporations, or nations, they inevitably pursue self-interest with far fewer moral constraints.

Niebuhr observes: “Love, which depends upon emotion, whether it expresses itself in transient sentiment or constant goodwill, is baffled by the more intricate social relations in which the highest ethical attitudes are achieved only by careful calculation.”[19] In other words, according to Niebuhr, in modern governance: our noblest human qualities—compassion, empathy, generosity—often prove inadequate when confronting systemic injustice. What works beautifully between neighbors becomes ineffective when applied to multinational corporations or government policies. Niebuhr suggests that in these complex arenas, ethical outcomes require not just good intentions, but strategic thinking about power dynamics, resource allocation, and long-term consequences.

So, one may ask, how does power work in insuring justice for the oppressed? In his 1934 work *Reflections on the End of an Era*, moving beyond idealistic notions of moral persuasion, he grounds justice in the hard realities of power relations, arguing that “justice is dependent upon achieving a balance of power between social

[19] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 74.

groups."[20] This core insight challenges both religious and secular idealisms that imagine justice emerging purely through ethical appeal or rational debate. This perspective was particularly radical in the 1930s context of economic collapse and rising fascism, when liberal democracies clung to the fading hope that reason alone could preserve social order. Niebuhr, witnessing the failure of such approaches, insisted that justice requires institutional mechanisms to check concentrated power—be it economic, racial, or political domination.

Yet, Niebuhr's theology of love and justice provides clear guidance for christian ingagement in politics which he refers to as a method of *unmasking of historical contradictions through the concept of divine love (Agape).* By redefining the messianic role as one of suffering service rather than conquering dominion, Jesus introduces a transcendent ethical standard that stands in perpetual judgment over all human institutions and actions. The crucifixion, the ultimate symbol of apparent political failure and weakness, becomes, in Christian theology, the ultimate revelation of God's power and love. This "wisdom of the cross" creates a permanent tension between the human and the divine.

He states,

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[20] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 244. For detail, see Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr as Political Theologian," in Richard Harries, ed.. *Reinhold Niehbuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (London: Mowbray, 1986), 157-81.

> The love which enters history as suffering love, must remain suffering love in his- tory. Since this love is the very law of history it may have its tentative triumphs even in history; for human history cannot stand in complete contradiction to itself Yet history does stand in actual contradiction to the law of love; and lesus anticipates the growth of evil as well as the growth of good in history. Among the signs of the end will be 'wars and rumours of wars'.[21]

The law of love, as exemplified by Christ, is an impossible ideal within history because it demands a self-abnegation and purity of motive that conflicted human beings, enmeshed in networks of power and self-interest, can never fully achieve. Niebuhr argues that this does not render the ideal irrelevant; on the contrary, it becomes the indispensable critical tool for judging all historical achievements. Every human justice, every social contract, every exercise of power falls short of this perfect standard of selfless love. This "impossible possibility" prevents us from sanctifying our own causes, our nation, or our political system as absolute. For democracy, this means that while it may be the best available system for approximating justice and checking power (as it is built on a realistic suspicion of concentrated power), it can never be considered the final embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Its laws, its policies, and its victories must continually be subjected to critique and reform in light of this higher law of love.

Niebuhr and Gudina on Marxism and Human Nature

[21] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny ofMan*, *vol.* 2, 49.

Following the 1974 revolution, the Derg regime embarked on a project of radical social engineering under the banner of Marxist-Leninism. This project was not merely economic or political; it was profoundly anthropological. It sought to create a "New Ethiopian Socialist Man," freed from the false consciousness of religion, tribal affiliation, and bourgeois individualism. The human person was redefined primarily as a *productive entity* whose identity and value were derived from their relationship to the means of production and their utility to the class struggle.

For Gudina, Niebuhr's work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*,[22] published in the early 1940s, provided a helpful framework for understanding the human nature by vertue of which he could critice the Marxist view of humanity. This book captures Niebuhr's mature philosophy and is the main reason he is known as a "Christian realist." In this book, Niebuhr contends that humanity exists in a state of tension between finitude and freedom. As creatures bound by natural limits and biological necessities, humans are finite; yet, being capable of self-transcendence, reason, and moral agency, they possess an infinite capacity for freedom and aspiration. This duality, rooted in the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, is the source of humanity's greatest achievements but also its deepest

[22] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, vol. 1: Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) and *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, vol. 2: Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943).

pathologies. The anxiety inherent in this ambiguous position leads inevitably to sin, which Niebuhr defines primarily as pride—the attempt by individuals and collectives to overstep their creaturely limits and secure their own existence through power, thereby displacing God and making themselves the center of existence.[23]

Niebuhr saw Marxism as the ideal modern "children of light" who are "not wise enough to understand the power of self-interest." The "Children of Light," according to Niebuhr, are the idealists and optimistic defenders of democracy—like the thinkers of the Enlightenment—who believe in human goodness, rationality, and the possibility of perfecting society through moral suasion and education.[24] While he shares their ultimate goals of justice and freedom, Niebuhr offers a profound critique of their naiveté. He argues that their vision is ultimately fragile because it fails to account for the persistent power of human self-interest, the "defect of the will," and the collective egoism of groups and nations that his theology describes. He argues, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[25]

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[23] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,* 10-11.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defenders* (London: Nisbet, 1945), vi. Historian Henry Bamford Parkes declared this book as "a brilliant political analysis, in the best American tradition." See Henry Bamford Parkes, "Democracy and Freedom," *The Sewanee Review* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1945): 476–86,

He argued that Marxism correctly identified the sin of the bourgeoisie (their pride and greed) but was naively blind to the sin of the proletariat. By believing that a change in economic structures (the abolition of private property) would eradicate selfishness and create a "new man," Marxism committed a fatal anthropological error. It replaced the biblical concept of sin with the category of "ideology," promising a *utopian* future that could only be achieved and maintained by coercive and ultimately tyrannical power. This, for Niebuhr, was the self-defeating prophecy of Marxism: *its quest for perfect justice, built on a flawed view of human nature, inevitably produced new forms of injustice*.[26]

It was this nuanced and tragic diagnosis that provided Gudina with a powerful counter-narrative to the Marxist theory of human nature. As Gudina Tumsa points out in his treatise *Unbelief From a Historical Perspective*, at the heart of the brutality committed by adherents of Marxism was "the denial of human nature and human dignity."[27] This denial operated on multiple levels. First, it rejected the idea of a universal and immutable human nature, positing instead that human consciousness is entirely a product of material conditions and

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at 484.

[26] See David Lyon, "Evaluating Marxism: Some Christian Reflections," in Alan Scarfe and Patrick Sookhdeo (eds.), *Christianity and Marxism* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1982) 131-132.

[27] Gudina Tumsa, "Unbeleif from a Historical Perspective, or Kairos" in *The Life, Works, and Witness of Thehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, Samuel Deressa and Sarah Wilson (eds.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 109.

social relations—a concept often termed “historical materialism.” In its most extreme applications, this enabled the view that individuals were infinitely malleable and could be remade, or eliminated, in service of the revolutionary future. Human dignity, therefore, was not an inherent right but a conditional status granted by the state to those who conformed to the dictates of the Party and its ideology. Consequently, this framework provided a justification for the suppression of individual rights, intellectual freedom, and religious expression, as these were dismissed as “bourgeois” constructs obstructing historical progress. The individual became subsumed by the collective, and dissent was treated not as a difference of opinion but as a pathological deviation to be corrected or excised.

In reaction to this Marxist anthropology, drawing from the foundational narrative of Genesis, Gudina established a theological cornerstone for his anthropology by asserting that the value of a human being is ontological and derivative in its very essence. This meant that human worth is not an accidental quality, a social construct, or a right granted by any political entity; rather, it is an intrinsic and inseparable part of what it means *to be* human, derived solely from a divine source. This stood in direct opposition to materialist philosophies, particularly the Marxist-Leninist ideology prevalent in his context, which reduced humanity to a product of economic and material conditions. For Gudina, this reduction was a

profound error, as he powerfully argued: “Man is not a matter. He does not just have consciousness, awareness. He has been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). The human beings have freedom, creativity, honor, and dignity derived from the image of God. To have a closed understanding of the world and materialist understanding of man is to deny essential elements of science and human nature.”[28] This framework provided Gudina with a foundation for human rights and value that was transcendent and immutable, standing in stark contrast to the conditional and utilitarian value ascribed to individuals within a Marxist framework, where human worth is often contingent on one's relationship to the means of production.

Furthermore, in his articulation of a Christian social ethic, Gudina frequently engaged in a critical dialogue with socialist and secular optimistic anthropologies. His critique is sharply summarized in his assertion: “Man is still seen as the most noble of all creatures, with a power within him to be guided by his highest intellect. Man is capable of seasoned response. If he knows what is right, he will do it. 'knowledge is vertue' is the motto of this appealing humanism. Can history support such a view of man? obviously not. Though certain flagrant abuses of justice have been removed from the affairs of man, unjust practices like racism, oppression, corruption continues wherever man is found.”[29]

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[28] Ibid, 111.

This critique of Gudina directly mirrors Niebuhr's central quarrel with what he termed "modern man's" naive faith in progress and reason. In his seminal work *Moral Man and Immoral Society* , Niebuhr systematically argued that the Enlightenment belief in the inherent goodness and rationality of humanity—the idea that "knowledge is virtue"—was both empirically false and theologically bankrupt. It failed to account for the pervasive and enduring nature of human self-interest, pride, and the will-to-power, which Niebuhr identified as the core of sin. Gudina channels this Niebuhrian skepticism perfectly, pointing to the unassailable evidence of history and contemporary experience.

However, Gudina's engagement with Niebuhr is not merely one of negation. He adopts Niebuhr's dialectical view of human nature, which is crucial for understanding his own call to social action. Niebuhr's anthropology is famously captured in his maxim that man is "a citizen of two worlds"—a being created in the image of God, endowed with a transcendent capacity for reason, love, and self-sacrifice (*humanitas*), yet also a finite, fallen creature whose reason is easily corrupted to serve its own interests (*pecator*). This duality is implicit in Gudina's analysis. He acknowledges humanity's noble status ("the most noble of all creatures") and its "highest intellect," affirming the *imago Dei*. Yet, he immediately counters this with the

[29] Gudina Tumsa, "The Gospel and Human Development," in *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, Samuel Deressa and Sarah Wilson (eds.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017),39.

realist observation of its failure. This nuanced view prevents both the utopianism of perfectible-human theories and the despair of cynical nihilism.

For Gudina, as for Niebuhr, this "realist" view of humanity does not lead to political quietism but to a more sober and effective strategy for justice. Precisely because humanity is sinful, power structures—be they imperial, feudal, or bureaucratic—will always tend toward corruption and oppression. Therefore, achieving justice requires not just education but the vigilant application of countervailing power. The Christian hope, then, is not placed in the innate goodness of man but in the transformative power of divine grace to convict, empower, and sustain communities in the struggle against these entrenched evils.

Gudina Tumsa and Reinhold Niebuhr on Love and Justice

The Norwegian theologian Øyvind Eide, who knew Gudina Tumsa, described his work as a theology of “love and justice.” This idea came straight from Gudina himself, who saw that Africans were trapped by a double fear: a deep spiritual fear of evil spirits and a very real, earthly fear of cruel rulers. He believed people were searching for a new kind of faith that could answer both of these terrors. In his “report on the Church Growth in Ethiopia” presented in Tokyo in 1971, Gudina argued, “eventhough the social and political

factors can not be overlooked, one would misunderstand the mass movements if one does not put the main empjasis on the religious apect …people are tormented with fear of spirits [and unjust rulers] and they want to accept the *new religion of love and justice*."[30]

To fully understand Gudina's thought and theology, particularly his conception of love and justice, one must trace its significant debt to the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's Christian realism, with its emphasis on the persistent and tragic reality of sin as crystallized in collective human structures, provided Gudina with a critical analytical tool. This framework was foundational to his entire approach to Christian ministry, which he argued must begin with a clear understanding of sin's power. As Gudina asserted at the "Stewardship of the Gospel" conference in May 1968: "Without grasping the meaning of sin, what sin means in our experience, and how God has dealt with it in the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, our witness lacks its constraining motives in the human will."[31] Moving beyond a merely individualistic understanding of sin, Gudina applied this realist analysis to the Ethiopian context, viewing "unjust rulers" not simply as morally deficient individuals but as manifestations of entrenched, sinful power structures.

Gudina states,

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[30] Emphasis mine.

[31] Gudina Tumsa, "Stewarship of the Gospel," in *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, Samuel Deressa and Sarah Wilson (eds.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 15.

> In order to liberate man from the power of sin,selfishness, death and the evil one, Jesus Christ died upon the Cross. God is the God of all creation, the God of history. He has called into being a people to serve Him in the world. He liberates this people from oppression, brings them into the judgment, defeat and exile, and restores them time and again.[32]

Here, when Gudina writes that Christ died to liberate humanity from “the power of sin, selfishness, death and the evil one,” it does seem that he is articulating a Niebuhrian understanding of sin as a pervasive force that corrupts both individual hearts and collective structures. This moves far beyond a simplistic view of personal salvation. For Tumsa, following Niebuhr, *selfishness* is the core expression of sin, manifesting as pride in the individual and as the oppressive will-to-power in political systems and "unjust rulers." The Cross, therefore, is the decisive event that breaks the dominion of every tyrannical power, whether spiritual, personal, or socio-political, offering a liberation that is as comprehensive as the bondage it seeks to overcome.

Much of the Protestant evangelicalism encountered by Tumsa focused on personal salvation and individual piety.[33] Niebuhr’s theology provided a crucial corrective, emphasizing that sin and redemption have social dimensions. Gudina argues that African people

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[32] Essential Writing, 84.

[33] See Samuel Deressa, “Church and Development in Ethiopia: The Contribution of Gudina Tumsa’s Holistic Theology,” in *Lutheran Mission Matters*, Vol. 25, No.1, (2017).

(particularly Ethiopians) are tormented as a community by systemic forces. Therefore, the solution—the “new religion”—must also be communal and social. It must transform relationships within society, challenging the structures upheld by “unjust rulers” and offering a new community (the church) built on love and mutual justice. This idea was central to Gudina’s development of the EECMY’s holistic ministry, which integrated evangelism with diaconal services, education, and advocacy for the poor.

Furthermore, for Gudina, calling the Gospel a “religion of love and justice” was the very heart of his faith and his response to the suffering he witnessed. He saw the people around him trapped in a cycle of fear—fear of spiritual forces that demanded constant appeasement, and fear of political rulers who exercised power with cruelty and oppression. To him, a religion that only offered comfort for the afterlife was insufficient. Similarly, a political movement that lacked a foundation of spiritual love and moral integrity was doomed to become just another form of tyranny. So, he saw the Christian message as the powerful answer to both forms of captivity. The “love” in this pair was God's transformative, liberating love. It was the love that reached into a person's deepest spiritual anxieties and offered freedom from fear, replacing it with a sense of inherent worth and belonging. This love was not passive; it was an active force that empowered individuals and communities.

But that love could not be separated from “justice.” For Gudina, true love necessarily demanded action against anything that crushed human dignity. The love that freed a person from spiritual fear also compelled them to stand against the unjust rulers and systems that created earthly fear. In this way, justice was the practical, social expression of love. It was love moving into the public square to confront corruption, demand fairness, and protect the poor and marginalized. In essence, Gudina refused to let these ideas be split apart. Love without justice could become a weak sentiment that ignored real pain. Justice without love could become a cold, brutal force that mirrored the oppression it fought against. Together, they formed a complete picture of liberation—a faith that healed the soul and fought for a better world, all at once. This idea was central to Tumsa’s development of the EECMY’s holistic ministry, which integrated evangelism with diaconal services, education, and advocacy for the poor.

When illustrating the practical outworking of Christian love and justice in the public sphere, Gudina frequently drew upon the lived experience of the church. One example is his reflection on the transformation of the Conso people in the Gamo Gofa region. He observes that when they “understood their true human dignity [because of the love of Christ] in a new way… they [became] strong enough to make the best of what can be done under the present

system in fighting for their rights."[34] Gudina's invocation of "true human dignity" rooted in "the love of Christ" aligns with the Niebuhrian emphasis on love as the ultimate, transcendent ideal in Christian ethics. For Niebuhr, Christ's love (*agape*) is a self-giving, sacrificial love that stands in perpetual judgment over all human institutions and social arrangements, which are invariably tainted by self-interest and the human will-to-power. This concept provides the prophetic, critical lens through which any "present system" can be evaluated. Gudina applies this directly: the Conso people's awakening to their God-given dignity acts as this prophetic moment. It is the *agape* of Christ that reveals the injustice of their current condition, serving as a divine imperative for change and empowering them to reject a status quo of oppression.

This synthesis of love and justice finds its ultimate expression in Gudina's holistic soteriology—his understanding of salvation. For Gudina, salvation was not a narrowly defined transaction concerning the fate of the individual soul after death. Instead, he defined it as the "restoration of humanity to wholeness." He argued, "central to the proclamation and witness of the beleivers if the idea that Jesus saves … There is no distinction between curing from malaria, pneumonia or saving from sin. 'Jesus Christ saves' means that he literaly cures from

[34] Ibid, 31. Conso people, according to Gudina, fought for their right when certain officials tried to take a portion of their land and won the case.

physical disease as well as from the burden of sin."[35] This conception directly confronted any tendency to bifurcate the spiritual from the physical or the individual from the communal. His vision was rooted in a Christocentric reading of the Gospels, where the ministry of Jesus served as the unequivocal model for the church's mission. Refering to the ministry of Jesus, he states, "The simple preaching of the gospel was very often accompanied by healing, exorcism, or by some other signs that were interpreted to be the new God demonstrating his power."[36]

In his Nairobi Address of 1974, a key text for understanding his mature theology, Gudina explicitly articulated this foundational principle:

> In the ministry of Jesus we note that *forgiveness of sins and healing of the body, feeding the hungry and spiritual nurture, opposing dehumanizing structures and identifying himself with the week* were never at any time divided or departmentalized. He saw man as a whole and was always ready to give help where the need was most obvious.[37]

For Gudina, Christ's ministry was inherently integrated. The act of forgiving sins was of a piece with healing physical infirmities; offering spiritual nourishment was simultaneous with providing literal

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[35] Gudina Tumsa, "Report on Church Growth in Ethiopia," in *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, Samuel Deressa and Sarah Wilson (eds.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 30.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Gudina Tumsa, "Serving the Whole Man: A Responsible Church Ministry and a Flexible International Air relationship" in *Witness and Discipleship: Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of revolution* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Gudina Tumsa Foundation), 112.

bread; his ultimate act of identifying with the weak on the cross was the profound opposition to the dehumanizing structures of sin and political power. By grounding his theology in this unified view of Christ's work, Gudina provided a powerful biblical warrant for his own insistence that the church's mission must be equally holistic. To preach forgiveness while ignoring hunger, or to offer spiritual nurture while remaining silent in the face of oppressive rulers, was, in Gudina's view, a fundamental betrayal of the Gospel model. It was to departmentalize what Christ had unified. Therefore, for Gudina, the "restoration to wholeness" (which is the goal for God's mission in the world) meant engaging in a ministry that mends broken bodies, forgives broken spirits, feeds empty stomachs, and liberates captive communities—all as inseparable parts of a single, divine mission to make humanity whole.

A year after his Nairobi Address, he writes the folloing in his 1975 Pastoral Letter: "derived from the poor, the Church rededicates itself to living for others, serving the whole human person, meeting the spiritual and physical needs."[38] Here, he is proposing for his church a reorientation of theological ethics. This perspective moves away from a view of the church as an institution concerned primarily with ritual and keeping the tradition. Instead, Gudina argues for a church whose very identity and purpose are shaped by its engagement with the most vulnerable members of society. This

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ethical framework directly challenges any separation between spiritual work and physical aid. His theology insists that a person's hunger, poverty, oppression, and sickness are central concerns of God and must therefore be central concerns of God's people. A sermon offered to someone who is starving is an empty gesture if it is not accompanied by bread. Conversely, providing bread without addressing the deep spiritual hunger for meaning, hope, and forgiveness is also an incomplete ministry. For the church to be truly faithful, it must integrate these two missions, seeing the pursuit of justice, health, and dignity as a deeply spiritual act. Gudina's message is clear: *The church's holistic ministry should reflect the example of Jesus Christ himself, who spent his life both teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and challenging oppressive social structures.*

Quoting Gudina,

> The Gospel was not understood as the Good News for the whole man, and salvation was given a narrow individual interpretation which was foreign to our understanding of the God-man relationship…Mission have not in the past paid due attention to the material and physical needs of man and that they only concerned about salvation of souls, doing every little to bring about change in society.[39]

In 1972, based on this understanding of the holistic proclamation of the Gospel, Gudina criticized Western mission partners for their missional approach influenced by "materialistic

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Western concept of development." He argued that this model suffers from two fundamental flaws—its neglect of transcendent values and its failure to recognize humanity's agential role—echoes and adapts Niebuhr's core insights on human nature, sin, and history, translating them into a potent manifesto for a holistic and human-centred approach to progress in the African context.[40]

Gudina's first contention—that materialistic development fails because it ignores "values in life beyond those of modern technology and economic betterment, without which man's development will never be meaningful"[41]—is a direct challenge to the positivist and utilitarian assumptions underpinning mid-twentieth-century modernization theory. This perspective, which equated development with linear economic growth, technological adoption, and industrialization, is diagnosed by Gudina as a form of spiritual poverty. Here, the Niebuhrian influence is profound. Niebuhr's entire theological project was a polemic against the illusions of modernity, particularly its naive optimism about human goodness and its belief in inevitable historical progress driven by reason and science. He argued that modern man, in rejecting the transcendent, had not escaped sin but had merely secularized it, replacing the worship of God with the worship of himself and his own technical achievements. This led to what Niebuhr called "the tower of Babel," a symbol of human pride

[40] Gudina Tumsa, "Gospel and Human Development," 38

[41] Gudina Tumsa, "Gospel and Human Development," 38

attempting to build a perfect society without reference to a divine standard of justice and love.

For Gudina, a development model obsessed with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and infrastructure projects, but blind to justice, dignity, community, compassion, and spiritual fulfillment, is not merely incomplete; it is ultimately dehumanizing. It creates what contemporary critics might call “empty selves”—individuals with greater purchasing power but devoid of moral or existential anchors. Gudina, steeped in a Christian worldview that Niebuhr helped articulate for the modern era, insists that true development must be measured against a transcendent telos. Human flourishing cannot be quantified on an economic index alone; it must encompass the *imago Dei* —the image of God in humanity—which calls for relationships of love, justice, and peace with God, neighbour, and creation. Without this spiritual and moral dimension, material advancement becomes an idol, a new form of bondage that promises liberation but delivers only a deeper alienation, a point Niebuhr made about all utopian political schemes and one that Gudina saw manifest in the oppressive regimes of his day, both colonial and post-colonial.

Conclusion

Reinhold Niebuhr’s theological and ethical framework profoundly shaped the thought and ministry of Gudina Tumsa,

enabling him to articulate a robust Christian response to the acute socio-political challenges of his time. Niebuhr's Christian realism, with its penetrating analysis of power, sin, and the ambiguous nature of human history, provided Gudina with a diagnostic tool far more incisive than the optimistic liberalism or reductive materialism that dominated much twentieth-century political thought. Through concepts such as the *Imago Dei* and the nature of sin as prideful rebellion, Gudina, like Niebuhr, constructed a theological anthropology that affirmed transcendent human dignity while accounting for humanity's relentless capacity for injustice. This dual insight became the foundation for his enduring emphasis on social justice, his resistance to all forms of oppression—whether feudal, Marxist, or colonial—and his vision of the church as a prophetic community called to engage power with ethical clarity and courage.

Moreover, this intellectual exchange underscores the dynamic, global reach of theological discourse. Gudina Tumsa did not merely import Niebuhr's ideas; he expertly translated and contextualized them. This process resulted in a unique synthesis: a distinctly African theology of public engagement that was both intellectually rigorous and deeply rooted in local struggle. Gudina's work thus stands as a powerful testament to the fact that the most critical theological resources often travel well, finding renewed relevance and potency in new soil when engaged by a thinker of Gudina's caliber.

Ultimately, the confluence of Niebuhr's and Gudina's thought offers a lasting model for Christian social ethics. It rejects both quietist withdrawal and utopian ideology, championing instead a sober yet hopeful realism that tirelessly works for proximate justice while acknowledging the imperfectability of human institutions. Their shared legacy is a call for the church to be a community of discernment—one that wields its influence to hold power accountable, to defend the inherent dignity of every person, and to bear witness to a divine justice that both judges and redeems human history.