



Niebuhr readings

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Class,

Attached are the readings on Reinhold Niebuhr. There are a combination of some of his own, plus reviews, and contemporary reassessments. A lot of different genres, but we are trying to see the broad range of influence that he had.

Here, for example, is Mr. Obama: “[Niebuhr] is one of my favorite philosophers. I take away [from his works] the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard.”—Senator Barack Obama

On the "Irony of American History," here is what one scholar said: “Irony provides the master key to understanding the myths and delusions that underpin American statecraft.... The most important book ever written on US foreign policy.”—Andrew J. Bacevich.

I'm not sure I buy the "most important book ever written", but you get the idea.

Read them in chronological order if you can:

The Secularized Society, 1926,
The selection from Irony of American History,

the Time Magazine piece
The Christian Witness in a Secular Age

The View from the Sidelines
the "Disputed Legacy" in First Things
Serenity Prayer
Pew Forum
Urquhardt on Niebuhr

And, for those more ambitious, there is an interview by Mike Wallace with Niebuhr in 1958:
http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/niebuhr_reinhold.html

Enjoy -- it should be a great week!

Our Secularized Civilization

by Reinhold Niebuhr

One of the foremost philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr was for many years a Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. He is the author of many classics in their field, including The Nature and Destiny of Man, Moral Man and Immoral Society, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, and Discerning the Signs of Our Times. He was also the founding editor of the publication *Christianity and Crisis*. Niebuhr warned in 1926 against ecclesiastical and cultural shortcomings which a generation later were to be widely and ruefully acknowledged. This article was published in the *Christian Century*, April 22, 1926. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation, used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This article was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Unqualified optimism on the present state or future prospect of religion in modern civilization can emanate only from a very superficial analysis of modern life. In America such optimism is justified by the undeniable prestige of the church in the popular mind and the vitality of the institutions of religion. In Europe optimism is not even supported by these facts. Yet America is in many respects more pagan than Europe, which means that the vitality of the institutions of religion is not in itself a proof of authentic religious life. The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization which has lost the art of bringing its dominant motives under any kind of moral control.

Recent events in Europe reveal what unrepentant tribalists Western people are and how little they have learned from the great tragedy. They seem to lack both the imagination to realize the folly of their ways and the humility to conceive of their folly as sin. While we in America affect to pity Europe, the sense of moral superiority, which is always the root of pity, is based on illusion. We are no more moral than Europe, but our tremendous wealth and our comparative geographic isolation save us from suffering any immediate consequences of our moral follies. However active the institutions of religion may be in our national life, there is no trace of ethical motive in our national conduct. To the world we appear, what we really are, a fabulously wealthy nation, intent upon producing more wealth and seemingly oblivious to the consequences which unrestrained lust of power and lust of gain must inevitably have on both personal morality and international harmony.

The fact is that the social life of the Western world is almost completely outside of ethical control. A political leader of Gandhi's type would be unthinkable in the Western world. While it may be true that all groups are naturally predatory and have never been effectually restrained by moral scruples, yet there is a measure of indifference to and defiance of moral law in our modern world which compares unfavorably with the best in either our own or oriental history. The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization.

The secularization of modern civilization is partly due to our inability to adjust the ethical and spiritual interests of mankind to the rapid advance of the physical sciences. However much optimists may insist that science cannot ultimately destroy religion, the fact remains that the general tendency of scientific discovery has been to weaken not only religious but ethical values. Humanism as well as religion has been engulfed in the naturalism of our day. Our obsession with the physical sciences and with the physical world has enthroned the brute and blind forces of nature, and we follow the God of the earthquake and the fire rather than the God of the still small voice. The morals of the man in the street, who may not be able to catch the full implications of pure science, are corrupted by the ethical consequences of the civilization which applied science has built. While pure science enthroned nature in the imagination, applied science armed nature in fact.

It is a part of the moral obfuscation of our day to imagine that we have conquered nature when in reality applied science has done little more than debase one part of humanity to become purely physical instruments of secular purpose and to cause the other part to be obsessed with pride in the physical instruments of life. The physical sciences armed nature -- the nature in us -- and lured us into a state where physical comfort is confused with true happiness and tempted us to indulge our lust for power at the expense of our desire for spiritual peace. We imagine we can escape life's moral problems merely because machines have enlarged our bodies, sublimated our physical forces and given us a sense of mastery. The mastery of nature is vainly believed to be an adequate substitute for self-mastery. So a generation of men is being bred who in their youth subsist on physical thrills, in their maturity glory in physical power and in their old age desire nothing more than physical comfort.

Vaguely conscious of the moral inadequacy of such an existence, men try to sublimate it by restraining their individual lusts in favor of the community in which they live. Thus nationalism becomes the dominant religion of the day and individual lusts are restrained only to issue in group lusts more grievous and more destructive than those of individuals. Nationalism is simply one of the effective ways in which the modern man escapes life's ethical problems. Delegating his vices to larger and larger groups, he imagines himself virtuous; the larger the group the more difficult it is to fix moral responsibility for unethical action.

It would have been too much to expect of religion that it find an immediate antidote for the naturalism and secularism which the modern scientific world view has created. It was inevitable that the natural world, neglected for centuries, should take vengeance upon the human spirit by making itself an obsession of the human mind. But it cannot be said that religion has been particularly wise in the strategy it developed in opposition to naturalism. Religion tried to save itself by the simple expedient of insisting that evolution was not mechanistic but creative, by discovering God in the evolutionary process. Insofar as this means that there is room for freedom and purpose in the evolutionary process, no quarrel is possible with the defenders of the faith. But there is, after all, little freedom or purpose in the evolutionary process -- in short, little morality; so that if we can find God only as he is revealed in nature we have no moral God.

It would be foolish to claim that the defense of a morally adequate theism in the modern world is an easy task; but it is not an impossible one. Yet most modernists have evaded it. Modernism on the whole has taken refuge in various kinds of pantheism, and pantheism is always destructive of moral values. To identify God with automatic processes is to destroy the God of conscience; the God of the real is never the God of the ideal. One of the vainest delusions to which religionists give themselves is to suppose that religion is inevitably a support of morality. There are both supramoral and submoral factors in religion. Professor Santayana makes the discrimination between two instincts in religion, the instinct of piety and the instinct of spirituality, the one seeking to hallow the necessary limitations of life and the other seeking to overcome them Pantheism inevitably strengthens those forces in religion which tend to sanctify the real rather than to inspire the ideal.

That is why modernism, which has sloughed off many of religion's antimoral tendencies but has involved itself in philosophic monism and religious pantheism more grievously than orthodoxy ever did, has been so slight a moral gain for mankind. Liberal religion is symbolizing a totality of facts under the term God which orthodoxy, with a truer moral instinct, could comprehend under no less than two terms, God and the devil. It would be better to defy nature's immoralities in the name of a robust humanism than to take the path which most modern religion has chosen and play truant to the distinctive needs of the human spirit by reading humanity into the essentially inhuman processes of nature. There is little to choose between the despair to which pure naturalism tempts us when we survey the human scene and the easy optimism which most modern religion encourages. What we need is both the spirit of repentance and the spirit of hope, which can be inspired only by a theism which knows how to discover sin by subjecting man to absolute standards and how to save him from despair by its trust in absolute values.

The secularization of modern life is partly due to the advance of science, but also to the moral inadequacies of Protestantism. If liberal Protestantism is too pantheistic, traditional Protestantism is too quietistic to meet the moral problems of a socially complex age. Protestantism, as Professor Whitehead in his *Science and the Modern World* has with rare insight pointed out, has no understanding of the social forces and factors which impinge on and condition human personality. It believes that righteousness can be created in a vacuum. It produces no sense of tension between the soul and its environment. The conversions of which it boasts may create moral purpose, but that moral purpose is applied to a very limited field of motives where application is more or less automatic. It helps men to master those sins which are easily discovered because they represent divergence from accepted moral customs: the sins of dishonesty, sexual incontinence and intemperance.

No religion is more effective than Protestantism against the major social sins of our day, economic greed and race hatred. In a recent trial of Negroes, growing out of a race riot in one of our metropolitan centers, the defense lawyer shrewdly manipulated the selection of the jury so that there would be at least a minority of Jews and Catholics in the jury box, and it is reported that their votes were for the defense when the jury failed to reach a decision. No real progress can be made against the secularization of modern life until

Protestantism overcomes its pride and complacency and realizes that it has itself connived with the secularists. By giving men a sense of moral victory because they have mastered one or two lusts, while their lust for power and their lust for gain remain undisciplined, it is simply aggravating those lusts which are the primary perils of modern civilization.

Protestantism reacted against the dualism in Roman Catholic ethics which produces asceticism on the one hand and an easy-going connivance with human weakness on the other. It is true that there is a dualism in Roman Catholic ethics, which can develop, let us say, a Cardinal O'Connell on the one hand and a Cardinal Mercier on the other. But Protestantism has a dualism equally grievous, which produces a Cardinal O'Connell and a Cardinal Mercier in the same skin, a pagan and a puritan in one person, whose puritanism becomes an effective anodyne for a conscience not altogether easy in the sins of paganism. If a choice is to be made between monastic and quietistic ethics, surely monastic ethics must be termed the most Christian, for it is better that the world shall be feared than that it be embraced with a good conscience.

How a fretful anxiety about a number of lustful temptations can develop a perfect complacency in regard to other temptations may be seen by the fact that the church is not now so conscious of some of the sins of modern civilization as some of our most thoroughgoing, realists. If Scott Nearing had the ear of New York he could convict it of sin more surely than Bishop Manning can. The *Nation* prompts its readers to a consciousness of social sin more effectively than does, say, the *Watchman-Examiner*. It is significant, too, that the very part of the country in which the churches insist upon "regenerate membership" and recruit such a membership by persistent revivals is most grievously corrupted by the sin of race hatred. Protestantism -- and insofar as Roman Catholicism has departed from the best medievalism, Catholicism, too -- has no understanding of the complex factors of environment out of which personality emerges. It is always "saving" individuals, but not saving them from the greed and the hatred into which they are tempted by the society in which they live. Protestantism, it might be said, does not seem to know that the soul lives in a body, and that the body is part of a world in which the laws of the jungle still prevail.

Perhaps it might not be irrelevant to add that its failure to understand the relation between the physical and the spiritual not only tempts Protestantism to create righteousness in a vacuum but to develop piety without adequate symbol. That is why the church services of extreme Protestant sects tend to become secularized once the first naive spontaneity departs from their religious life. In Europe nonconformist Protestants tend more and more to embrace the once despised beauty of symbol and dignity of form in order to save worship from dullness and futility. In America nonconformist Protestantism, with less cultural background, tries to avert dullness by vulgar theatricality. The Quakers alone escape this fate because their exclusion of symbol is so rigorous that silence itself becomes symbol. If worship is to serve man's ethical as well as religious needs, it must give him a sense of humble submission to the absolute. Humility is lacking in Protestant worship as it is missing in Protestant civilization. If this humility is medievalism, we cannot save civilization without medievalism.

An excerpt from Chapter 1 of

The Irony of American History

Reinhold Niebuhr

The Ironic Element in the American Situation

Everybody understands the obvious meaning of the world struggle in which we are engaged. We are defending freedom against tyranny and are trying to preserve justice against a system which has, demonically, distilled injustice and cruelty out of its original promise of a higher justice. The obvious meaning is analyzed for us in every daily journal; and the various facets of this meaning are illumined for us in every banquet and commencement-day speech. The obvious meaning is not less true for having become trite. Nevertheless it is not the whole meaning.

We also have some awareness of an element of tragedy in this struggle, which does not fit into the obvious pattern. Could there be a clearer tragic dilemma than that which faces our civilization? Though confident of its virtue, it must yet hold atomic bombs ready for use so as to prevent a possible world conflagration. It may actually make the conflict the more inevitable by this threat; and yet it cannot abandon the threat. Furthermore, if the conflict should break out, the non-communist world would be in danger of destroying itself as a moral culture in the process of defending itself physically. For no one can be sure that a war won by the use of the modern means of mass destruction would leave enough physical and social substance to rebuild a civilization among either victors or vanquished. The victors would also face the "imperial" problem of using power in global terms but from one particular center of authority, so preponderant and unchallenged that its world rule would almost certainly violate basic standards of justice.

Such a tragic dilemma is an impressive aspect of our contemporary situation. But tragic elements in present history are not as significant as the ironic ones. Pure tragedy elicits tears of admiration and pity for the hero who is willing to brave death or incur guilt for the sake of some great good. Irony however prompts some laughter and a nod of comprehension beyond the laughter; for irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood. Our age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history. Our dreams of a pure virtue are dissolved in a situation in which it is possible to exercise the virtue of responsibility toward a community of nations only by courting the prospective guilt of the atomic bomb. And the irony is increased by the frantic efforts of some of our idealists to escape this hard reality by dreaming up schemes of an ideal world order which have no relevance to either our present dangers or our urgent duties.

Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning. Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in his

world than the mature man is in his wider world. The pattern of the historical drama grows more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation.

Our situation of historic frustration becomes doubly ironic through the fact that the power of recalcitrance against our fondest hopes is furnished by a demonic religio-political creed which had even simpler notions than we of finding an escape from the ambiguity of man's strength and weakness. For communism believes that it is possible for man, at a particular moment in history, to take "the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom." The cruelty of communism is partly derived from the absurd pretension that the communist movement stands on the other side of this leap and has the whole of history in its grasp. Its cruelty is partly due to the frustration of the communist overlords of history when they discover that the "logic" of history does not conform to their delineation of it. One has an uneasy feeling that some of our dreams of managing history might have resulted in similar cruelties if they had flowered into action. But there was fortunately no program to endow our elite of prospective philosopher-scientist-kings with actual political power.

Modern man's confidence in his power over historical destiny prompted the rejection of every older conception of an overruling providence in history. Modern man's confidence in his virtue caused an equally unequivocal rejection of the Christian idea of the ambiguity of human virtue. In the liberal world the evils in human nature and history were ascribed to social institutions or to ignorance or to some other manageable defect in human nature or environment. Again the communist doctrine is more explicit and therefore more dangerous. It ascribes the origin of evil to the institution of property. The abolition of this institution by communism therefore prompts the ridiculous claim of innocency for one of the vastest concentrations of power in human history. This distillation of evil from the claims of innocency is ironic enough. But the irony is increased by the fact that the so-called free world must cover itself with guilt in order to ward off the peril of communism. The final height of irony is reached by the fact that the most powerful nation in the alliance of free peoples is the United States. For every illusion of a liberal culture has achieved a special emphasis in the United States, even while its power grew to phenomenal proportions.

We were not only innocent a half century ago with the innocency of irresponsibility; but we had a religious version of our national destiny which interpreted the meaning of our nationhood as God's effort to make a new beginning in the history of mankind. Now we are immersed in world-wide responsibilities; and our weakness has grown into strength. Our culture knows little of the use and the abuse of power; but we have to use power in global terms. Our idealists are divided between those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous. We take, and must continue to take, morally hazardous actions to preserve our civilization. We must exercise our power. But we ought neither to believe that a nation is capable of perfect disinterestedness in its exercise, nor become complacent about particular degrees of interest and passion which corrupt the justice by which the exercise of power is legitimized. Communism is a vivid object lesson in the monstrous consequences of moral complacency about the relation of dubious means to supposedly good ends.

The ironic nature of our conflict with communism sometimes centers in the relation of power to justice and virtue. The communists use power without scruple because they are under the illusion that their conception of an unambiguously ideal end justifies such use. Our own culture is schizophrenic upon the subject of power. Sometimes it pretends that a liberal society is a purely rational harmony of interests. Sometimes it achieves a tolerable form of justice by a careful equilibration of the powers and vitalities of society, though it is without a conscious philosophy to justify these policies of statesmanship. Sometimes it verges on that curious combination of cynicism and idealism which characterizes communism, and is prepared to use any means without scruple to achieve its desired end.

The question of “materialism” leads to equally ironic consequences in our debate and contest with communism. The communists are consistent philosophical materialists who believe that mind is the fruit of matter; and that culture is the product of economic forces. Perhaps the communists are not as consistently materialistic in the philosophical sense as they pretend to be. For they are too Hegelian to be mechanistic materialists. They have the idea of a “dialectic” or “logic” running through both nature and history which means that a rational structure of meaning runs through the whole of reality. Despite the constant emphasis upon the “dignity of man” in our own liberal culture, its predominant naturalistic bias frequently results in views of human nature in which the dignity of man is not very clear.

It is frequently assumed that human nature can be manipulated by methods analogous to those used in physical nature. Furthermore it is generally taken for granted that the highest ends of life can be fulfilled in man’s historic existence. This confidence makes for utopian visions of historical possibilities on the one hand and for rather materialistic conceptions of human ends on the other. All concepts of immortality are dismissed as the fruit of wishful thinking. This dismissal usually involves indifference toward the tension in human existence, created by the fact that “our reach is beyond our grasp,” and that every sensitive individual has a relation to a structure of meaning which is never fulfilled in the vicissitudes of actual history.

The crowning irony in this debate about materialism lies in the tremendous preoccupation of our own technical culture with the problem of gaining physical security against the hazards of nature. Since our nation has carried this preoccupation to a higher degree of consistency than any other we are naturally more deeply involved in the irony. Our orators profess abhorrence of the communist creed of “materialism” but we are rather more successful practitioners of materialism as a working creed than the communists, who have failed so dismally in raising the general standards of well-being.

Meanwhile we are drawn into an historic situation in which the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity; and the conviction of the perfect compatibility of virtue and prosperity which we have inherited from both our Calvinist and our Jeffersonian ancestors is challenged by the cruel facts of history. For our sense of responsibility to a world community beyond our own borders is a virtue, even though it is partly derived from the prudent understanding of our own interests. But this virtue does not guarantee our ease, comfort, or prosperity. We are the poorer for the global responsibilities which we bear. And the fulfillments of our desires are mixed with frustrations and vexations.

Sometimes the irony in our historic situation is derived from the extravagant emphasis in our culture upon the value and dignity of the individual and upon individual liberty as the final value of life. Our cherished values of individualism are real enough; and we are right in preferring death to their annulment. But our exaltation of the individual involves us in some very ironic contradictions. On the one hand, our culture does not really value the individual as much as it pretends; on the other hand, if justice is to be maintained and our survival assured, we cannot make individual liberty as unqualifiedly the end of life as our ideology asserts.

A culture which is so strongly influenced by both scientific concepts and technocratic illusions is constantly tempted to annul or to obscure the unique individual. Schemes for the management of human nature usually involve denials of the "dignity of man" by their neglect of the chief source of man's dignity, namely, his essential freedom and capacity for self-determination. This denial is the more inevitable because scientific analyses of human actions and events are bound to be preoccupied with the relations of previous causes to subsequent events. Every human action ostensibly can be explained by some efficient cause or complex of causes. The realm of freedom which allows the individual to make his decision within, above and beyond the pressure of causal sequences is beyond the realm of scientific analysis. Furthermore the acknowledgment of its reality introduces an unpredictable and incalculable element into the causal sequence. It is therefore embarrassing to any scientific scheme. Hence scientific cultures are bound to incline to determinism. The various sociological determinisms are reinforced by the general report which the psychologists make of the human psyche. For they bear witness to the fact that their scientific instruments are unable to discover that integral, self-transcendent center of personality, which is in and yet above the stream of nature and time and which religion and poetry take for granted.

Furthermore it is difficult for a discipline, whether philosophical or scientific, operating, as it must, with general concepts, to do justice to the tang and flavor of individual uniqueness. The unique and irreplaceable individual, with his

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped.

(BROWNING)

with his private history and his own peculiar mixture of hopes and fears, may be delineated by the poet. The artist-novelist may show that his personality is not only unique but subject to infinite variation in his various encounters with other individuals; but all this has no place in a strictly scientific account of human affairs. In such accounts the individual is an embarrassment.

If the academic thought of a scientific culture tends to obscure the mystery of the individual's freedom and uniqueness, the social forms of a technical society frequently endanger the realities of his life. The mechanically contrived togetherness of our great urban centers is inimical to genuine community. For community is grounded in personal relations. In these the individual becomes most completely himself as his life enters organically into the lives of others. Thus our theory and our practice tend to stand in contradiction to our creed.

But if our academic thought frequently negates our individualistic creed, our social practice is frequently better than the creed. The justice which we have established in our society has been achieved, not by pure individualism, but by collective action. We have balanced collective social power with collective social power. In order to prevail against our communist foe we must continue to engage in vast collective ventures, subject ourselves to far-reaching national and international disciplines and we must moderate the extravagance of our theory by the soberness of our practice. Many young men, who have been assured that only the individual counts among us, have died upon foreign battlefields. We have been subjected to this ironic refutation of our cherished creed because the creed is too individualistic to measure the social dimension of human existence and too optimistic to gauge the hazards to justice which exist in every community, particularly in the international one.

It is necessary to be wiser than our creed if we would survive in the struggle against communism. But fortunately we have already been somewhat better in our practice than in our quasi-official dogma. If we had not been, we would not have as much genuine community and tolerable justice as we have actually attained. If the pre-vailing ethos of a bourgeois culture also gave itself to dangerous illusions about the possibilities of managing the whole of man's historical destiny, we were fortunately and ironically saved from the evil consequences of this illusion by various factors in our culture. The illusion was partly negated by the contradictory one that human history would bear us onward and upward forever by forces inherent in it. Therefore no human resolution or contrivance would be necessary to achieve the desired goal. We were partly saved by the very force of democracy. For the freedom of democracy makes for a fortunate confusion in defining the goal toward which history should move; and the distribution of power in a democracy prevents any group of world savers from grasping after a monopoly of power.

These ironic contrasts and contradictions must be analyzed with more care presently. Our immediate prefatory concern must be the double character of our ironic experience. Contemporary history not merely offers ironic refutation of some of our early hopes and present illusions about ourselves; but the experience which furnishes the refutation is occasioned by conflict with a foe who has transmuted ideals and hopes, which we most deeply cherish, into cruel realities which we most fervently abhor.

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Reinhold Niebuhr

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Introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

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Monday, Mar. 08, 1948

Religion: Faith for a Lenten Age

(See Cover)

It was Lent. On Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, a woman and a little girl were stopped by the traffic at a cross street. On the opposite curb stood a young man with an Ash Wednesday mark on his forehead. "Look," said the little girl. "Mustn't point," said the woman. "But mother," asked the little girl, "why has he got that black mark on his forehead?" "Hush," said her mother. "It's something they do in church, I think."

With prayer, with humility of spirit tempering his temerity of mind, man has always sought to define the nature of the most important fact in his experience: God. To this unending effort to know God, man is driven by the noblest of his intuitions—the sense of his mortal

incompleteness—and by hard experience. For man's occasional lapses from God-seeking inevitably result in intolerable shallowness of thought combined with incalculable mischief in action.

Modern man knows a great deal about the nature of the atom. But he knows almost nothing about the nature of God, almost never thinks about it, and is complacently unaware that there may be any reason to. Theology, the intellectual system whereby man sorts out his thoughts about faith and grace, enjoys much less popular appeal than astrology. With its "devolutionary theopantism" * and "axiological eschatology,"* theology is jaw-breakingly abstract. And its mood is widely felt to be about as bracing as an unaired vestry.

Worthy Habit. This is scarcely strange, since among millions of Christians religion itself is little more than a worthy mental habit, socially manifested in church attendance often more sporadic and much less disturbing than regular visits to the dentist.

To the mass of untheological Christians, God has become, at best, a rather unfairly furtive presence, a lurking luminosity, a cozy thought. At worst, He is conversationally embarrassing. There is scarcely any danger that a member of the neighborhood church will, like Job, hear God speak out of the whirlwind (whirlwinds are dangerous), or that he will be moved to dash down the center aisle, crying, like Isaiah: "Howl, ye ships of Tarshish!"

Under the bland influence of the idea of progress, man, supposing himself more & more to be the measure of all things, achieved a singularly easy conscience and an almost hermetically smug optimism. The idea that man is sinful and needs redemption was subtly changed into the idea that man is by nature good and hence capable of indefinite perfectibility. This perfectibility is being achieved through technology, science, politics, social reform, education. Man is essentially good, says 20th Century liberalism, because he is rational, and his rationality is (if the speaker happens to be a liberal Protestant) divine, or (if he happens to be religiously unattached) at least benign. Thus the reason-defying paradoxes of Christian faith are happily bypassed.

Catastrophic Paradoxes. And yet, as 20th Century civilization reaches a climax, its own paradoxes grow catastrophic. The incomparable technological achievement is more & more dedicated to the task of destruction. Man's marvelous conquest of space has made total war a household experience and, over vast reaches of the world, the commonest of childhood memories. The more abundance increases, the more resentment becomes the characteristic new look on 20th Century faces. The more production multiplies, the more scarcities

become endemic. The faster science gains on disease (which, ultimately, seems always to elude it), the more the human race dies at the hands of living men. Men have never been so educated, but wisdom, even as an idea, has conspicuously vanished from the world.

Yet liberal Protestants could do little more than chant with Lord Tennyson:

O, yet we trust that somehow good Will be the final goal of ill, To pangs of nature, sins of will,

Defects of doubt, and taints of blood...

It was a good deal easier to see that Tennyson was silly than to see that the attitude itself was silly. That was the blind impasse of optimistic liberalism. At the open end of that impasse stood a forbidding and impressive figure. To Protestantism's easy conscience and easy optimism that figure was saying, with every muscle of its being: No.

His name was Reinhold Niebuhr. He was an Evangelical-pastor, a professor of applied Christianity at Manhattan's Union Theological Seminary, an editor of Christianity and Crisis, Christianity and Society, contributing editor of the Nation, and an ex-Socialist who was still unflinchingly active in non-Communist leftist movements. He was also the author of countless magazine articles and eleven books on theology. His magnum opus, the two-volume Nature and Destiny of Man, was the most complete statement of his position.

Against the easy conscience, Dr. Niebuhr asserted: man is by the nature of his creation sinful; at the height of man's perfection there is always the possibility of evil. Against easy optimism, he asserted that life is inevitably tragic. Says Niebuhr: "Mankind is living in a Lenten age."

Dr. Niebuhr was one liberal Protestant who had indeed heard the Voice out of the whirlwind. It spoke the thought of three God-tormented men: Russian Novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, Danish Theologian Soren Kierkegaard and Swiss Theologian Karl Barth.

World War I ended the age of liberalism. More than half a century before it ended, two men had felt that it was ending. They were Fyodor Dostoevsky and Søren Kierkegaard. Both men were pessimists. To Dostoevsky, the human situation was a tragic drama. To Kierkegaard, it was a tragic argument. Both men felt that the anguish of human experience, the truth of

man's nature and God's nature and the relationship of God and man, could be grasped only by a new dimension of perception.

Against liberalism's social optimism (progress by reform) and the social optimism of the revolutionary left (progress by force), Dostoevsky asserted the eternal necessity of the soul to be itself. But he discerned that the moment man indulged this freedom to the point where he was also free from God, it led him into tragedy, evil, and often the exact opposite of what he had intended. In human terms there was no solution for the problem of evil. This insight Dostoevsky dramatized on a scale of titanic tragedy in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*, and of titanic comedy in *The Possessed*.

Kierkegaard too was obsessed with "the ultimate potentialities of the human soul." And like the great Russian, the great Dane was haunted by the tragic sense of life whose full implication only the presentiments of religious faith could grasp.

Karl Barth, too, heard the Voice from the whirlwind. But this time the Voice spoke in the tones of cannon. During World War I, Barth was a Christian Socialist and pastor of a small Swiss Reformed Church near the Alsatian frontier. As he preached, on quiet Sunday mornings, about the fulfillment of God's intentions as evidenced in human progress, the thump and slam of German and Allied artillery punctuated his periods. It caused him, said Barth, acute embarrassment.

It also caused him 1) to doubt that the will of God was being fulfilled by man's good works, or could be; 2) to re-examine the Bible, where, to his surprise (since he, too, had been an optimist), he discovered that most of the principal characters shared his new pessimism about human nature. **God, Barth decided, was above and beyond all human effort.** Between man's purposes in history and God's purposes in eternity was what Kierkegaard had called an "infinite qualitative difference." Man, said Barth, cannot define God by talking about man, in however loud a voice. God is ganz anders—wholly different.

Theology of Crisis. Earth's "neo-orthodoxy" was called the "theology of crisis." By crisis, Barth did not mean the present crisis of Western civilization. He meant, like Dostoevsky, that permanent crisis in which man lives.

The relationship between God and man, said Earth's neo-orthodoxy, is a one-day affair; it proceeds always from God to man, never from man to God—the desperate situation that Franz Kafka dramatized in *The Castle* (TIME, April 28). Between the ages of God's

revelation in Christ and His final judgment, man must live by faith and wait upon God's will for that grace which He alone can bestow.

Barth and his theology have both undergone changes. But his importance as a prophet of the new orthodoxy and the crisis of the soul are best reported in his own disclaimer: he merely climbed the steeple to get his bearings. No one was more surprised than he when, in the darkness, his hand touched the bell rope and the great bell of prophecy began to toll.

Reinhold Niebuhr heard the bell. Though the term "neo-orthodox," applied to himself, makes him wince, Niebuhr matured in the climate of crisis. Though he charges Barth with a paralyzing pessimism and a Bible worship that amounts to obsession, Niebuhr shares Barth's view of the perpetual crisis of the soul and Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative difference" of God.

The Logic of Paradox. Orthodox Protestantism by & large subscribes to a body of beliefs among which are: that man is by nature inevitably evil, partaking of the original sin of Adam; that salvation is by faith alone, that good works are meritorious but not essential; that grace is God's gratuitous benevolence; that the Atonement is the redeeming power of Christ's incarnation, suffering and death; that the end of history will be the Last Judgment.

Reinhold Niebuhr's new orthodoxy is the oldtime religion put through the intellectual wringer. It is a re-examination of orthodoxy for an age dominated by such trends as rationalism, liberalism, Marxism, fascism, idealism and the idea of progress.

It is customary to say that Niebuhr's books are hard reading. But any person of average patience can find out what he is saying in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Like Karl Barth's, his method is dialectic; that is, he sees in paradox not the defeat of logic but the grist of an intellectual calculus—a necessary climbing tool for attempting the higher peaks of thought. The twists & turns of his reasoning and his wary qualifications are not hedging, but the effort to clamber after truth. He knows that simplicity is often merely the misleading coherence of complexity.

Niebuhr's overarching theme is the paradox of faith—in St. Paul's words: "The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." But Christian faith is a paradox which is the sum of paradoxes. Its passion mounts, like a surge of music, insubstantial and sustaining, between two great cries of the spirit—the paradoxical sadness of "Lord, I believe;

help Thou mine unbelief," and the paradoxical triumph of Tertullian's "Credo quia impossibile" (I believe because it is impossible).

To the rigorously secular mind the total paradox must, like its parts, be "unto the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness." It is not irrational, but it is not the logic of two & two makes four. Theologically, it is the dialectical logic of that trinitarian oneness whose triunity is as much a necessity to the understanding of Godhead as higher mathematics is to the measurement of motion. Religiously, its logic, human beyond rationality, is the expression of a need epitomized in the paradox of Solon weeping for his dead son. "Why do you weep," asked a friend, "since it cannot help?" Said Solon: "That is why I weep—because it cannot help."

The Singular Animal. But basic to Niebuhr's doctrine is another paradox—the lever of his cosmic argument and that part of his teaching which is most arresting and ruffling to liberal Protestantism's cozy conscience. It is the paradox of sin. Sin arises from man's precarious position in the creation.

Man, says Dr. Niebuhr, has always been his own greatest problem child—the creature who continually asks: "What am I?" Sometimes he puts the question modestly: "Am I a child of nature who should not pretend to be different from the other brutes?" But if man asks this question sincerely, he quickly realizes that, were he like the other brutes, he would not ask the question at all.

In more exalted moods, man puts the question differently: "Am I not, indeed, the paragon of the creation, distinctive, unique, set apart and above it by my faculty of reason?" But man has only to observe himself in his dining, bath and bed rooms to feel a stabbing sense of his kinship with the animals.

This paradox is related to another. Sometimes man boasts: "I am essentially good, and all the evils of human life are due to social and historical causes (capitalism, communism, underprivilege, overprivilege)." But a closer look shows man that these things are consequences, not causes. They would not be there if man had not produced them.

If, in a chastened mood, man says, "I am essentially evil," he is baffled by another question, "Then how can I be good enough to know that I am bad?"

The Transcendent Animal. "The obvious fact," says Dr. Niebuhr, "is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms. . . . The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world." Man is, in fact, the creature who continually transcends nature and reason—and in this transcendence lies man's presentiment of God.

Man's world is not evil, for God, who is good, created the world. Man is not evil, because God created man. Why, then, does man sin?

"Anxiety," says Reinhold Niebuhr, "is the internal precondition of sin"—the inevitable spiritual state of man, in the paradox of his freedom and his finiteness. Anxiety is not sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith might purge anxiety of the tendency toward sin. The ideal possibility is that faith in God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. Hence Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin. Anxiety is the state of temptation—that anxiety which Kierkegaard called "the dizziness of freedom."

Man seeks to escape from the insecurity of freedom and finiteness by asserting his power beyond the limits of his nature. Limited by his finiteness, he pretends that he is not limited. Sensing his transcendence, man "assumes that he can gradually transcend [his finiteness] until his mind becomes identical with universal mind. All his intellectual and cultural pursuits . . . become infected with the sin of pride. . . . The religious dimension of sin," says Dr. Niebuhr, "is man's rebellion against God. . . . The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice."

But man does not always sin by denying his finiteness. Sometimes, instead, he denies his freedom. He seeks to lose himself "in some aspect of the world's vitalities." This is sensual sin.

The paradox of man's freedom and finiteness is common to all great religions. But the Christian approach to the problem is unique, for it asserts that the crux of the problem is not man's finiteness—the qualities that make him one with the brute creation—but man's sin. It is not from the paradox that Christianity seeks to redeem man; it is from, the sin that arises from the paradox. It is man who seeks to redeem himself from the paradox. His efforts are the stuff of history. Hence history, despite man's goals of goodness, proliferates sin.

Juncture of Nature & Spirit. For man stands at the juncture of nature and spirit. Like the animals, he is involved in the necessities and contingencies of nature. Unlike the animals, "he sees this situation and anticipates its perils." As man tries to protect himself against the vicissitudes of nature, he falls into the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life. "The perils of nature are thereby transmuted into the more grievous perils of human history."

There are other perils—a dissolving perspective of paradox. Man's knowledge is limited, but not completely limited, since he has some sense of the limits—and, to that degree, transcends them. And, as he transcends them, he seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation—i.e., God's will. But man is unable to understand the total situation except in the finite terms of his immediate situation. "The realization of the relativity of his knowledge subjects him to the peril of skepticism. The abyss of meaninglessness yawns on the brink of all his mighty spiritual endeavors. 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. This is the 'ideological taint' in which all human knowledge is involved and which is always something more than mere human ignorance. It is always partly an effort to hide that ignorance by pretension." This is pre-eminently the sin of the 20th Century.

Creative Temptation. But man's sin is more than a simple sin of pride under the guise of pretension. Man's anxiety is also the source of "all human creativity." Man is anxious because his life is limited and he senses his limitations. But "he is also anxious because he does not know the limits of his possibilities."

He achieves, but he knows no peace, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. In all his anxious acts man faces the temptation of illimitable possibility. "There is therefore no limit of achievement in any sphere of activity in which human history can rest with equanimity." History cannot pause. Its evil and its good are inextricably interwoven. Says Niebuhr: the creative and the destructive elements in anxiety are so mixed that to purge even moral achievement of sin is not so easy as moralists imagine.

Original Sin. This grand but somewhat anxious survey of man's fate Dr. Niebuhr clinches with a doctrine of original sin in which he leans heavily upon an insight of Kierkegaard's: "Sin presupposes sin." That is, sin need not inevitably arise from man's anxiety if sin were not already in the world. Niebuhr finds the agent of this prehistoric sin in the Devil, a fallen

angel who "fell because [like man] he sought to lift himself above his measure, and who in turn insinuates temptation into human life." Thus, "the sin of each individual is preceded by Adam's sin; but even this first sin of history is not the first sin. One may, in other words, go farther back than human history and still not escape the paradoxical conclusion that the situation of finiteness and freedom would not lead to sin if sin were not already introduced into the situation."

This original sin, infecting the paradox in which man asserts his freedom against his finiteness, and complicating with a fatality of evil a destiny which man senses to be divine, is the tissue of history. It explains why man's history, even at its highest moments, is not a success story. It yawns, like a bottomless crater, across the broad and easy avenue of optimism. It would be intolerable without faith, without hope, without love.

No. 1 Theologian. The intricate architecture of his thought explains why even Roman Catholic theologians respect Dr. Niebuhr. Both Catholics and Protestants may disagree with this or that aspect of his doctrine, or bypass or reject it as a whole. Few care to challenge it.

Clearly it is not a faith for the tender-minded. It is a faith for a Lenten age. Even those who fail to follow all the sinuosities of his reasoning must sense that, whatever else he has done or left undone, Niebuhr has restored to Protestantism a Christian virility. For, in the name of courage, which men have always rightly esteemed in one another as the indispensable virtue, he summons Protestants to seek truth.

Though he warns that the human implications of truth are tragic, he does not condemn the pursuit of happiness which modern civilization, more than any other, has legitimized. But he implies that the pursuit of happiness loses measure, just as optimism loses reality, if neither is aware of what Wordsworth called "the still sad music of humanity." And he gives a discipline of mind and a structure of meaning to the tragic cry of Philosopher Miguel de Unamuno: "A Miserere sung in a cathedral by a multitude tormented by destiny has as much value as a philosophy."

The Man. The elaborator of somber paradoxes is something of a paradox himself. Hawk-nosed and saturnine, Reinhold Niebuhr is, nevertheless, a cheerful and gracious (though conversationally explosive) man. An intellectual's intellectual, he nevertheless lectures and preaches with the angular arm-swinging of a revivalist. An orthodox Protestant, he is one of the busiest of leftist working politicians—a member of the Liberal party. For his gloomy view

of man and history does not inhibit his belief that man should act for what he holds to be the highest good (always bearing in mind that sin will dog his action).

Reinhold Niebuhr was born (1892) in Wright City, Mo., where his father, who emigrated from Germany when he was 17, was an Evangelical pastor. Young Niebuhr never intended to be anything else but a minister. Though he lacked any degree, he succeeded in 1913 in enrolling in Yale Divinity School (they were short of students, he explains). Two years later, in a burst of his usual energy, Niebuhr had his B.D. and M.A.

To help support his mother, he took his first and only parish, in a dingy district of Detroit. Niebuhr had intended to stay a couple of years. Instead, he stayed 13. His congregation on the first Sunday consisted of 18 souls. To eke out his salary (\$50 a month), Niebuhr began writing, and out of necessity discovered his vocation.

"I have a horror of Ladies Aid," says Niebuhr. But he waded into the social problems of his parish and the city, presiding at labor forums, lecturing at Midwestern colleges. Sometimes he unburdened himself of remarks like: "The lowliest peasant of the Dark Ages had more opportunity for self-expression than the highest-paid employee at the Ford factory." When, in 1928, Niebuhr became an associate professor at Union Theological Seminary, Detroit's automotive tycoons breathed a sigh of relief.,

At Union his reception was cool. But soon his classes were among the most crowded in the seminary. He moved from class to class surrounded by disputatious students, who soon called him "Reinie." In 1939, Niebuhr became the fifth American* to be invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University. Niebuhr drew the biggest crowds in Gifford history, later published the lectures as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Now he lives strenuously at the seminary with his British-born wife, the former Ursula Keppel-Compton, and their two children, Christopher, 13, and Elizabeth, 9. Mrs. Niebuhr, a theologian in her own right, was the first woman to win a First in theology at Oxford. She has lectured on religion at Barnard College for six years. In summer, the Niebuhrs rusticate at Heath, Mass., near the Vermont line. There Niebuhr writes and rests, after his fashion, from the nervous pace at which he drives himself.

The Liberal. Most U.S. liberals think of Niebuhr as a solid socialist who has some obscure connection with Union Theological Seminary that does not interfere with his political work. Unlike most clergymen in politics, Dr. Niebuhr is a pragmatist. Says James Loeb, secretary

of Americans for Democratic Action: "Most so-called liberals are idealists. They let their hearts run away with their heads."

Niebuhr never does. For example, he has always been the leading liberal opponent of pacifism. In that period before we got into the war when pacifism was popular, he held out against it steadfastly." He is also an opponent of Marxism.

Niebuhr's chief contribution to U.S. liberal thinking, his friends say, is keeping his fellow liberals on the path of the possible. "You don't get world government," he once said, "by drawing up a fine constitution. You get it through the process of history. You grow into it." The feelings of his fellow theologians are more mixed. Some criticize his failure to think and act in terms of the church or to generate ideas that would help to counteract modern irreligion and immorality. Others find his ideas of sin too grandiose, too remote from the common tares of mankind. Some feel that he could do with more human warmth and less intellectual incandescence.

But there are few who do not respect his questing intelligence or the spiritual inspiration which has infused old orthodoxy with the tremor of new life. Most would agree with the words of the late Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, when he met Reinhold Niebuhr for the first time: "At last I've met the troubler of my peace."

*The doctrine that God is the sole cause of the world process, the world and man having no independent reality.

*The belief that every generation is directly under God's judgment (as opposed to "teleological eschatology," which puts the judgment at some future time).

* Dr. Niebuhr was ordained in the Evangelical Synod of North America, a German Lutheran church now a part of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

*The other four: Philosophers William James, Josiah Joyce, John Dewey, William Ernest Hocking.

The Christian Witness in a Secular Age

by Reinhold Niebuhr

One of the foremost philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr was for many years a Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. He is the author of many classics in their field, including The Nature and Destiny of Man, Moral Man and Immoral Society, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, and Discerning the Signs of Our Times. He was also the founding editor of the publication *Christianity and Crisis*. This essay appeared in The Christian Century magazine July 22, 1953, pp. 840-842.

The most obvious fact in the spiritual climate of our age, to which the preaching of the Christian gospel must adjust itself, is that a world view, usually defined as scientific, is discredited in its interpretation of the human situation by contemporary events. It is discredited though it boasted tremendous triumphs in the technical conquest of nature; and had gained such prestige that "modern" Christianity thought itself capable of survival only by reducing its world view to dimensions which would make it seem compatible with the scientific attitudes of "modern" men.

There was a curious pathos in this adjustment, because the failure of modern culture to understand man and his history stemmed precisely from its inability to appreciate the uniqueness of man as distinguished from nature. It therefore misunderstood everything about man, his grandeur and his misery, because it transferred attitudes and techniques, which had been such a tremendous success in understanding nature, to the human situation, where they were the source of misunderstanding.

The "idea of progress," for instance, resulted from a transmission of the concept of evolution, true enough in nature, to human history, where human freedom made a determined development impossible; for man was always free to use his growing powers over nature for egoistic and parochial, rather than for universal, ends. Thus modern culture was unable to anticipate or to understand the evils which would arise in the technical possibilities of modern society, or the demonry of the cynical revolt against the standards of civilization manifested in nazism, or the even greater evils in the Communist revolt, which was animated, not by moral cynicism, but by a utopianism akin to the very utopianism of the liberal world.

Dignity, Misery and Freedom

In short, everything in our present historic situation -- as not understood because of characteristic, rather than fortuitous, errors in modern culture. Its confidence in the perfectibility of man rested in its trust in both the virtue and the power of mind. This was akin to the confidence in mind of the Greek rationalists; modern optimism also shared the Greek belief that evil was the subrational forces of the self which mind could gradually

master. Hence our psychologists are always looking for the roots of human "aggressiveness" on a level where scientific technics can eliminate them. They do this precisely in the moment when the fury of Communist idealism and fanaticism proves its most dangerous "aggressiveness" to be compounded of monstrous power lusts and illusory heavenly visions. These are in a dimension which is not understood by those who think of man as one of the objects in nature, to be manipulated and beguiled to seek "socially approved ends." While they prate endlessly about the "dignity" of man, they actually rob him of his dignity. They make this mistake because they do not understand that his dignity and his "misery" have the same root in man's radical freedom.

It is not possible to understand this radical freedom if we try to comprehend human selves as parts of some system of nature or of reason. This freedom can be apprehended only in dramatic-poetic terms, because it consists of the self's transcendence over every rational or natural scheme to which it may be related. In other words, the affirmations of a religion of history and revelation are based upon the presupposition that there is a power of self-revelation in the mystery of the divine; and then the power of faith to apprehend such a revelation is a proof of the human self's greatness. These presuppositions are precisely the treasures about which modern Christianity was so embarrassed and which it tried so desperately to fit into systems elaborated by a Hegel, a Comte or a Marx. They are the sources of its understanding of man and his history, including his wholly unanticipated and totally tragic modern history.

Relevant, But Still a Faith

The refutation in experience of alternate views does not prove the truth of the Christian faith. This only establishes its relevance, after generations had assumed its irrelevance and regarded it as merely the remnant of a prescientific past. The fact is that the essentials of the Christian faith cannot be proved, as one proves either scientific propositions or metaphysical theories. For the basis of the Christian view is the presupposition that the mystery of the divine is disclosed, not so much in the permanent structures and essences of existence, as in historical disclosures of which the life, death and resurrection of Christ is the climax. The *agape* of Christ is thus the clue to the divine mystery which is encountered in creation on the one hand, and on the other hand is met at the outer limits of our consciousness, when the perennial dialogue within the self is felt to be transmuted into a dialogue between the self and a divine "other" who is always judging and forgiving the self.

How can the self prove that its encounters with such an "other" are real? Must not the encounter between selves, whether human or divine, be a matter of faith and love rather than rational proof? Is the Christian enterprise in any different position in a scientific age than it was in the classical metaphysical age, when it had to bear witness to the reality of a divine judgment and mercy of the God of whom the Bible spoke, as against the conception of Plato's or Aristotle's "god," who could be philosophically proved? In short, the proof that we encounter a God who is above the structures and forms of life and has a freedom at least as great as our own; that we do not merely face an ocean of mystery

which is at the same time the fullness and the absence of being (as that mystery is described for us by the mystics)-the proof of such a reality must be the "witness" of a life.

Thus the Christian community, founded in a unique disclosure of God to those who are ready to receive it, is called upon to "witness" to the truth of Christ by the fruits which emerge from an encounter between the self and such a God as Christ revealed. "By their fruits ye shall know them," declared Jesus; and St. Paul defined the characteristic fruits by which we bear witness to the truth of Christ as "love, joy and peace." That is to say, the only effective witness of the truth of Christ is a life in which the anxieties and fears of life have been overcome, including the fear of death; in which the prison of self-love, of preoccupation with the self, its interests and securities, has been broken so that the self can live in "love, joy and peace." That is, be so free of anxieties as to enter creatively into the lives of others.

Faith and Repentance

The relation between the self and God is not primarily an intellectual one, though everyone will have the intellectual problem of relating what he has perceived about God in this personal and "existential" encounter with what he knows about the structures, coherences and intelligibilities of the universe. This encounter is one of faith or trust on the one hand, and of repentance on the other. It requires faith as trust because the soul commits itself to the tremendous proposition that it deals with a power which can give meaning to, and can complete, both its own fragmentary life and the whole strange drama of human history. Neither the life of the individual nor the whole drama of history fits neatly into any system of rational intelligibility. The root of the modern, as of the classical, error is either to complete life falsely or to deny it any significance because its unity cannot be fitted into the coherence of either nature or mind. The mystic of course annuls life in all its rich historical variety because he thinks he has discerned a divine ground of existence which consists of undifferentiated being and which negates all particular being and historical striving.

The encounter between the self and God under the prompting of the primary self-disclosure of God-that is, under the presupposition that Christ is the clue to the character of God-moves in a circle of faith and repentance. Faith is required that the mysterious power can complete our fragmentary lives. But repentance is the precondition of faith because, in the ultimate encounter, every soul is convicted of trying to complete its life prematurely and making itself into the center of some system of meaning, of power or of virtue. The self is not condemned for being a particular self; it is condemned for being a false self.

Redemption for the self means, not the annihilation of the self, but its transfiguration from a self-centered and self-defeating self to one which finds its life in creative loyalties and affections. Thus the Christian plan of salvation re-enacts the theme of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, of dying to live. St. Paul declares that we are "buried with Christ in our baptism that we may rise with and peace" are the only effective witnesses

that the Christian faith has rightly apprehended the dimension and the reality of both the divine and the human self.

We would probably all agree that in a world of "clamor and evil speaking," the the most significant witness would be the nonchalance and charity of Christians who know how "to forgive one another even as God, also Christ, has for. given you."

Limitations of the 'Gathered Church'

But we must admit humbly that there is no such clear witness by the church as the "body of Christ" to the world. Every effort of evangelistic sectarianism to select out the true saints from the morally ambiguous multitude, which makes up the church, has proved abortive. The "gathered church" always proves itself as unclear in its witness as the conventionally inclusive church. Why should this be so?

The first element in an adequate answer to that question embodies a truth which erupted tumultuously in the history of Christianity at the Reformation, but has since been periodically suppressed. That truth is that rebirth of the "Sold man," even if genuine, does not wholly eradicate all tendencies to self-seeking; so that even the most gracious saints remain in some sense sinners. Luther put this truth in the phrase, "*Justus et peccator simul.*" Nothing could of course be more obvious than this truth. Experience with monks or bishops, theologians or princes of the church, pastors and ordinary laymen, attest to the persistence of sin in the life of the redeemed, to the persistent power of human self-love which can be radically broken by the love of Christ. But it cannot be destroyed! We therefore face this interesting situation: that the church would be powerless and ineffective if it did not manifest some "fruits of the spirit," but that it, just like any individual, must be embarrassed when it calls attention to itself as a proof of the powers of God. For the very pretension of virtue is yet another mark of the sin in the life of the redeemed.

The lack of a clear spiritual witness to the truth in Christ is aggravated by certain modern developments, among them the increasing complexity of moral problems and the increasing dominance of the group or collective over the life of the individual. The complexity of ethical problems makes an "evangelical" impulse to seek the good of the neighbor subordinate to the complicated questions about which of our various neighbors has first claim upon us or what technical means are best suited to fulfill their need. The "Enlightenment" was wrong in expecting virtue to flow inevitably from rational enlightenment. But that does not change the fact that religiously inspired good will, without an intelligent analysis of the factors in a moral situation and of the proper means to gain desirable ends, is unavailing.

Dominance of Collectives

The dominance of the life and the destiny of groups and collectives in the life of the modern man is another complicating factor. It is ironic that the 19th century individualism presented human history as the gradual emancipation of the individual from the group,

while we to be placed in trusteeship, but any colony or territory may be voluntarily placed under United Nations supervision.

At present only onetime (German colonies, mandated after World War I, form the grist of the Trusteeship Council mill. These are the tiny and relatively insignificant countries of Ruanda-Urundi, Tanganyika, the Cameroons, Togoland, New Guinea, Nauru, Western Samoa and some Pacific islands. (South West Africa ought to be added to the list, but the intransigence of the Union of South Africa prevents this.) About 20 million souls live on these ribbons and specks of soil. Only one Italian colony, Somali-land, is under the Trusteeship Council, and that for a period limited to ten years. Libya has achieved full independence and Eritrea has been federated with Ethiopia.

Where are the colonies which were to be *voluntarily* placed under U.N. trusteeship by such powers as Britain, France, Holland, and Portugal -- colonies in which about 180 million people live? There is no answer. In the British colonial empire, the following are some of the areas over which the Trusteeship Council has no supervision: the Sudan, Kenya, Bechuanaland, Northern Rhodesia, Uganda, Nigeria, Swaziland, North Borneo, Cyprus, British Guiana, the Bahamas, and many Pacific islands. The flag of France flies over Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, and Madagascar. Little Portugal controls the lives of millions in Mozambique and Angola. In the heart of the Dark Continent Belgium has her great Congo, but she has not accepted United Nations supervision. Only tiny fragments of Africa have come under the Trusteeship Council's authority.

If France, Britain, Portugal and Belgium were voluntarily to agree, as administering authorities, to submit reports to the Trusteeship Council, to allow natives to present grievances to the council, and to permit missions to visit these areas, world peace and human rights would be substantially advanced.

Such an agreement on the part of the imperial powers of Europe is morally right. No country should assume the right to control arbitrarily the life of another national group, and none should cling to that power when a better course is open. Democracy requires that the temptation of self-interest be checked by United Nations discussion and criticism. The Christian faith applies here: "He who loses his life for my sake shall find it." In "losing" India, Britain has strengthened the Commonwealth and the democratic tradition, and has moved closer to India than ever before.

Under this plan the colonists would no longer be able to blame all their troubles on Lisbon, Paris or London. Their aspirations would be weighed and judged by many nations. This would make for more responsible nationalism. Just grievances would find sympathetic response.

The administering authorities would not lose their investments in their colonies. Each would still be the chief country in charge in its former dependency. It is becoming obvious to some colonial peoples that they very much need the economic and cultural assistance of more advanced nations. Libya is finding it difficult to stand altogether on its

own feet economically. The people of Somaliland will need Italian capital and assistance after they win political independence. The Gold Coast of Africa has learned much from British agronomists and finds in Britain a good market for its cocoa.

The Trusteeship Council would help the colonies rise to freedom. One of the finest things about the programs of the United Nations is that they give men freedom at so many points: freedom to vote, freedom from disease, illiteracy and hunger. Linked with the Trusteeship Council's supervision would be assistance from the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the Technical Assistance Administration.

Finally, supervision of the world's 180 million non-self-governing people by the U.N. Trusteeship Council would give that body more work to do, help it to prove its worth in the field of colonialism, and pave the way for a world community where the aspirations of colonial peoples are the concern of all.

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A View of Life from the Sidelines

by Reinhold Niebuhr

One of the foremost philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr was for many years a Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. He is the author of many classics in their field, including The Nature and Destiny of Man, Moral Man and Immoral Society, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, and Discerning the Signs of Our Times. He was also the founding editor of the publication *Christianity and Crisis*. The late Reinhold Niebuhr, who died in 1971, wrote this previously unpublished article in 1967, 15 years after his retirement as professor of applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. This article appeared in the *Christian Century* December 19-26, 1984, p 1195. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

It may be hazardous to give an account of my experiences, and my changed perspectives and views, following a stroke that lamed my left side in 1952, in the 60th year of my life. Perhaps the simile “from the sidelines” is inadequate to describe the contrast between my rather too-hectic activities as a member of the Union Theological Seminary faculty; as weekly circuit rider preaching every Sunday in the colleges of the east; and as a rather polemical journalist who undertook to convert liberal Protestantism from its perfectionist illusions in the interventionist political debates at a time when Hitler threatened the whole of Western culture -- and the inactivity and helplessness I experienced after my stroke. The physical trauma prompted at least three depressions, which my neurologist regarded as normal. He was not, however, averse to my seeking advice from friendly psychiatrists. I learned from them, particularly those who combined clinical experience with wisdom and compassion, that the chief problem was to reconcile myself to this new weakness; I had to live through these depressions. Then, as various ancillary ailments increased, my working day grew shorter and shorter but my depressions ceased -- because, I imagine, I had adjusted myself to my increasing weakness. Also, daily therapy prevented spastic limbs from growing worse, and this gave me hope. In 1952, neurologists were not particularly interested in rehabilitation; I had to wait about ten years for these therapies. Then my old friend the late Waldo Frank told me about his daughter, Deborah Caplan, who had been trained by the famous Howard Rusk. She not only gave me weekly treatments but trained a number of young nurses, some of whom happened to be the wives of my students, to give me daily therapy. I owe to them a tremendous debt, as I do also to our old friend, Hannah Burrington of Heath, Massachusetts, who stayed with my wife and me every summer and gave me twice-daily treatments.

My first stroke, which was not too severe, was caused by a cerebral vascular thrombosis. Some of my doctors attributed it to nervous exhaustion, while others said it was caused by defective “plumbing” and might have occurred in the life of a janitor. I lost my speech for two days, and the following two years were rough. I

was given sick leave from the seminary, but eventually resumed my academic work until my retirement in 1960. With the help of my wife, I was able to accept visiting professorships at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia. My frustration at the relative inactivity was overcome somewhat in that I could continue writing articles and editorials. I used an electric typewriter but found it impossible to use a dictaphone. The habits of a lifetime ordained that I must see what I write, line by line.

In short, my dismissal from the “playing fields” to the “sidelines” was accomplished gradually; but now, in the 75th year of my life, suffering from various ills and weaknesses, I am conscious of the contrast between an active and a semidependent status. These 15 years represent almost a quarter of the years of my ministry.

I must confess my ironic embarrassment as I lived through my depressions, which had the uniform characteristic of an anxious preoccupation with real or imagined future perils. The embarrassment, particularly, was occasioned by the incessant correspondence about a prayer I had composed years before, which the old Federal Council of Churches had used and which later was printed on small cards to give to soldiers. Subsequently Alcoholics Anonymous adopted it as its official prayer. The prayer reads: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Many friendly and inquiring correspondents asked for the original inspiration of the prayer, whether I was really its author, or whether it had been Francis of Assisi, or even an admiral who had used it in a shipboard worship service. I received about two such letters a week, and every answer to an inquiring correspondent embarrassed me because I knew that my present state of anxiety defied the petition of this prayer. I confessed my embarrassment to our family physician, who had a sense of humor touched with gentle cynicism. “Don’t worry,” he said, “Doctors and preachers are not expected to practice what they preach.” I had to be content with this minimal consolation.

Now I must come to a discussion of the view of life from the sidelines as compared with the view of life that active participation encourages. This cannot be adequately presented without a discriminate analysis of two connotations of the word "sidelines." Sidelines are on the one hand filled with athletes who have been injured in the battles of the arena, and on the other hand with spectators. My view of life since my stroke had to be informed by both connotations. I was dismissed from the battle, but I was also a spectator to engagements that had hitherto occupied me. Emancipation from the endless discussions of committee meetings, trying to solve problems in both religious and political communities that had hitherto occupied so much of my time, was a desirable freedom from the chores of a democratic society; but it also meant an emancipation from responsibility -- a doubtful boon, because responsibility engages us in the causes of moral, political and religious movements.

I still remain uncertain whether the relaxation of the polemical attitudes of my youthful zest for various causes represents the wisdom of old age, the disengagement of a spectator, or an increasing awareness of the strange mixture of good and evil in all the causes and purposes that once had prompted me to carry the banners of religion against secularism, and of Protestantism against Catholicism. I now hope that the unpolemical attitudes of my old age and dependence may have had their roots in experience, rather than in the irresponsibility of weakness and lack of engagement. My early polemical attitude toward the Catholic Church had been modified when, in the days of the New Deal social revolution, the Catholic Church revealed that it was much more aware of the social substance of human nature, and of the discriminate standards of justice needed in the collective relations of a technical culture, than was our individualistic Protestantism. But my view from the sidelines of illness made me more fully aware of the impressive history of the Catholic faith, and of its sources of grace and justice, which even our Reformation polemics cannot obscure.

There is some advantage in the spectator's view as opposed to the advocate's. One can see all the strange forms of spirit and culture that a common faith may take, without disloyalty to one's inherited beliefs. It can be exciting when one ceases to be a consistent advocate and polemical agent of a belief system. If I feel, at times, that an attitude from the sidelines may betray the irresponsibility of a pure spectator, I console myself with the fact that my current loyalty to causes, while less copious, is also more selective. And on the two main collective moral issues of our day -- the civil rights movement that seeks democratic improvements for our black minority, and opposition to the terrible and mistaken war in Vietnam -- the thoroughly ecumenical cooperation among the three biblical faiths gives one a reassuring confidence that unpolemical attitudes are not in contrast to moral commitments. My semiretirement has brought me nearer to the common moral commitments of the three faiths.

The physical ills that consigned me to the "sidelines" were productive in furnishing me with insights about human nature that had never occurred to me before. I learned to know the goodness of men and women who went out of their

way to help an invalid. Among the persons who impressed me with their helpfulness were my doctors, nurses and therapists, my colleagues and friends in the realms of both politics and religion. I soon learned that some of these people who entered my life professionally, or who served me nonprofessionally with visits and walks, showed an almost charismatic gift of love. And, of course, my chief source of spiritual strength was my wife. She was my nurse, secretary, editor, counselor and friendly critic through all those years of illness and occasional depression. We had been happily married for two decades, but I had never measured the depth and breadth of her devotion until I was stricken. It may be an indication of my male pride that I had only casually relied on her superior sense of style in editing my books and articles. Now I absolutely relied on her editing, and it dealt not only with style but, more and more, with the substance of my thought.

Again and again she assured me that I would do as much for her, were she ill. But I doubted it, because I was inclined to affirm the superior *agape* of woman.

The retrospective view that my illness made inevitable was not reassuring for my ego. I found it embarrassing that my moral teachings, which emphasized the mixture of self-regard and creativity in all human motives, had not been rigorously applied to my own motives. I do not pretend that this new insight made for saintliness. My experience is that constant illness tends to induce preoccupation with one's ills; the tyranny of invalids is a well-known phenomenon.

The mixture of motives in all people, incidentally, refutes the doctrines both of total depravity and of saintliness. In my case, retrospection from the sidelines prompted me to remember many instances in my earlier years when my wife had protested my making an extra trip or going to yet another conference, despite my weariness; I always pleaded the importance of the cause that engaged me, and it never occurred to me that I might have been so assiduous in these engagements because the invitations flattered my vanity.

I now proceed to two more objective insights from the "sidelines." The one concerns my view of the church as a hearer, rather than a preacher, of sermons. I had only one parish, in Detroit, where I served as pastor after my graduation from the Yale Divinity School in 1915 until my appointment to the faculty of Union Seminary in 1928. But in subsequent years I was, as I said, a preacher in the universities and, of course, in our seminary chapel. The life of the local church was therefore *terra incognita* to me. After my illness I worshiped in many local churches, particularly in the summer months.

I had always believed that the vitality of religion after the rise of modern science, which tended to discredit the legends of religious history, was due to the simple fact that faith in an incomprehensible divine source of order was an indispensable bearer of the human trust in life, despite the evils of nature and the incongruities of history. An aura of mystery surrounded every realm of historical meaning. But

as I became a pew-worshiper rather than the preacher, I had some doubts about the ability of us preachers to explicate and symbolize this majesty and mystery. These pulpit-centered churches of ours, without a prominent altar, seemed insufficient. Moreover, in the nonliturgical churches the “opening exercises” -- with a long pastoral prayer which the congregation could not anticipate or join in -- seemed inadequate. I came to view the Catholic mass as, in many religious respects, more adequate than our Protestant worship. For the first time I ceased to look at Catholicism as a remnant of medieval culture. I realized that I envied the popular Catholic mass because that liturgy, for many, expressed the mystery which makes sense out of life always threatened by meaninglessness.

The second insight about religious faith that I gained from the years of partial invalidism has to do with the problem of mortality and our seeming disinclination to accept the fact. All human beings face death as an inevitable destiny, but those of us who are crippled by heart disease or cerebral injury or other illness are more conscious of this destiny, particularly as we advance in years. The fear of death was a frequent topic of conversation with my closest friend. We were both in a situation in which death might be imminent. We both agreed that we did not fear death -- though I must confess that we did not consider the unconscious, rather than the conscious, fear that might express itself. We believed in both the immortality and the mortality of the person, and acknowledged that the mystery of human selfhood was quite similar to the mystery of the divine. In the Hebraic-Christian faith, God both transcends, and is involved in, the flux of time and history. The human personality has the same transcendence and involvement, but of course the transcendence of mortals over the flux of time is not absolute. We die, as do all creatures. But it is precisely our anxious foreboding of our death that gives us a clue to the dimension of our deathlessness.

The belief in a life after death, held by both primitive and high religions, reveals the human impulse to speculate about our deathlessness, despite the indisputable proofs of our mortality. In the Greek and Hebrew faiths, which converge in the Christian faith, we have a significant contrast of the symbols of this faith. The Hebrews, and of course our New Testament, are confident of the “resurrection of the body,” thus emphasizing the integral unity of the person in body and soul.

This symbolic expression of faith is currently almost neglected, despite the biblical references to it in the liturgy of funeral services. We moderns seem to believe that the notion of a disembodied immortal soul is more credible than the idea of resurrection. In fact, we have no empirical experience either of a resurrected body or of a disembodied soul. This confusion of symbols in the religious observance at the time of death, incidentally observed even by families of little religious faith, may indicate that belief in the deathlessness of mortal humans is not taken too seriously in strict dogmatic terms. But it does reveal the faith that most of us have, a presupposition of the residual immortality of our mortal friends. We express it simply in the phrase, “I can’t believe he’s dead.” There are, of course, many forms of social immortality. Political heroes are immortal in the memory of their nations; the great figures in the arts and sciences,

or of any discipline of culture, have social immortality in their respective disciplines; we common mortals are, at least, remembered by our dear ones. But there is a dimension of human personality that is not acknowledged in these forms of social immortality.

The very contrast between the two symbols of resurrection and immortality in our Western Christian tradition calls attention to this ambiguity in the dimension of deathlessness in our mortal frame. I am personally content to leave this problem of deathlessness in the frame of mystery, and to console myself with the fact that the mystery of human selfhood is only a degree beneath the mystery of God.

This symbolic expression of faith is currently almost neglected. If we recognize that the human self is not to be equated with its mind, though the logical and analytic faculties of the mind are an instrument of its freedom over nature and history, and if we know that the self is intimately related to its body but cannot be equated with its physical functions, we then are confronted with the final mystery of its capacity of transcendence over nature, history and even its own self; and we will rightly identify the mystery of selfhood with the mystery of its indeterminate freedom.

This freedom is its guarantee of the self's relations with the dimension of the "Eternal." While mortal, it has the capacity to relate itself to the "things that abide." St. Paul enumerates these abiding things as "faith, hope and love." Faith is the capacity to transcend all the changes of history and to project an ultimate source and end of temporal and historical reality. Hope is the capacity to transcend all the confusions of history and project an ultimate end of all historical existence, that which does not annul history but fulfills it. Love is the capacity to recognize the social substance of human existence, and to realize that the unique self is intimately related to all human creatures. These capacities relate the self to the eternal world and are its keys to that world.

In an Hebraic-biblical faith, neither history nor human selfhood is regarded as an illness of the flux of the temporal world from which we must escape. Each is regarded as a creation of the divine which is fulfilled, and not annulled by the source and end of history which is rightly revered as divine. Thus the individual, though mortal, is given, by self-transcendent freedom, the key to immortality. Individual selfhood is not a disaster or an evil. It is subsumed in the counsels of God and enters the mystery of immortality by personal relation to the divine. I could not, in all honesty, claim more for myself and my dear ones, as I face the ultimacy of death in the dimension of history, which is grounded in nature.

The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr

Matthew Berke FIRST THINGS, Nov. 1992

Besides being the quincentenary of Columbus' voyage, 1992 has also been the centenary of the birth of the American churchman Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). From the 1930s through the 1950s, Niebuhr was regarded by many as a kind of prophet, a public theologian who could explain modern discontents and upheavals in language that was explicitly Christian—or “biblical,” as he sometimes put it, acknowledging the common inheritance of Christians and Jews.

One of the most impressive tributes of this centennial was provided by historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writing in the *New York Times* on the occasion of Niebuhr's birthday, Schlesinger described his old friend as “one of the great Americans of the century.” The son of a Midwestern immigrant pastor, Niebuhr rose to become a distinguished professor (at Union Theological Seminary in New York), a tireless lecturer and preacher, and a prodigious writer of books and articles on theology, history, foreign policy, politics, and culture. “To an intellectually superficial and blithely secular generation raised on “optimistic convictions of human innocence and perfectibility,” this politically liberal clergyman spoke compellingly about the reality of evil and sin. Yet the inevitability of human egotism was not used to justify an authoritarian political order—on the contrary, Schlesinger recalls, Niebuhr “persuaded me and many of my contemporaries that [belief in] original sin provides a far stronger foundation for freedom and self-government than illusions about human perfectibility.” A modicum of justice, Niebuhr held, is best attained through a balance of power between contending factions or classes within a democratic framework. Schlesinger writes, “Of all his thoughts, I treasure this the most: Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” And, in a particularly evocative passage, Schlesinger observes:

What gave his activities unity and power was his passionate sense of the tragedy of life, irony, and the fallibility of humans—and his deep conviction of the duty, even in the face of these intractable realities, to be firm in the right as God gives us to see the right. Humility, he believed, must temper, not sever, the nerve of action. Lincoln was his ideal as a statesman because he combined “moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning.”

As for Niebuhr's legacy, Schlesinger says that it “is currently a subject of acrid dispute between liberals and conservatives,” with both parties claiming Niebuhr as a mentor. This last point is slightly behind the times, since the “acrid disputes” of the seventies and eighties have become moot issues in the nineties: the Cold War is over and the imminent threat of nuclear Armageddon removed; liberation theology as a political enthusiasm is as dead as Christian temperance; the domestic issues of race and poverty remain, but they are no longer discussed in simple liberal/conservative terms, while at the same time new issues of oppression and liberation have arisen. Of course, the past always lives in the present, and the final Niebuhrian verdict on the issues of the age just past will largely determine how his “Christian realism” is applied to current debates.

In the disputes over Niebuhr's legacy during the past two decades, both the conservative and liberal Niebuhrians were able to find a measure of confirmation in the Master's writings. In the end, though, judgment of Niebuhr's legacy must be decided in the light of historical events. We cannot bring Niebuhr back to see which faction among his disciples he would bless; but between the alternate strains in his thought we can, in light of recent events, say

which strain proved to be most prescient, prophetic, and wise. In short, the decisive question is not, “Who was right with Reinie?”—but rather, “What did Reinie get right?”

The contest for Niebuhr's legacy was occasioned by—and tended to focus on—the controversy over America's role in world affairs, in particular the country's Cold War policies reconsidered in light of the Vietnam War.

The evolution of Niebuhr's own thought on America's international role passed through several stages that are by now familiar to students of his work. During World War I, Niebuhr, as a young pastor of German descent, was an ardently patriotic supporter of America's war effort; but in the general disillusionment that followed the Treaty of Versailles he embraced, albeit half-heartedly, the fashionable pacifism of the day. (“This is as good a time as any to make up my mind that I am done with the war business,” he wrote in his diary in 1923.) By the late thirties, however, with Hitler menacing the world, Niebuhr shocked the largely pacifist/neutralist American church with his strong advocacy of intervention—in order, he said, “to prevent the triumph of an intolerable tyranny.”

Niebuhr's position at the outset of the Cold War was one of moral equivalence between the superpowers, but a series of naked power grabs by Soviet Russia quickly persuaded him that “we do face once more the distinction between relative justice and tyranny.” As in the years leading up to World War II, Niebuhr again subordinated his reformer's misgivings about American institutions and purposes, saying that “we are embattled with a foe who embodies all the evils of a demonic religion.” Communism, he explained, is “an organized evil which spreads terror and cruelty throughout the world and confronts us everywhere with faceless men who are immune to every form of moral and political suasion.” Given Communism's “monstrous evil,” “poison,” “malignancy,” “demonic” pretension, and “cruel fanaticism,” Niebuhr concluded by the late 1940s that “Russian truculence . . . cannot be mitigated by further concessions”; therefore “we must be ready to risk war. . . rather than yield to Russian pressure.

Niebuhr's hard-line statements and rhetoric did not, however, reflect a crude anti-Communism or mindless patriotism. He understood that Communism was a perverse form of Western idealism, that it possessed (wrongly but understandably) a measure of prestige among desperate people and reform-minded intellectuals, and that its dangerously utopian solutions to social ills (real and exaggerated) required the free world to wage a political as well as military struggle. A critic of his own society, Niebuhr, acknowledged the sinful propensities of all nations and the American/Western democratic complicity in the whole morass of tensions and ancient wrongs that had led to the existing situation.

Moreover, he worried that “we Americans are not really good enough for this struggle”: too inexperienced in international affairs, too sure of our own innocence and virtue, unprepared for the uses and perils of power. In *The Irony of American History* (1952), his most comprehensive statement on the nation's Cold War responsibility, Niebuhr cautioned that even in the best circumstances “power cannot be wielded without guilt,” since “we cannot do good without also doing evil.” Thus, he worried, “either we will seek escape from responsibilities which involve unavoidable guilt, or we will be plunged into avoidable guilt by too great confidence in our virtue.” Though we might possess a “provisional” moral advantage over our adversaries, that advantage, he said, could be squandered by an arrogant attitude toward our allies, or, in a fit of frustration and self-righteous fury, by a vain attempt at “preventive war” against our adversaries. Though he felt that Communist fanaticism and aggression could be tempered and tamed in the long run, he feared that the American people, accustomed to relatively easy triumphs in domestic affairs and foreign wars, might lack the maturity and patience to beat the insecurity and uncertainty of what John F. Kennedy would later call a “a long twilight struggle, year in and year out,” perhaps for decades. Nevertheless,

Niebuhr insisted that defensive actions were required, despite all hazards. Along with the diplomat George Kerman and the academic Hans Morgenthau, Niebuhr became one of the key intellectual defenders of America's "containment" policy against the Soviet Union, including the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent. As a founding member of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) in the 1940s, he firmed up liberal support for a bipartisan foreign policy.

By the 1960s New Left critics and revisionist historians were challenging this consensus account of American policy, finding the Cold War's origins in American rather than Soviet aggression. Walter LaFaber in *America, Russia, and the Cold War* (1967), attributed enormous influence to the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr in fashioning and defending the policies of the Cold War. Theologian

John M. Swomley, in *American Empire: The Political Ethics of Twentieth-Century Conquest* (1970), accused Niebuhr and his Christian realism of having "provided the religious rationale for the military foreign policy that created the contemporary American empire and the policy of global intervention culminating in the war in Vietnam." Christopher Lasch denounced the whole "cult of the hardboiled" with which Niebuhr and the realist school were identified.

Though Niebuhr himself had turned against the war by the late 1960s, he was still regarded by doves as a founder of policies that led to Vietnam, whatever their original intent. Religious as well as secular activists now took their cues from revisionist and New Left theoreticians, using Niebuhrian realism as a foil or negative counterpoint to their ideologically "correct" radicalisms—a trend that has continued to the present time in many, seminaries and religion departments across the country.

Some of Niebuhr's old colleagues and students followed the leftward tide in varying degrees, without, however, disowning their mentor; indeed, they argued that he had been leaning in that direction for some time. These left-liberal Niebuhrians—Professor Schlesinger, John C. Bennett, Robert McAfee Brown, Ronald Stone, Richard Wightman Fox, to name just a few—conceded that Niebuhr's thought had contributed to the fiasco of the Cold War and Vietnam. But they were pleased by Niebuhr's accusations that Vietnam was "a bloody, costly, and futile war" being fought under the rubric of defending democracy in a country where democracy was unsustainable. For such an act of hubris we were paying a bitter price in human suffering and domestic strife. Thus while the left-liberals acknowledged that Niebuhr never renounced containment altogether, they were pleased by his growing reluctance to approve of specific interventions (as in the Dominican Republic in 1965), and by his criticisms of the war, which widened into a larger indictment of American foreign policy and culture. As Richard Fox put it: "He was summoning up vestiges of the anti-establishment militance he had only rarely expressed since the mid-1930s."

Besides, some of the left-liberal Niebuhrians said, the Communism that Niebuhr had denounced in such strident terms had been the Communism of Stalin, repressive to a totalitarian extent internally and dynamically aggressive in its external relations with other countries. Even here, Arthur Schlesinger argued, Niebuhr "went too far in postulating a radical, monolithic, invariant totalitarian essence, immune to human and to historical change." Furthermore, he "underestimated the extent to which the Soviet Union [in the early Cold War period] was acting on defensive grounds." In any event, as the Cold War dragged on, Niebuhr did at least speculate about the possibility of an early thaw in superpower relations, and—as if to confirm his left-liberal disciples—he saw the Soviets as being capable of negotiating mutually beneficial agreements with America and the West.

According to Richard Fox, while Niebuhr "had regarded nuclear deterrence with a certain equanimity" in the 1950s, the Berlin crisis of 1961 awakened him to the real danger and

possibility of nuclear war. Thus Niebuhr came to speak of the US. and USSR as “partners” in preventing a nuclear holocaust, insisting (like nuclear “freeze” proponents of the early eighties) that we needed to “take some risks for peace comparable to our ever more dangerous risks in the game of deterrence,” even if it meant dropping an “unrealistic . . . insistence on foolproof inspection.” Furthermore, Fox and others pointed out, Niebuhr began to advocate a mild form of unilateralism: i.e., that America should renounce a first use of nuclear weapons, since even a victory won by such means would load an open, democratic society with oppressive, unendurable guilt. Leftists refuted conservatives who invoked Niebuhr's name as a Cold War liberal disdainful of neutralism and moral equivalence between the superpowers, citing one of Niebuhr's last statements on this matter, written eighteen months before his death (and published in *Christian Century*, December 31, 1969):

I must now ruefully change that decade-ago opinion of mine in regard to [theologian Karl] Barth's neutralism. While I do not share his sneer at the “fleshpots of Germany and America,” I must admit that our wealth makes our religious anti-Communism particularly odious. Perhaps there is not so much to choose between Communist and anti-Communist fanaticism, particularly when the latter, combined with our wealth, has caused us to stumble into the most pointless, costly, and bloody war in our history.

This position was not entirely an aberrant *volte-Face*, the left-liberal Niebuhrians argued, because Christian realism was never a fixed system but rather a dynamic one open to, indeed thriving upon, change and growth. Niebuhr, they said, was always dissatisfied with his previous thought, always revising and refining it in light of new facts and arguments. Once upon a time Soviet Communism was seen as the major threat to justice and world peace, but, according to Arthur Schlesinger “As the Cold War developed, Niebuhr grew increasingly alarmed over the delusions generated by excessive American power.” Thus the nation had forfeited the provisional, and always tenuous, superiority that, for Niebuhr, had initially justified our Cold War policies. Conservative and neoconservative Niebuhrians who recalled Niebuhr's anti-Communist writings and hard-line foreign policy statements were accused of “fossilizing” the Reinhold Niebuhr of the forties and fifties, ignoring or initializing his turn to the left in the late sixties. In effect, the left-liberals said, the right had Niebuhrianism but the left had Niebuhr himself—and the living tradition of Christian realism.

Niebuhr's hard-line disciples—Cold War liberals who, willy-nilly, had to accept the conservative or neoconservative label—were distressed by all this. One neocon Niebuhrian, Paul Ramsey, famously lamented that in the political climate of the 1960s “even Reinhold Niebuhr signs petitions and editorials as if Reinhold Niebuhr never existed.” Nevertheless, the neoconservative disciples continued to invoke Niebuhr's memory and to draw from his vast store of anti-Communist writings and hard-line foreign policy statements. They had on their side the better part of Niebuhr's corpus: in weight, words, and—they were certain—wisdom.

Throughout the 1960s, Niebuhr's writings still occasionally displayed flashes of the anti-Communist, Cold War “realism” characteristic of earlier writings; but now they alternated (incomprehensibly to many readers) with more leftist assessments. Some hard-line Niebuhrians no doubt thought (but did not say publicly) that Niebuhr's neutralist pronouncements were cranky, unbalanced, and out of touch with reality, products of the advanced physical illness and morbid temper of his final years. Michael Novak, the most persistent proponent of a neoconservative Niebuhr, may have been hinting at this view when, in 1972, a year after Niebuhr's death, he opined: “It would have been marvelous to have had him at the height of his powers during the turbulence of the 1960s; instead, he could only be an occasional and inevitably distant observer.”

But beyond attempts to minimize Niebuhr's last musings, the neocon Niebuhrians could turn at least one of the left-liberals' potent arguments against them: Niebuhr's perpetual dissatisfaction and revision of his own thought as events unfolded. Thus, if Niebuhr had moved to the left in the sixties—it could be argued—he probably would have readjusted his views once again in the seventies and eighties, having seen the terrible aftermath of the Vietnam War: totalitarian dictatorship and oppressive poverty, hoards of refugees and “boat people,” near-genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge Communists. Beyond its direct consequences for Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War also resulted in an American loss of nerve and purpose, allowing, for a time, considerable reign to revolutionary movements and Communist regimes throughout the third world. Moreover, while détente muted the hostile rhetoric between East and West—a development that Niebuhr in the 1960s thought would help reduce superpower tensions—had he lived longer, with his intellectual powers intact, it seems certain that he would have confronted the menacing realities belied by treaties and talk of mutual understanding. Under the umbrella of détente the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and began their remorseless accumulation of nuclear weapons in an effort to surpass the U.S. In the meantime America froze or cut back on nuclear as well as conventional forces; it even made unilateral concessions, such as foregoing deployment of the neutron bomb and construction of the B-1 Bomber, and living up to an antimissile defense treaty (ABM) that—we now know—the Soviets freely violated.

Whether Niebuhr would have reconsidered his Vietnam opposition in the face of these developments is, of course, an open question. But a persuasive case is made by neocon Niebuhrians that he would have corrected his general drift toward neutrality and moral equivalence, recovering the lapsed policy of containment and deterrence. George Weigel, a neocon Niebuhrian, summarized the situation in the *National Interest* (Fall 1986):

Niebuhr's mature foreign policy commentary was written at a time when there was a present danger of American overconfidence. Niebuhr worried publicly in 1952 whether the moral superiority of democracy, the necessity of meeting the threat of totalitarian ruthlessness, and the impressive weight of American military and economic power would “blind [us] to the ambiguity of the drama of human existence beyond and above the immediate urgencies.” The emergence over the past generation of an elite adversary culture in the teaching centers of American life—churches, the media, the academy, popular entertainment—suggests that the present danger is not so much overconfidence as a lack of confidence, which has deteriorated at times into that morally degrading survivalism preached by Drs. Carl Sagan and Helen Caldicott.

Of course it is possible that Niebuhr might have sided with the Carl Sagans and Helen Caldicotts, as well as the Arthur Schlesingers and John C. Bennetts. If he had, he would have betrayed all the finest insights of his earlier years—and been woefully mistaken about the course of recent history as well. By the end of the 1980s it was clear to all but the willfully obtuse that the revival of American and NATO strength, not the false “sweetness and light” of détente and neutralist survivalism, ended the Cold War on terms consistent with Western ideals of democracy and freedom. The administration of Ronald Reagan renewed opposition to Communist revolutionary movements—in Latin America, Africa, and Asia—thereby imposing terrible burdens on Soviet capabilities. The deployment of the Euromissiles in 1984 prevented a “Finlandization” of Western Europe, while the mere prospect of a “Star Wars” missile defense drove the Soviet military planners to despair. The rearmament of the 1980s, carried out in the teeth of liberal opposition and ridicule, put such strain on the Soviet economy that Kremlin leaders, in order to keep up, were forced to initiate a reform of Communism that, once begun, became uncontrollable, ending finally in a democratic revolution throughout the Communist empire of Eastern and Central Europe. To be sure,

internal flaws in the system itself were ultimately responsible for Communism's collapse—but only, as containment advocates like Niebuhr always predicted, because such internal contradictions could be aggravated by external pressures.

It is a pity that Niebuhr did not live to witness the breathtaking events of recent years, events that vindicate all his predictions and preachments of the forties and fifties. He said that America had to engage in a patient chess game with the adversary, containing it until at length it would, of its own internal contradictions, destroy itself. His belief in the untenability of Communism was a consequence of his religious sensibility: he believed that human freedom and human nature in the divine image could not be suppressed and contorted indefinitely, that they would eventually reassert themselves against the remaking and mangling of Communist rulers. Even when there appeared to be no foreseeable change in Russia's internal governance and feverish aggression, Niebuhr could say, "But we must realize that we are not fated to share the world with the present despotism forever," that political change was inevitable "in the long run"—provided we kept our nerve and maintained a steady course between war and withdrawal, suicide and surrender. "We . . . know that a world order based upon Communist force and fraud cannot finally prevail; but we are not so certain when and how it will disintegrate."

Though he publicly expressed doubts about America's ability to fulfill the mission presented by history, the fact that we did succeed in the end undoubtedly would have thrilled him as it thrilled millions of others who understood the achievement of bringing down the Communist empire without a third world war. Some left-liberal Niebuhrians said that Niebuhr never sought to "win the Cold War" (Ronald Stone) or that he stressed political rather than military means (John C. Bennett). In reply one may ask, why would he want to wage a Cold War if not to win it? Moreover, while he saw political success as key to Western victory, he knew that diplomacy would be futile unless it was backed up by military power—the "ultima ratio" of all power, as Niebuhr used to put it. The point was to cultivate a readiness and willingness to fight, but also the coolness, skill, and prudence to avoid an all-out war.

Niebuhr often spoke of political solutions as achieving at best a "rough justice." He saw that in the struggle for justice men never calibrate their use of power perfectly to the threat against them; as fallible human beings they invariably overreact, and as sinners they often equate their own partial vision of the good with perfect goodness, covertly insinuating their own pride and selfishness under the cover of a just cause. This in part is what Niebuhr meant when he insisted that "we cannot do good without also doing evil," since legitimate assertions of power are inevitably accompanied by illegitimate accentuations of that power. If anything is to be conceded to left-liberal Niebuhrians it is that Niebuhr might have been disappointed that America did not somehow accomplish this world-historical victory with greater nobility and constancy, less meanness and extremism. Rough justice should have been less rough.

What would Niebuhr have said about the Reagan administration? One can easily imagine that he would have been rankled by many Reagan policies and pronouncements—perhaps ridiculing Reagan as unsophisticated, complacent, and self-righteous. Yet Niebuhr always had a great capacity to distinguish between a politician's personal imperfections and his creative historical role. (Students of Niebuhr's thought will recall his retroactive endorsement, by 1940, of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and the repudiation of his own earlier radicalism.) It is difficult to imagine him failing to appreciate Reagan's achievement in rallying American and Western morale and energy after a hiatus from containment during the post-Vietnam "malaise" of the seventies. The recently liberated peoples of Central and Eastern Europe certainly did not snobbily dismiss the President's rhetoric about an "evil empire," but, even before Communism's final collapse, savored it as a light of truth in their darkness and an anticipation of future freedom.

Earlier this year even the liberal *Christian Century*, while not praising the Reagan administration for its achievements, wondered whether the Western churches need to repent for their complicity with Communist regimes and state-controlled churches, for their failure to provide witness and support to Christians behind the Iron Curtain. Is it conceivable that Niebuhr would have lagged behind left-liberal churchmen—and secular liberals for that matter—in assessing the true situation of freedom and oppression, East and West? Whatever suggestions of moral equivalence he may have fallen into at the end of his life, Niebuhr's words, written during World II, provide a permanent reproach to moral equivalence and neutralism:

We do not find it particularly impressive to celebrate one's sensitive conscience by enlarging upon all the well-known evils of our Western world and equating them with the evils of the totalitarian systems. It is just as important for Christians to be discriminating in their judgments, as for them to recognize the element of sin in all human endeavors.

And while Niebuhr could pass severe judgment on American society, he had a sense of providence in which our fulfillment of high purposes did not necessarily wait upon the elimination of all our vices—self-righteousness and false innocence made all the more insufferable by gross materialism and commercialism, love of comfort, infatuation with technology, cultural shallowness and frivolity, and a tendency to national isolationism and irresponsibility. In 1955 Niebuhr wrote:

It is probably idle to hope for the reversal of so strong a cultural trend as our preoccupation with technics. The best we can hope for is that the wealth so acquired will be dedicated to the task of giving strength to the free community of nations. If we could say, "God be thanked who matched us with this hour"; if we could be thrilled with our historic opportunities and cease to regret our burdens as involving high taxes; and if we could realize that our burdens are an opportunity to make our wealth sufferable to our conscience and tolerable to our friends—then we would redeem even that part of our culture which our critics may deem least honorable.

Despite the odd intellectual turns of his final years, what Niebuhr will be remembered for, what he is vindicated in—in sum, what will be his legacy—is the insistence that in desperate circumstances even sinful men and nations "must take ... morally hazardous actions. " They must be ready to "cover themselves with guilt" in order to ward off radical evils, such as Communism, because "the disavowal of the responsibilities of power can involve an individual or nation in even more grievous guilt." Niebuhr always held that in the end it is the knowledge of God's forgiveness that enables men to venture, action at all. And he believed, finally, that great historical events, such as the defeat of Nazism and Communism, owe more to divine providence than human virtue. He knew that the agency of the free world was really the instrument of a good greater than itself.

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Reinhold's Era

by Gary Dorrien

Gary Dorrien was associate professor of religion and dean of Stetson Chapel at Kalamazoo College when this article was written. His book [The Word as Truth Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology](#) is to be published this year (1997) by Westminster John Knox. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, February 24, 2002, pp. 34-41. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

Book Review:

The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics In Times of Peace and War. By *Elsabeth Sifton*. Norton. 349 pp.

From the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s Reinhold Niebuhr spent his summers in the northwestern Massachusetts village of Heath, where he often spoke at the Heath Union Church. In the summer of 1943 he wrote a notable prayer: "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Though the Heath parishioners were mostly Congregationalists, the vacationing summer congregants were mostly Episcopalians, with a heavy sprinkling of Episcopal theologians and church leaders. One of them, Howard Robbins, was sufficiently struck by Niebuhr's prayer to remember it several months afterward. Robbins was dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and a leader of the Federal Council of Churches. In 1944 he included Niebuhr's prayer in a booklet of prayers and services that the Federal Council published as an aid for army chaplains. Shortly thereafter a fledgling organization named Alcoholics Anonymous asked Niebuhr if it could use the prayer.

AA refrained the prayer in the first-person singular; changed its first clause to the simpler "what cannot be changed," reduced its second clause to the weaker "change what can be changed," added some extra clauses that sounded nothing like Niebuhr; and made the prayer famous. Since Niebuhr didn't believe in copyrighting prayers, he had no way of controlling the fate of his own, though he shook his head at its appearance on bookends, tea towels, key chains and coffee mugs. In 1951 a University of Kiel professor named Theodor Wilhelm published the prayer in a book of his own under the pseudonym Friedrich Oetinger, which launched a German tradition of attributing it to the 18th-century Swabian Pietist F. C. Oetinger; Catholic-artifact versions of the prayer attributed it to St. Francis of Assisi; Hallmark cashed in on the prayer; and it was immortalized on thousands of plaques featuring Albrecht Dürer's praying hands.

In this unusual memoir Elisabeth Sifton, Niebuhr's daughter; uses the prayer's context and career as an entry point into Niebuhr's world. Sifton, who was four years old when her father wrote the Serenity Prayer, is a perceptive interpreter of her father's temperament, friendships and thought. Her book strengthens our understanding of Niebuhr's friendships with such luminaries as Episcopal Bishop Will Scarlett, Methodist Bishop Francis McConnell, Anglican Archbishop William Temple, English politician Stafford Cripps, historian R. H. Tawney, poet W H. Auden and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. More distinctively, it offers an unforgettable portrait of the summertime context in which Niebuhr consorted with Protestant ecumenists, traded wisecracks with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (an agnostic among the Heath clerics) and wrote most of his major works.

Sifton is nostalgic for the "astonishing summer invasions" of her youth, though she grew up among equally stimulating company at Union Theological Seminary. During the school year she and her Anglo-Catholic mother, Barnard College professor Ursula Niebuhr; usually attended services at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, or St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia University, or James Chapel at Union Seminary; occasionally they attended the East Harlem Protestant Parish or heard Harry Emerson Fosdick preach at Riverside Church. For Sifton, Union's nondenominationalism stripped its services of religious interest. She had a similar reaction to Riverside, "despite Fosdick's rousing sermons and the rather-too-glamorous sound of Virgil Fox's organ." On most Sundays Niebuhr himself was out of town speaking at college chapels.

At Heath, however, her father took a regular preaching turn, the congregants were family friends and the cast of supply preachers included Robbins, Episcopal bishops Charles Gilbert and Angus Dun, Episcopal theologians William Wolf and Sherman Johnson, Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown and Episcopal rector Worcester Perkins. "These were men who had learned how not to have needless liturgical or doctrinal disputes, and they were good, conscientious people." Sifton recalls. "I thought of them as typical American clergymen: how wrong I was! Little did I know how unusual was their sturdy broad-mindedness, how atypical their devout modesty. I grew up completely insulated from the barbarous, self-congratulatory sloth of what journalists call Mainstream American Protestantism, and it took me decades to realize this."

Mainline Protestantism takes many lumps in her account. To Sifton, the CHRISTIAN CENTURY'S Charles Clayton Morrison, "he of the pious do-nothing school," typified the Protestant mainstream. Morrison had a certain "earnest" goodness, she allows, but he and other mainline pastors "completely failed" to face up to the crises of the 1930s. They "snoozed optimistically through the gray years of 1930-42, reassuring their congregations that soon all would be well." Later they treated the rise of fascism as a challenge to hold onto their pious, isolationist moralism.

Sifton ignores the fact that during the same period Niebuhr was often wildly wrong on the issues of the day. She doesn't acknowledge that her father's socialism was radical and militant in the 1930s, that he postured about the need for "very considerable violence" to secure social change in America, and that he harshly condemned the New Deal

throughout Franklin Roosevelt's first three terms. In her rendering Niebuhr was always a pragmatic realist and progressive who wanted only to make the structures of modern society "more fair."

Her lack of interest in tracking his zigzagging on political issues and his theological development leaves her unable to deal fairly with the criticisms he received in these areas. In Sifton's account the problem was always that mainline Protestant leaders were too sanctimonious, weak-minded and comfortable to follow Niebuhr's lead.

This perspective has its drawbacks, but it also contributes to the book's value. Sifton wonderfully conveys the social atmosphere of her father's historic and brilliant opposition to American isolationism. She describes Niebuhr's amazement at the deep hostility that he provoked among antiwar Protestants and secular pacifists, recounts his whirlwind of travel and lecturing that was "not easy for his wife, one has to note," and emphasizes the importance of his friendships with Scarlett, McConnell and Auden. She quotes a Chicago theologian's reproach to Niebuhr: the theologian could "no longer be silent at your shocking disregard for the fundamental decencies of your Christian ministry and professorship." Protesting that Niebuhr wrote "feeble yet sinister sophistries" about the unrealizability of Christian ideals, the theologian blasted Niebuhr's additional "sophistry" about the moral value of war, which was "Hitlerism at its worst." No matter how wealthy and famous Niebuhr's books made him, they were nothing but "brazen and shameless" apostasy: "You are a shocking spectacle to God, Jesus Christ, and humanity. Some of us, who are willing to be poor, unrenowned and unpopular, know the truth."

Sifton replies that this kind of attack imagined huge royalties that didn't exist and showed that liberals can be fundamentalists too. She recalls Niebuhr's wish that the war resisters hated him less and Hitler more. In a powerful 1940 article Niebuhr protested that America's dominant liberal culture was too appeasing and moralistic to fathom "what it means to meet a resolute foe who is intent upon either your annihilation or enslavement." Sifton identifies with her father's indignation at American obliviousness. By 1940, she observes, it had been seven years since Hitler destroyed democracy in Germany and five years since he issued the Aryan decrees. What were Americans waiting for?

Sifton ignores the fact that as late as March 1939, even Niebuhr was passionately opposed to preparing for war. In 1937 he condemned Roosevelt's naval buildup as a "sinister" evil, declaring that it had to be "resisted at all costs." The next year he blasted Roosevelt's billion-dollar defense budget as "the worst piece of militarism in modern history." Right up to the Munich crisis Niebuhr insisted that the best way to avoid war was not to prepare for it; collective security was the realistic alternative to war. He wanted the U.S. to enact neutrality legislation and to voluntarily support League of Nations sanctions. Sifton never mentions any of this, but Niebuhr's strident opposition to Roosevelt's preparations for war helps us to grasp the revulsion against war that his generation felt after World War I. Even for Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* did not lead straight to the interventionism of 1940; he had had to struggle for eight years to get there. Then he had to fight very hard to bring others along -- a story that Sifton helps us see in a fresh way, even though she was only a toddler at the time.

One of Sifton's chief arguments is that it is ridiculous for theologians and historians to describe Niebuhr as a "major Protestant leader" of his generation. She recalls that for 30 years, even though her father often spoke in college chapels, only a handful of churches invited him to preach in their pulpits. In her recollection St. George's Episcopal Church in New York was the major exception. Niebuhr was taken seriously by "a small minority of intrepid souls," she observes, but most American church leaders and churchgoers "simply didn't want to listen. . . . They pussyfooted around feel-good mega-preachers like Norman Vincent Peale or Billy Graham -- who like so many of their successors never risked their tremendous personal popularity by broaching a difficult spiritual subject, and rarely lifted a finger to help a social cause.

Niebuhr wearied of the pious irrelevance and timidity of church people, she says. This was the key to the "atheists for Niebuhr" phenomenon. It was not merely that Niebuhr attracted "cheering secular friends" who were "oblivious of his theology." Niebuhr himself came most fully alive in the company of his political friends, especially Joseph Rauh, Walter Reuther, Hubert Humphrey John Kenneth Galbraith and other leaders of Americans for Democratic Action. Sifton explains that the ADA liberals were "a welcome relief from the sometimes inane, always piously cautious, and frequently self-congratulatory churchmen among whom he might otherwise have had to spend his time. Even at the seminary one had to guard against the constant threat of sanctimony, whereas the ADA people were exuberant, skeptical, and energetically committed, after all, to democratic action."

It is chastening to be reminded that Niebuhr's influence on people was small compared to Peale's or Graham's. If one is inclined, like me, to take comfort in the thought that at least Niebuhr and Paul Tillich had a significant public impact, a certain defensiveness against Sifton's statements on this theme is inevitable. Niebuhr had a tremendous impact on the fields of Christian social ethics and modern theology, and many of us who labor in these fields are grateful for it. He also influenced leading political realists such as George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau; in recent years he has been claimed by neo-liberals and neo-conservatives in both political parties; and in the 1950s and '60s he was a cherished influence on Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Heschel. According to one story, when the New York City Council voted in the late 1970s to name the corner of Broadway and 120th Street "Reinhold Niebuhr Plaza," none of the Christians on the council knew who Niebuhr was, but all of the Jews did.

Sifton takes no interest in current academic debates over her father's theological method, and she ignores liberationist critiques of his nationalism, cold warriorism and androcentrism. She says nothing about the precipitous decline of Niebuhr's influence after the emergence of liberation theology. She does take a quick pass at the usual picture of his later career, briefly asserting that the image of Niebuhr as an "in-house establishmentarian gadfly" underestimates the ironic, tragic and pathetic aspects of his later life. And she pauses a bit longer over the cultural fate of his passionate philo-Semitism.

Niebuhr despaired over much of the non-Jewish literature on Zionism and Jewish existence, a literature which, in Sifton's telling, consisted of "pretentious nonsense, offering specious reasoning, idiotic psychobabble, or poor contrasts between Jewish and Christian ethics that slandered the first and misapplied the second." She observes that things have gotten much worse in the 30 years since her father's death. Niebuhr's philo-Semitism was embattled in his time, but it would find little place at all in today's intellectual culture. While guarding against nostalgia for what was, after all, a terrible time, she fondly recalls the score-keeping discussions her parents conducted with Frankfurter and Isaiah Berlin: "We all knew who the friends had been -- but oh the guffaws and acerbic dismissals of the enemies: the appeasers, the reactionaries, the anti-Semitic Jews, the isolationists, the Nazi sympathizers, the bad Germans, the Germans who thought they were 'good' but weren't!"

Sifton went to Radcliffe College and the University of Paris before starting a career as an editor at Viking Press, but her memoir is pervaded by a feeling of disappointment. Her home discussions while growing up set a standard that was hard to match afterward; the church leaders that she knew at Heath were more interesting than those she met afterward: she agrees with her father that the generation that succeeded him fled into the "cellars of irrelevance."

In 1932 Niebuhr suffered a stroke that ended his circuit-riding days and spurred the Niebuhr family to make retirement plans. They sold the stone cottage in Heath, bought a comfortable home in the historic valley town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where medical care was readily available, and prepared for Niebuhr's 1960 retirement from Union. Berkshire County had hills that Melville and Hawthorne had climbed, beautiful historic towns, grand houses, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Atheneum library, but to Sifton it seemed a poor trade for the modest farms and captivating friendliness of Heath: "It was more like exurbia for the power elite." While her father fell into a morose depression and her mother struggled with a difficult new situation, Sifton stewed in adolescent rage.

Worse yet, Republicans won the White House. Niebuhr told his daughter sadly "You poor girl, you've never lived under a Republican administration. You don't know how terrible this is going to be." Sifton rightly concludes that everything her father wrote about American politics took for granted that there is little point in writing if one had no concept of America's spiritual and cultural identity. His "constant gripe" about American politicians was that they were "stupider, prouder, more self-righteous, more moralistic, more vain-glorious than the American people on whose behalf they spoke." Niebuhr was convinced that ordinary American Christians made better Christian realists than their political leaders did.

As an ethicist he moved from the imperatives of the gospel ethic of sacrificial love to the requirements of ambiguous situations, always under the mediation of the principles of justice -- freedom, equality and order. This method of ethical reasoning has puzzled and divided Niebuhr's interpreters, as has his religious sensibility as a whole. He was deeply prayerful and profoundly religious, yet also hyperactively worldly and allergic to the

expressions of piety that many Americans identify with faithfulness. One of his interpreters, John Murray Cuddihy, wrongly believes that Niebuhr was totally politicized; another, Richard Wightman Fox, offers a highly skillful and better informed interpretation, but still presses too far in the same direction.

For many years Ursula Niebuhr and Sifton chafed at interpreters who didn't capture the Reinhold Niebuhr they knew or who sometimes got him quite wrong. That experience moved Ursula Niebuhr to publish her correspondence with her husband, and now Sifton has described the family and social atmosphere behind his work. *The Serenity Prayer* gives us a strong dose of the politicized Niebuhr, but it also splendidly conveys the hopeful, ironic, polemical, prophetic spirit of a great theologian who prayed from the heart and unfailingly asked himself, "What does the gospel ethic mean in this situation?"

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2959>

Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr

June 26, 2009

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*Ever since then-Sen. Barack Obama spoke of his admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr in a 2007 [interview](#) with New York Times columnist David Brooks, there has been speculation about the extent to which the 20th-century theologian has influenced Obama's views on faith, politics and social change. At the Pew Forum's biannual Faith Angle Conference in May 2009, Wilfred McClay, a historian specializing in American intellectual history, offered an overview of Niebuhr's unique form of progressive Christianity and its influence on 20th-century American politics and international affairs. E.J. Dionne, columnist for *The Washington Post*, remarked on the recent revival of interest in Niebuhrian thought and the role Niebuhr played as a public intellectual active during the worldwide political upheavals of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.*

Speaker: Wilfred M. McClay, SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Respondent: E.J. Dionne Jr., Columnist, *The Washington Post*; Senior Advisor, Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life

Moderator: Michael Cromartie, Vice President, Ethics & Public Policy Center; Senior Advisor, Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life

In the following excerpt, ellipses have been omitted to facilitate reading. Find the full transcript, including audience discussion, at pewforum.org.

MCCLAY: The occasion for this -- the hook -- is an [interview](#) between David Brooks and then-Sen. Obama in 2007 [in which David noted] that Obama gave a sort of perfect description of the book in perfect sentences and perfect paragraph structure for 20 minutes, which does suggest that he knew the book in question, *The Irony of American History*, one of the books I'm going to talk about.



Obama's not the first American president to declare his fondness for Niebuhr. Jimmy Carter notably did, both before and after his election. Some people think that the famous "malaise" speech had some Niebuhrian input. I'm not going to get into the question of whether Obama really understands Niebuhr or not. What I really want to do is to lay out [Niebuhr's] vision, his worldview in a kind of short course. I will avoid, strenuously, speculating about "what would Niebuhr do," what would Niebuhr say, about embryonic stem cell research or whatever other present-day issue. I think there's plenty to talk about, just with respect to what he did say and think.

Niebuhr is the outstanding public theologian of the 20th century, [but he] has become a figure of obscurity in recent decades, and that's partly because the term "public theologian" has come to represent something of a null set in recent times. But Niebuhr had an unusually long and productive career. He turned out many books, many articles; wrote journalistically; wrote densely scholarly works. He was engaged in the politics of the day, from World War I all the way to the Vietnam War. So he was not only a theologian of great distinction, but also a public intellectual who addressed himself to the full range of public concerns and had an enormously capacious mind that really could take in all kinds of issues that he wouldn't necessarily have discussed in his books. His importance in his time tells you something about his time. It was a time when theologians were important people. And it was a time when there was that great vitality in the mainline of Protestantism.

Niebuhr is something of a counterpuncher as an intellectual; it's hard to know what he thinks about somebody or about some subject unless he's reacting to them, taking exception to or responding to other thinkers, which is why I think it's very important to see him in context. One thing about the context is, I think it's impossible to imagine him operating in anything other than a modern, Western, liberal environment, where there's a strong tradition of science, of belief in the idea of progress -- a society that is in some ways poised on the cusp of a transformation into secularity, or at any rate a world in which a secular option exists. He was very much a creature of that historical moment and a critic of liberalism from within liberalism, a breed that flourished particularly in the late '40s and '50s -- and doesn't seem to exist, at least in the same form, today

The issues that he struggled with are quintessentially related to problems of advanced modernity, and science is one of them. Niebuhr upholds the idea of progress and remorselessly critiques it at the same time. [Y]ou may know Niebuhr for what's called the "serenity prayer," which goes something like "God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things that can be changed, and the wisdom to know the one from the other." I'm reciting from memory. But the interesting thing to me anyway, as someone of conservative disposition, is what he leaves out, and that is preserving the things that need to be preserved. [I]t shows how thoroughgoing a progressive he was.

Niebuhr has an understanding of Christianity that's grounded in a very complicated view of human nature. Actually, a lot of his persuasiveness derives from the fact that this view is more complicated and adequate than its secular equivalents. But first, let me give you a little background biography. He was born in 1892, not in a log cabin, you'll be happy to know, but in rural Missouri, the son of a German immigrant pastor, Gustav Niebuhr, a member of a tiny Protestant group called the German Evangelical Synod. Reinhold inherited from his father this sense of pastoral vocation and a keen interest in social and political affairs. He built on this with two years at Yale Divinity School, and so he began his career as a theologian and pastor as an advocate of what was called the "[social gospel](#)."

The social gospel was a movement within liberal Protestantism which located the meaning of the Christian Gospel in its promise as a blueprint for progressive social reform, rather than its assertions about supernatural reality. It arose out of a crisis within, particularly, Protestantism -- although Catholicism had its own version of this -- in response to industrialization and urbanization. In the Protestant case, particularly salient were the challenges to biblical authority rising out of these things, but more so out of Darwinism. Not so much the idea of evolution per se, which was a doctrine that easily comported with Christian faith, but natural selection. It was the randomness of the process of natural selection that was viewed as particularly threatening. An equally powerful threat came from the so-called "higher criticism" of the Bible, which deconstructed the Bible, for all intents and purposes, into a collection of redactions of successive texts by multiple authors over long periods of time, and therefore not a text that should be regarded as having any kind of organic or authorial unity. All of these things were terribly threatening, especially to Protestants, because the whole basis of the Protestant Reformation, to oversimplify grandly, was to see the authority of the Bible as superseding the authority of the historical institutional church. So that tremendous weight is placed on the authority of that text.

[T]he social gospel was one way of responding to this problem. Social gospelers were modernists. They had dismissed the notion that the Bible should be read authoritatively in the way that, say, fundamentalists read the Bible. [T]he social gospelers insisted that what they thought of as the heart of the Christian Gospel could be preserved by dispensing with these supernatural problematic elements and instead socializing the Gospel, i.e., translating it into the

language of social reform, including scientific social reform. They saw very little sense of antagonism between science and reform. And in the general optimism of the period, there were seen to be very few limits on what could be achieved.

One of the ways American sociology differed dramatically from, say, German sociology is that from the very beginning it had an astonishingly religious content to it. Albion Small, who was president of the American Sociological Association, and so on, wrote that social science was "the holiest sacrament open to men," devoted to ensuring that "we live, move, and have our being as members of one another." In other words, the kingdom of God is not reserved for the beyond or the end of time, but can be created in the here and now by social scientists and ministers working hand-in-hand together.

I think that certainly one of the things that one could speculate on is the degree to which Obama has been influenced by the social gospel, as I think his pastor Jeremiah Wright very clearly was. There is a lot of evidence that he has been. For example, there was the famous speech that Obama gave in South Carolina, during the campaign, in which he declared his desire to be an "instrument of God" -- and declared, quote, "I am confident that we can create a kingdom right here on Earth." And it was a capitalized 'k,' -- I assume he did not mean that he was going to institute the political institution of the monarchy. So definitely, echoes of the social gospel were there.

Niebuhr initially bought into the social gospel movement. It fit with his upbringing, with his reformist inclinations. But being Niebuhr, he soon became uneasy with the progressive movement. He found it and the social gospel to be utterly naïve about the intractability of human nature, and inadequate to the task of explaining the nature of power relations as they existed in the real world. Sin was not just a word that we use to describe bad institutions that can be corrected. Sin, he thought, was something much deeper, an intrinsic part of the human condition, something that social reform was powerless to do much, if anything, about. And in 1939 he says, "Liberalism is little more than faith in man, exemplifying that perversion of the will, that betrayal of divine trust, which is called sin." Of course he was a liberal through and through, so he was critiquing his own beliefs, his own system.

What was arguably his most important book came out in 1932 -- with the revealing title, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. [It was] the depths of the Depression, a propitious moment to publish a rather hard-hitting book, which this was. Niebuhr turned the social gospelers' view on its head or on its feet -- whichever Marxian analogy you like -- and argued that in fact there was a disjuncture between the morality of individuals and the morality of groups. And the latter -- the morality of groups -- was generally inferior to the morality of individuals. Individuals could, once in a while, in rare instances, transcend their self-interest for the sake of a larger good. But groups of individuals, especially groups like nations, never could. So in fact, groups made individuals worse

rather than better because the work of collectives was invariably governed by a logic of self-interest.

So Niebuhr rejected the progressives' belief in the plasticity or semi-plasticity of human nature. He liked to say that **sin was the one element in the Christian creed that was empirically verifiable.** And he also took aim -- and I think this is more radical than people appreciate -- at the very concept of socialization, which for the progressives was so central. John Dewey was a frequent target. Dewey argued that "The lost individual will re-find inner wholeness ... by subduing himself to the forces of organization at work in externals." Niebuhr thought almost the opposite was true - men have little enough goodness in themselves and socialization makes them worse because the reason for being, for all social groups, is to pursue the shared self-interest of the members. He dismissed as sentimentality the progressive hope that the wages of individual sin could be overcome by intelligent reform and that we could transform into a loving fellowship of like-minded comrades holding hands beside the campfire.

Instead, the pursuit of good ends in the arenas of national and international politics had to take full account of the un-loveliness of human nature and of power. The implications for Christians who wanted to do good in the world were fairly stark in his view. They had to be willing to get their hands dirty -- very dirty, for existing social relations were held together by coercion and only counter-coercion could change them. Social change was brought about not by persuasion, diplomacy, pedagogy, intelligence or sweetness, but by "emotionally potent oversimplifications." A quotation: "Society is a perpetual state of war between different self-interested groups." [M]eet Thomas Hobbes. "The only way a society can maintain itself is by the coercion of dominant groups who go on to invent romantic and moral interpretations of the facts, and the peace lasts only as long as the underdogs are kept down. Then when they are able to successfully challenge and coerce a new peace, they impose another set of romantic and moral interpretations of the facts."

His conclusion was that the exercise of power was always morally dangerous, but also always morally necessary. You couldn't take the option of opting out. Hence, the need for a dualism in morals, since -- and I quote again -- "The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability and can only be countered by competing assertions of interests." So that's James Madison along with Hobbes. But in none of this is there a release from the moral requirements of Christianity. This rather stark view extends very much to the nation-state. And this was a response on his part to the social gospel, to the progressive movement and to a rather long strain in American ideas -- progressive ideas -- about solidarity. Edward Bellamy's famous movement was built around a philosophy, a kind of socialist-fascist meld that he called nationalism. So on the progressive side of things, nationalism was not a bad thing. But to Niebuhr it was.

Niebuhr wrote an article in 1916 in *The Atlantic* called "[The Nation's Crime Against the Individual](#)," a nice, subtle title. And the idea here was, and this is before American entry into the

first world war, which he strongly supported, that the nation cheats the soldier because it takes his loyalty, his willingness to die and sacrifice, for its own purposes without being able to hallow that sacrifice. Or as he expressed the same idea some 16 years later in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, "Patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism." It is "the unselfishness of the individuals [that] makes for the selfishness of nations," which "is why the hope of solving the larger social problems of mankind, merely by extending the social sympathies of individuals, is so vain." So much for empathy.

But there's an interesting twist here; it is that all of this rejection of the social gospel, affirmation of original sin and so on, did not mean that he gave up on social reform. Niebuhr remained a man of the left always. Maybe not enough left to suit some people, but he certainly was never a conservative. And he believed Christians were obligated to work actively for progressive social causes, for the realization of justice and righteousness, but they had to do this in a way that abandoned their illusions, not least in the way they thought about themselves. The pursuit of social justice would involve them in acts of sin and imperfection. Even the most surgical action, one might say, involves collateral damage. But the Christian faith, just as inexorably, called its adherents to a life of perfect righteousness. So he's pushing against the social gospel, but not abandoning it entirely.

These ideas would continue to develop. In 1938, he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews University, very prestigious lectures in natural theology. These were later published as what is arguably his magnum opus, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, about which David Brooks once said, as I recall, "If you write a book with a title like that, you really feel like you have nothing else left to say." [T]his book is really a grand tour of the entire intellectual history of the West and ultimately, a book about the idea of progress itself and the question of whether human history can be meaningful.

As a thinking Christian he had to see some meaning in history. What he felt had happened, however, in modern times, was that there was a secularized idea of progress that saw an immanent order, or as he called it, "an immanent logos," that was no longer related to a transcendent meaning. This idea of progress was built on biblical language, on biblical insights, but became transformed by two modern innovations. First, there was the elimination of the notion that grace, meaning the supernatural intervention of divine power to give meaning to history, was necessary. And second, the thinkers who laid the foundation of modernity -- and this I think is really where you get to the heart of Niebuhr -- failed to see that the dynamism of history was a double-edged thing. These thinkers assumed that all development means the advancement of the good, but in so assuming, they failed to recognize that, and I quote, "every heightened potency of human existence may also represent a possibility of evil." In other words, as our capacity grows, so does our power to do evil -- intentionally or unintentionally. Niebuhr takes a generous view of history's possibilities, but also warns that, as he puts it, "History

cannot move forward towards increasing order without developing possibilities of chaos by the very potencies which have enhanced order." In other words, we're never out of the woods. And the danger only increases as we progress. Man's capacity for evil advances with his progress towards the good. Hence, the greater the progress, the greater the need for vigilance, the greater the need for some metaphysical check on human pride.

[L]et me move on to the book that has really gotten attention in the last 10 years. *The Irony of American History* takes these same insights and focuses them upon a consideration of America's role in the world. Published in 1952, at the height of the Cold War, this was a stinging attack on communism and at the same time a stinging attack on the moral complacency of America. That's Niebuhr -- typically, as always, fighting on two fronts at once. Nobody can top Niebuhr for his anticommunism, but he also believed the United States resembled its antagonists more than it cared to imagine. He criticizes the communists for their philosophical materialism, but then points out that Americans are guilty of the same thing in practice. Here's a statement that I think rings just as true today as in 1952: "Despite the constant emphasis upon the 'dignity of man' in our own liberal culture, its predominant naturalistic bias frequently results in views of human nature in which the dignity of man is not very clear."

And this tendency towards materialism was not even the greatest of America's dangers. Even more perilous, he thought, was one of our principal points of pride, the entrenched idea that America has a providential mission in the world and [that] our nation is rendered uniquely virtuous and innocent by the blessings of history, locating the beginnings of it in the Calvinist Puritan tradition, and then the Jeffersonian tradition, which saw America's as nature's nation, free from the encumbrances of the old world. America was, so to speak, the land of the great reset button, presumably labeled in the correct manner. Even Abraham Lincoln, who was not a dewy-eyed fellow, called America "the last best hope of mankind," words that certainly, if nothing else, convey a kind of cosmic significance to American history.

Niebuhr didn't reject these things completely, but he insisted that the belief that America had turned its back on history and made a new beginning for humankind was naïve and dangerous, laying America open to the sins of spiritual pride. It was a source of strength that turned into a source of weakness. And that is what he meant by the irony of American history, the tendency of American civilization to allow decent motives and noble intentions to blind it to the sins and errors to which it's prone and thereby let its virtue become the source of its vice.

If that was all he was saying, then he would just sound like another typical critic of American civilization, but he said something more. In the same way that the sinful imperfect Christian is required to act in the world and get his or her hands dirty in working for the cause of good, so a morally imperfect America was obliged to employ its power in the world. Let me read you a couple of passages that illustrate this: "Our culture knows little of the use and abuse of power; but we have to use power in global terms. Our idealists are divided between those who would

renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous." Fairly timely words, I think.

Needless to say, he rejects both of these options and continues this way: "We take, and must continue to take, morally hazardous actions to preserve our civilization. We must exercise our power. But we ought neither to believe that a nation is capable of perfect disinterestedness in its exercise, nor become complacent about particular degrees of interest and passion which corrupt the justice by which the exercise of power is legitimated."

DIONNE: Can you think of a talk show that would book Reinhold Niebuhr now? I was thinking about that. "Tell us, Reinhold, what do you mean by the irony of American history?" "Well, Larry, as I was saying the other day to Abraham Heschel and Paul Tillich ..." It just wouldn't happen. And I think it suggests a certain hole in our discussion of this. Colbert would have him on; absolutely, absolutely.



In 1987, 22 years ago, the late Father Richard Neuhaus organized a conference on Reinhold Niebuhr. It was funded -- you will be surprised -- by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Father Neuhaus said a very interesting thing in introducing the volume about Niebuhr. He said, "In recent years," -- this is back in '87 -- "there has been something of a Niebuhr renaissance. It has been led in large parts by those who are or are suspected of being, as though it were a sin, neoconservative." And then he adds -- and this part I very much agree with -- "Attempting to capture Niebuhr for any partisan agenda, however, would be a great disservice both to Niebuhr and to what he can help us do today."

I think it says something about Niebuhr that this new Niebuhr revival is not being led primarily by neoconservatives, but actually by liberals and certain dissident conservatives like our friend David Brooks. I want to just talk a little bit about the political character of Niebuhr's thought. How do you sort of get at what being a Niebuhrian is?

A Niebuhrian hockey player tries to win the game, but does not assume victory renders him superior to his opponent and would admit that he may have won unfairly when he high-sticked and got away with it. A Niebuhrian wagering in Vegas plays the odds intelligently and tries to win, but always admits that perhaps luck or God's grace, not his system, is why he won. A Niebuhrian will get into a fistfight if it's absolutely necessary, but would be acutely conscious of the pain his blows are inflicting on his opponent and knows that the very fact the fight is happening is proof of the fallen nature of both himself and the person he is fighting. (And a proper Niebuhrian will have a sense of humor about all of these things, understanding the profound ironies involved in trying to act effectively in the world and trying to act morally at the same time.) And that's why I love Reinhold Niebuhr.

I went back to the canonical text, which is David Brooks' famous interview with Barack Obama. It was actually just a short statement by Obama, but it's worth quoting. David asked, "Have you ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?" Obama replied, "I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers." And David asked what Obama took away from Niebuhr. And here's what Obama actually said. "I take away the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism."

That is actually a pretty good description of Reinhold Niebuhr. And whether Barack Obama, the politician, was pandering to David Brooks' well-known love for Niebuhr or whether he was reflecting something deep in him, it sounded pretty deep and I think it's actually not a bad description of the way Obama views the world. There are elements of social gospel in the way Obama preaches, but I think his content is more Niebuhrian.

Niebuhr is a "yes, but" guy. His favorite words are "paradox" and "irony." He is a 1940s liberal and that's why there is the big debate between liberals and neocons because a lot of neocons say they are 1940s liberals. What I like about him is that he believes what he believes passionately, but with a sense of humility.

Why are there Niebuhr revivals? Niebuhr is the person we turn to for balance. We turn to him when things get out of hand. He is a critic of the left's utopianism and he's a critic of the right's tendency to deify our own country. His critique of original sin I think applies neatly at different times to both the right and the left in our politics. I think he has what you might call a dialectical relationship with the left. He reacted against the social gospel not because he opposed the economic or social programs of the social gospel but because he had a different understanding of human nature. He thought liberals had too optimistic a view of human nature.

His next big political turn was in the late 1930s, when he broke with his pacifist friends [at] The Christian Century and formed another magazine called Christianity and Crisis to argue that we needed to go to war against Hitler and Nazism. And then he made his mark again in politics, with

a liberal anticommunism that made him one of the founders of Americans for Democratic Action with Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Niebuhr never stopped being a liberal, but he was a liberal critic. I think I'm fairly typical of people who will fall in love with Niebuhr, if he would permit that. I'm not even sure he would. I read *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, which is the first Niebuhr I read, in the early-to-mid-'70s. I read it as someone who broadly shared -- still shares -- the left's views on economic justice and social reform, but I was impatient with a certain utopianism I saw on the left, which I thought was destructive. And I was also impatient with some parts of the left that seemed not to believe in the disciplines and limits placed upon our aspirations by the need to persuade majorities and to build consensus in democratic societies. I was and still am turned off by self-righteous moralism disguised as morality.

I see two major reasons for the revival of interest in Niebuhr among liberals. One, I think some of the criticism by Christian moderates and liberals of what we would see as a hyper-politicized Christian right square very much with some of Niebuhr's criticism of a certain style of Christianity, a kind of revivalism that he was critical of in his own time. Niebuhr enjoined the believer to understand that "the worst corruption is a corrupt religion."

We need a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us and a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demony and our vanities. Americans, Niebuhr argued, were never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire. One great Niebuhrian quote should hang over all seminars. Niebuhr once said that "we must always seek the truth in our opponents' error and the error in our own truth." And that is also classic Niebuhr.

[O]ne of the paradoxes is that Niebuhr encourages us to doubt and the kind of doubt that Niebuhr encourages is the kind of doubt that faith ought to encourage. If faith is defined solely as a demand that everyone assent, without reservation, to a long and particular list of propositions, that's an odd idea. But I think this is an inadequate understanding of the Christian and Jewish traditions, which always call us to a form of moral doubt that, as Bill Galston has said, calls upon us to question our motivations and pretensions to special virtue. Niebuhr said, "No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint."

Niebuhr argued that some of the greatest perils to democracy arise from the fanaticism of moral idealists who are not conscious of the corruption of self-interest. And in his assertion, which might usefully have guided us during our debate over the war in Iraq, Niebuhr warned, "A nation with an inordinate degree of political power is doubly tempted to exceed the bounds of historical possibilities, if it is informed by an idealism which does not understand the limits of man's wisdom and volition."

David Brooks and I did a session on Niebuhr recently, and one point that emerged clearly is that it is not surprising that Niebuhr really came to popularity in a period when he was writing about Nazism and Stalinism, which were ideologies that justified despotic pretensions in the name of creating new human beings and perfect societies. Niebuhr had a strong sense of human nature as a constant. He was very skeptical of projects designed to create a new humanity and was very aware of how terrible these projects could become. This is religion's essentially moderating role, which is far removed from ideology and from many claims that religion can provide a detailed textbook for creating the perfect society here on Earth.

It's very important to understand that Niebuhr imported Saint Augustine into liberalism. And a friend of many of ours, Jean Elshtain, captured this very well. She wrote -- and this is a totally Niebuhrian thought on Jean's part -- that if Augustine is "a thorn in the side of those who would cure the universe once and for all, he similarly torments critics who disdain any project of human community or justice or possibility." "Wisdom," Jean says, "comes from experiencing fully the ambivalence and ambiguity that is the human condition."

One of Niebuhr's favorite public statements by any politician is Lincoln's second inaugural address. And you all remember the key passage in Lincoln's second inaugural, when he said: "Both sides read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully."

Think about it. If anybody could have claimed that he was on the right side of history or even that he was on God's side, it was Abraham Lincoln fighting slavery during the Civil War. Yet, Lincoln himself refused in this extreme instance to presume an identification of his will with God's will. And I think that Lincoln demonstrated as clearly as any statesman, which is why he is a Niebuhrian figure, that it is possible to undertake great tasks in politics with firmness, commitment, principle and courage and still not pretend to absolute certainty about one's course, one's intentions or the purity of one's motives.

Arthur Schlesinger wrote in *The New York Times* magazine in 2005, an [essay](#) in which I think Schlesinger successfully claims Niebuhr back for the liberals. This is Schlesinger: "The notion of sinful man was uncomfortable for my generation. We had been brought up to believe in human innocence and even in human perfectibility. This was less a liberal delusion than an expression of an all-American DNA." Yet, Schlesinger said, this notion became absurd for liberals when they confronted the evils of both Nazism and Stalinism. "The belief in human perfectibility had not prepared us for Hitler and Stalin. The death camps and the gulags proved that men were capable of infinite depravity. The heart of man is obviously not OK. Niebuhr's analysis of human nature and history came as a vast illumination. His argument had the double merit of accounting for

Hitler and Stalin and for the necessity of standing up to them." And I think that is at the heart of *The Irony of American History*.

[P]erhaps it's worth noting [labor organizer Eugene] Debs' great line that there should be [another beatitude](#): "Blessed are they who expect nothing for they shall not be disappointed." But I think a Niebuhrian view of the world insists that you can hold on to hope, that good Obama word, even with a realistic view of the capacity of human beings to make mistakes, and even, at times, to perform great acts of evil. So this is my concluding prayer, really from Reinhold Niebuhr.

Read the full transcript, including audience discussion, at pewforum.org.

What You Can Learn from Reinhold Niebuhr

By **Brian Urquhart**

The Irony of American History

by Reinhold Niebuhr, with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

University of Chicago Press, 174 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism

by Andrew J. Bacevich

Metropolitan, 206 pp., \$24.00

The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy (Just Not the Way George Bush Did)

by James Traub

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 262 pp., \$25.00

A fog of know-nothing ideology, anti-intellectualism, cronyism, incompetence, and cynicism has, for eight years, enveloped the executive branch of the United States government. America's role in the world and the policies that should shape and maintain it have been distorted by misguided decisions and by willful misinterpretations both of history and of current events. That fog is now being dispersed, and the vast intellectual and managerial resources of the United States are once again being mobilized.

A blessing of this time of liberation and hope is that serious works of political analysis and philosophy may contribute to the new administration's approach to its daunting agenda of global and national problems. That Barack Obama has made clear his admiration for one of the books under review—Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*—is in itself reassuring.^[1]

It will take time to develop once again the elements of a coherent national program that most Americans can agree with and support, not to mention Congress, where the recent lack of a single House Republican vote for the President's economic stimulus package makes a mockery of bipartisanship on important matters. In the meantime, thinkers and writers of various political persuasions offer a rich harvest of ideas and suggestions.

1.

Andrew J. Bacevich, in his introduction to the republished edition of Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*, calls it "the most important book ever written on US foreign policy." Certainly it would be hard to think of another book from the 1950s that retains, nearly sixty years later, both its compulsive readability and so much of its relevance. The elegance, strength, and charm of Niebuhr's writing invite quotation at every turn. And behind the prophetic style lie wisdom, Christian charity, and a profound understanding of both history and the ways of human beings, individually as well as in groups.

The Irony of American History was published in 1952, the year in which Niebuhr suffered a stroke that limited his public activities for the remaining nineteen years of his life although he continued to teach and to write books. Primarily a Protestant theologian, Niebuhr, as a pastor in Detroit from 1915 to 1928, also became a social reformer. From 1928 to 1952, as a professor of theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, he was an influential voice on a wide range of issues, including politics, ethics, and foreign policy. He was a strong supporter of United States intervention in the war in Europe, but in 1946 was a drafter and signatory of the Federal Council of Churches statement that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was "morally indefensible."

Niebuhr warns of "our dreams of managing history" as a source of potentially mortal danger for the United States. To quote Andrew Bacevich again, his book "provides the master key...to understanding the myths and delusions that underpin this new American view of statecraft." By 1952 the United States had reached a unique position of world power and influence. In such circumstances "dreams of managing history" seem understandable, if unwise.

Prosperity and the country's almost unlimited abundance were dominating forces in the growth of America. Niebuhr foresees the danger of an excessive national pursuit of gratification. In 1952, a powerful agent of mass gratification, television, was rapidly invading American homes. "Television," he writes, "may represent a threat to our culture analogous to the threat of atomic weapons to our civilization."

In 1952 the ideological-military-political standoff with the Soviet Union was the defining phenomenon of American policy. As a Christian socialist and a founding member of the Americans for Democratic Action, Niebuhr detested the Soviet system as a monstrous tyranny disguised as a utopian democracy. The struggle against it, however, was also the cause of a major irony: "...The necessity of using the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace is a tragic element in our contemporary situation." "Thus an 'innocent' nation finally arrives at the ironic climax of its history."

Niebuhr's main indictment of the "communist movement against which the whole world must now stand on guard" rests upon

the cruelties which follow inevitably from the communist pretension that its elite has taken "the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom," and is therefore no longer subject to the limitations of nature and history which have hitherto bound the actions of men.

The delusions of grandeur implicit in such an idea rule out once and for all the Soviet Union's claim to be the master of historical destiny. At the same time, along with his fellow members of the ADA, Niebuhr deplored McCarthyism and other attacks on civil liberties in the name of anticommunism.

There has, from the country's earliest Puritan years, Niebuhr wrote, also been "a deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America," which the unprecedented scope and influence of America's post-World War II power did little to discourage while vastly complicating the country's involvement in world affairs. As to the universal values that the United States supposedly holds in

trust for mankind, "we were, of course, not immune to the temptation of believing that the universal validity of what we held in trust justified our use of power to establish it." Niebuhr quickly adds, "Except in moments of aberration we do not think of ourselves as the potential masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection." During the last eight years we have learned a good deal about "moments of aberration" and have, as a result, fewer illusions about our ability to manage historical destiny.

The fateful turning point came during and after World War II when "it...became apparent that we could neither be really secure in an insecure world nor find life worth living if we bought our security at the price of civilization's doom." The unparalleled scope of American power created "the temptation to become impatient and defiant of the slow and sometimes contradictory processes of history.... Man cannot rise to a simple triumph over historical fate."

The capacity to make sacrifices and to sustain endeavors without complete certainty of success is an essential element of Niebuhr's prescription for America's pursuit of peace and justice in the world. He even seems to anticipate the national security policy of George W. Bush:

We might be tempted to bring the whole of modern history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty effort to overcome its frustrations. The political term for such an effort is "preventive war." It is not an immediate temptation; but it could become so in the next decade or two. A democracy can not of course, engage in an explicit preventive war. But military leadership can heighten crises to the point where war becomes unavoidable.

In our recent case, of course, the heighteners were civilians.

Discussing the weaknesses of the American political and economic system, Niebuhr, again prophetically, writes:

The lip service which the whole culture pays to the principles of *laissez-faire* makes for tardiness in dealing with the instability of a free economy.... Some believe that...a recurrence of such a catastrophe [the Great Depression of the 1930s] is impossible; but it is not altogether certain that this is true.... We remain an irritatingly incalculable element in world stability.

Niebuhr often uses the word "pretension" to describe a particularly undesirable state of mind for a powerful state. "The pretensions of virtue," he writes, "are as offensive to God as the pretensions of power." Pretension blinds nations "to the ambiguity of all human virtues and competencies," not to mention "the larger meanings of the drama of human existence beyond and above the immediate urgencies." And again:

This tendency is accentuated in our own day by the humorless idealism of our culture with its simple moral distinctions between good and bad nations, the good nations being those which are devoted to "liberty."

In our own day also.

It is impossible to summarize a book so strong and yet so subtle, in which every word has meaning. I have tried to extract a few of Niebuhr's ideas that seem particularly relevant today and to give some idea of the grandeur of his vision and style. In his peroration he suggests

the possibility and the necessity of living in a dimension of meaning in which the urgencies of the struggle are subordinated to a sense of awe before the vastness of the historical drama in which we are jointly involved; to a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of its perplexities; to a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities....

2.

Andrew Bacevich is a devoted disciple of Niebuhr, and his latest book is very much in the Niebuhrian spirit, which he applies with great skill and originality to the problems, mostly of our own making, that now beset the United States. Bacevich retired from the US Army as a colonel and became a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. An earlier book, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy* (2002), assailed the myth of the US as a reluctant superpower and urged it to act openly as a benevolent leader in the world. His son Andrew, to whom his present book is dedicated, was killed in Iraq in May 2007. A traditional conservative, Bacevich's style is compounded of military clarity, great eloquence, and invigorating overtones of Oliver Cromwell, Savonarola, and other inspired reformers. His book is both highly readable and enormously worth reading.

In Bacevich's account of the descent of the United States few leaders go unscathed. Both successive administrations and the people have ignored common sense in their belief that an exceptionalist America is immune from the normal process of cause and effect. The result is the triple crisis—economic and cultural, political, and military—that has now befallen the country. A quotation from Niebuhr sets the tone for Bacevich's book:

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay that leads to death has already begun.

Bacevich traces the "crisis of profligacy" in which the American way of life has outstripped the means available to satisfy it. In 1947 America's economic position was unrivaled. That moment soon passed. By 1950 the US had begun to import foreign oil, which Bacevich calls "the canary in the economic mineshaft." The first negative US trade balance occurred in 1971; in 1972 US oil production peaked; and the 1973 "oil shock" caused a 40 percent rise in gas prices. Later in the decade Jimmy Carter's warnings of "a fundamental threat to American democracy," which he described as the "worship of self-indulgence and consumption" and a "constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility," fell on deaf ears. By the 1980s the "Empire of Production" had become the "Empire of Consumption." Carter does not escape, however. Of his statement that control of the Persian Gulf was a vital US interest, Bacevich writes, "not since the Tonkin Gulf Resolution has a major statement of policy been the source of greater mischief."

Ronald Reagan has a special place in Bacevich's rogue's gallery. He is a "faux-conservative" and "the modern prophet of profligacy" who encouraged the fantasy that credit had no limits and bills would

never come due. He had a "canny knack for telling Americans what most of them wanted to hear" and presided over eight years of "gaudy prosperity and excess" based on cheap credit and cheap oil. Bacevich remarks that Reagan's beliefs "did as much to recast America's moral constitution as did sex, drugs, and rock and roll." By 1990 the United States imported 41 percent of its oil and was embroiled in the Islamic world as a result. Deficits and the national debt had soared, and the United States was no longer a creditor country. "Americans have yet to realize," Bacevich writes, "that they have forfeited command of their own destiny."

Operation Desert Storm, which ejected Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, also created a permanent US military presence in the Gulf, which, in Saudi Arabia, provided the proximate cause for the birth of al-Qaeda. After September 11, 2001, the United States was plunged into an orgy of exceptionalism—disdain for its allies and the UN, contempt for international law, and a new and unwarranted enthusiasm for preventive war, a concept that had been shunned by previous administrations.^[2] The very real limits of US power soon became clear.

As for George W. Bush's Iraq invasion, Bacevich remarks that it was originally supposed to be the first step in "a breathtakingly ambitious project of near global domination." Of Bush's posturing as commander in chief in a nation at war he comments bitterly, "Washington may have fancied itself to be at war; the nation most assuredly was not."

Bacevich maintains that, starting in 1947, an informal national security elite has caused an "atmosphere of seemingly permanent crisis" and has deprived Congress of most of its responsibilities except ensuring the reelection of its own members, whom he refers to as "narcissistic hacks." The ideological conviction of this extra-constitutional group—that America's destiny and obligation is to ensure the triumph of freedom worldwide—adds "a moral gloss that can be added to virtually any initiative by insisting that...the United States is also acting to advance the cause of freedom and democracy."

James Forrestal and Paul Nitze were founding members of this elite and of its mindset—"sounding the alarm at the drop of a hat" and favoring the worst-case scenario. In 1950 Nitze wrote NSC 68, "one of the foundational documents of postwar American statecraft." NSC 68 finds the US, then at the peak of its power and influence, in "deepest peril" and "in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history," with the possibility of "the destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself." The long-expected Chinese Revolution and the first Soviet nuclear tests apparently induced this doom-laden mood. Succeeding generations of the elite, sometimes referred to as Wise Men, have also seen the United States as perennially beset by hideous threats, often inflated and based on a misinterpretation of reality. One recalls with embarrassment Condoleezza Rice's smoking gun as mushroom cloud and other Saddam Hussein fantasies.

The resulting permanent militarization of US policy produced ever-increasing military budgets and persistent fearmongering, which, in Bacevich's phrase, became "the stock-in-trade of Wise Men from Nitze's day to the present." Bacevich pronounces the national security elite ideology, with its reliance on the false security of military power, as "American exceptionalism in its most baleful form."

As a soldier, Bacevich regards the overexpectations of America's forces after September 11 as puerile. When the Iraq war went sour, "the ills afflicting our political system, including a deeply irresponsible Congress, broken national security institutions, and above all an imperial commander-in-chief not up

to the job, became all but impossible to ignore." A vast gap existed between what George W. Bush "called upon America's soldiers to do and what they were capable of doing...." Bacevich is withering about the quality of current American generals, starting with Tommy Franks. He maintains that no general since Marshall and Eisenhower has understood Winston Churchill's dictum that "at the summit true politics and strategy are one," and writes that strategy is now a lost art, confused by civilians with ideology, by soldiers with operations. Post-cold war US military supremacy has produced—as may now be the case in Afghanistan—the prospect of open-ended conflict rather than enhanced security.

"America doesn't need a bigger army," Bacevich writes. "It needs a smaller—that is, more modest—foreign policy...." Instead of the "war on terror," containment should be tried in order to allow the Islamist threat to wither away. Efforts should be concentrated on major goals like the abolition of nuclear weapons or the reversal of climate change. His conclusion is fatalistic: "Americans appear determined to affirm Niebuhr's axiom of willful self-destruction."

3.

In *The Freedom Agenda*, James Traub eschews both the grand prophetic style of Niebuhr and the sometimes biblical thunder of Bacevich. His book is an even-tempered but critical study of America's self-imposed obligation to bring freedom and democracy to the world. The post-September 11 doctrine known as the "Freedom Agenda" derives from George W. Bush's highly debatable assertion, in his second inaugural address, that "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands." The Bush administration's promotion of the Freedom Agenda was not a success.

Bush's Freedom Agenda, Traub points out, was the latest restatement of the venerable idea that Providence had chosen Americans to ensure the blessings of liberty for all. From the occupation of the Philippines in 1898, he traces the policies and experiences that tried to make a reality of this long-held and noble belief. He discusses many basic questions, with vivid practical examples. At what stage of development can democracy be usefully introduced? Is prosperity an essential prerequisite for democracy? Can freedom exist without democracy? How important is tradition or the building of liberal institutions? How much can outsiders really help in the process of democratization? How is the United States supposed to deal with essential but autocratic allies? How did the Bush administration's encroachments on an open society at home affect the credibility of the US as a promoter of democracy abroad?

Traub's excellent book presents a fascinating account of the progress, or lack of it, of liberty. He is an imperturbable ironist, brilliantly portraying long-standing American dilemmas like copious freedom rhetoric at home alongside expedient support of repressive autocratic states abroad. He shows how education, potential prosperity, existing public and nongovernmental institutions, and, in some cases, previous experience of democratic government favor the poster states of successful democratization—Germany, Japan, and the Eastern European countries. He describes, among many fascinating examples, the failure to promote democracy in Russia and its unexpected success in Serbia.

Traub describes the "vast and frustrating undertaking" of building up failed states like Somalia, Bosnia, or East Timor. "The arc of democratic development...," he writes, "was vastly longer than the arc of international attention." African states, with virtually none of the prerequisites for democracy, present, and will continue to present, a particular problem for the promoter of democracy. Traub

contrasts the often short-lived nature of "electoral" democracy with the hardier variety of "liberal democracy," where the recognition of individual rights is already enshrined in law.

In a chapter called "Realism Died on 9/11," Traub describes the way in which the Iraq war would forever define, and discredit, Bush's Freedom Agenda, because it seemed to prove that "the president and his team of neocons believed that democracy was something that could be imposed at gunpoint...." He gives a fascinating account of the administration's doomed efforts to persuade President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to be more democratic, a cautionary tale of Washington's perennial difficulty with so-called "liberal autocracies" that are also vital allies.

Another democratic mishap with violent consequences was the 2006 Gaza election on which, against all advice, the Bush administration insisted, and which gave Hamas a lawful majority over Fatah. During the recent war in Gaza, we did not hear much about Hamas being democratically elected; except for Egypt, nobody concerned would even talk to its leaders. To paraphrase George Orwell, some lawful democratic elections are evidently more lawful than others. The Iraq war certainly diminished other Middle East countries' enthusiasm for democratization, Bush-style. It had, a reporter in Syria told Traub, accomplished what President Bashir al-Assad "had been unable to do by himself; silence public demands for democratic reforms here."

Another of Traub's striking case histories concerns Mali, one of the world's poorest countries, which, against all probability, clings to its own version of democracy, in which, in addition to national elections, village elders are capable of settling local disputes peaceably in the shade of the mosque. Traub's comments on Africa and China, whose "new type of strategic partnership" in African countries offers a less moralistic approach to aid for Africans, are particularly valuable in stressing how much prolonged assistance in development and poverty reduction will be needed before African democracy can take hold.

James Traub has written a thoughtful and splendidly informed book on a vast subject that in the wrong hands can very easily become elusive, even boring. As he writes in conclusion, "Liberty at home may not depend on liberty abroad, but it surely depends on a sense of hope and possibility abroad." His book is very much in tune with the content and the tone of the new administration's ideas, and it should be a valuable guidebook for those working on them. It can also be read with enjoyment and great interest by anyone hoping for ways to make the world more livable for all its inhabitants.

4.

The excellence, in their different ways, of these three books raises the tantalizing question of how books can help or inspire leaders and others in public life. Reinhold Niebuhr has been a strong influence for many years. Andrew Bacevich's brilliantly expressed perceptions should clarify and invigorate the minds of busy politicians at a critical moment in history. James Traub's assessment of the state of America's self-imposed mission to spread freedom and democracy should be of great practical value to all who work in this controversial and complex field.

In a democracy the people need to be informed if they are to fulfill their duties as citizens. May we now be entering a renewal of participatory American democracy? If we are not, we shall be in even greater trouble than we are now.

The fatalism of Bacevich's final sentence about Americans being firmly set on self-destruction is deeply disturbing, as no doubt it was intended it to be. Since his book was published, the presidential election has shown how intelligent use of the Internet can bring together an enthusiastic and disciplined body of volunteers and bring young people in large numbers back into politics. There is now talk of using the Obama campaign's online network to foster support for his legislative program and presidential initiatives. Brilliant and essential political analysis by writers like the three reviewed here could be a useful part of such initiatives.

Bacevich suggests that the acknowledgment of the truth of the following Niebuhr principle would be a useful standard for election or appointment to public office: "The whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management." That might also be a good start for a renaissance of knowledgeable democratic participation.

Notes

^[1] On the back cover:

[Niebuhr] is one of my favorite philosophers. I take away [from his works] the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. —Senator Barack Obama

(Obama's comments originally appeared in an interview with David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2007.)

^[2] In a more recent book, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (Yale University Press, 2009), the British journalist and historian of America Godfrey Hodgson writes, from his long experience in the US:

My thesis is not that American exceptionalist thought is intrinsically corrupting or that it was destructive in the past, but that what has been an essentially liberating series of beliefs has been corrupted over the last thirty years or so by hubris and self-interest into what is now a dangerous basis for national policy and for the international system.