

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is one of a handful of modern theologians who can sit at the crossroads of politics, international relations, philosophy, ethics, and religion. Examining a few key essays and a few commentaries about Niebuhr reveals a deeply religious and intelligent man who centers his arguments around the key themes of justice, action, morality, and the finite nature of man. The following is a brief review of the key elements of the essays considered with some commentary regarding impact are areas where Niebuhr influenced thought regarding democracy and the role of the United States as a world power in the 20th century.

Beginning with his essay *Our Secularized Civilization*, written in 1926, Niebuhr was on the battlefield of Purcell's *Crisis of Democratic Theory* as he railed against the negative influences of scientific discovery and the over-reliance on science which weakened religion and morality. He cautioned that optimism and confidence in the future of religion was very much in doubt as science attempted to place society beyond ethical control declaring, "The fact is that we are living in a completely secularized civilization." His concern is not a particular attack on science *per se* nor is it simply an exhortation to Protestantism to grapple with the reality that science must be understood as a part of the mystery of the universe. He is warning that "scientific discovery... weaken[s] not only religious but ethical values." Because, he continues, "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." No matter how much "mastery of nature" we achieve, humans cannot escape the fact that there remains a mystery to the universe and he feels that God is the source of that mystery. Therefore, "to identify God with automatic processes is to destroy the God of conscience..."

He calls for a return to medievalism to save humanity. He calls for a reliance on the mystery of God to remind humans that they are not the masters of the world and that there are choices which must be made in under the veil of the divine mystery. The acceptance of divine mystery is the foundation for his principle of justice. In the mysterious and unknowable universe with a wholly unknowable God, there remains choice, not calculus and formula. In that choice, he argues that (Protestantism above others) solutions to the “major social sins of our day, economic greed and race hatred” can be found.

Continuing to leverage his fundamental belief in justice as the motivating force behind required action, Niebuhr writes *The Irony of American History* in 1952 in the face of a rapidly escalating Cold War. In seeking justice, he adopts a position that would be classified as neoconservative today in declaring that America must accept the risk of destroying herself in nuclear war to protect herself: “Though confident of its virtue, it must yet hold atomic bombs ready for use so as to prevent a possible world conflagration.” Communism is a moral evil that represses the divine design of man. It is an absolutist regime that rejects God and rejects the mystery of the universe in the overt claims that history has been defeated and all ills are solvable through science. “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.” The absolute nature of communism makes it more dangerous, Niebuhr writes, and will ultimately be its downfall. Until it falls, America must stand firm and act to prevent its spread. He describes America on a continuum of maturity that, by 1952, has presented it with a challenge on whether and how to wield power, “Our culture knows little of the use and the abuse of power; but we have to use power in global terms.”

The challenge to unilateral power is the charge of hypocrisy. To this he offers an apology. He admits that the United States is “schizophrenic upon the subject of power” and warns that justice is the overriding goal while acknowledging, courtesy of the theological concept of original sin, sin occurs in all

action. Matthew Berke comments in 1992 that Niebuhr's point is, "power cannot be wielded without guilt," since "we cannot do good without also doing evil." Niebuhr says in 1952, "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." Justice, over all, is the priority. And in New Deal fashion, justice can best be obtained by collective action.

Another nod to the omnipresent mystery of the universe, he ascribes a certain mystery to democracy to aid in the battle against communism. "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." It is the "confusion" that keeps democracy safe and the dispersion that prevents monopoly.

This barely scrapes the surface of the material available in these short essays, but a distillation of Niebuhr's key points remains useful: justice requires action; science informs us of the mystery of the universe, but does not solve it; mystery is critical and foundational; and action while acknowledging sin is not hypocrisy, it is accepting the fundamental truth that sin exists and action is still required. The associated commentaries attached repeat these core themes and leave this reader with the overriding conviction that the world is a messy place. There are no formulas for infinite solution. As novelist Douglas Adams might lament, there is no answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything. In that ordained chaos, there is hope and opportunity for democratic action to take hold. Mistakes will happen. But in the search for justice, action relies on a measure of faith in democracy and in God while being informed by science and is a burden best shared with others.

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