

Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics

God and Power

Edited by

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Introduction

Richard Harries

Barack Obama, somewhat fatigued, was being interviewed yet again when out of the blue he was asked ‘Have you ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?’ Obama’s tone changed. ‘I love him. He’s one of my favourite philosophers.’ When asked what he took away from Niebuhr, he answered in a rush of words:

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 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.¹

For a tired man moving rapidly from one event to another, that is a brilliant summary of the heart of Niebuhr’s approach to politics.

Barak Obama is simply the latest in a long line of senior politicians and distinguished political theorists who have been influenced by Niebuhr. In Great Britain, to take just one example, Dennis Healey had in the 1930s been a member of the Communist Party. When he left he retained a strong moral vision and a desire to change society for the better without losing his grasp of the economic realities of life that Marxism had provided. He, and many others, found in Niebuhr an understanding of humanity and society and a structure of thought in which moral vision and a tough realism could be held together. As Healey has written:

The years I spent in the wartime army deepened my interest in the spiritual side of reality. After the war I was much impressed by Christian theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Nicolas Berdjajev. They confirmed my belief in democratic socialism and rooted it firmly in realism about human nature and society—though they did not persuade me to believe in a personal God!²

¹ David Brooks, *New York Times*, 27 Apr. 2007.

² Letter to Richard Harries, 14 Oct. 2006.

For obvious reasons the influence of Niebuhr in the United States has been even more pronounced. Jimmy Carter kept a collection of Niebuhr's writings by his bedside, calling it his 'political bible' and many other major political figures like Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey have acknowledged his influence. 'Niebuhr is the father of us all', said George Kennan whilst Hans Morgenthau, himself a respected political philosopher, wrote: 'I have always considered Reinhold Niebuhr the greatest living political philosopher in America.'

In the early stages of his ministry Niebuhr published *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*,³ reflecting his experience in the growing industrial city of Detroit from 1915 to 1928. The jottings in the notebook reveal an unblinking awareness of the realities of life both in himself and in the people around him. This realism never left him and sometimes people found it difficult to reconcile with their understanding of the Christian faith. It is noteworthy that in the 1930s SCM Press (noted for their liberal publishing policy) refused to publish *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, on the grounds that they thought it was not a Christian book.

But this realism, if sometimes steely, was neither brutal nor cynical. The title says it all. Niebuhr saw himself as a *tamed cynic*, and one crucial element of his thinking was designed to stop people simply being content with realism or, worse, slipping over from realism into cynicism. It is not surprising therefore that with this deliberate tension in Niebuhr's thought he has been claimed by different groups for their own purposes. In the 1980s, for example, the New Right looked to him as a progenitor, ignoring the strong social vision that Niebuhr never repudiated or lost.⁴ It is important to keep *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* in view when interpreting Niebuhr, even though Niebuhr ostensibly set it aside, for, combined with his realism, it sets out Niebuhr's prophetic Christian vision.

In recent years in particular Niebuhr has been differently interpreted and Robin Lovin (Chapter 1) begins by setting him in historical perspective. Whilst very appreciative of his approach, he suggests that Niebuhr underestimated the power latent in the hopes and dreams of the oppressed, and therefore had a too limited view of what might be possible. The result was that he was too cautious at first both about the civil rights movement and about the folly of American involvement in Vietnam. However, he defends Niebuhr against the criticism of Hauerwas that he was totally blind to the way he shared the assumptions of his time and suggests that an ethic of responsibility

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Meridian, 1957).

⁴ 'The new Right attitude is "unnuanced" . . . in a way quite foreign to Niebuhr's thought' (Ronald Preston, 'Reinhold Niebuhr and the New Right', in Richard Harries (ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of our Time* (London: Mowbray, 1986), 102).

can still serve us well. Mac McCorkle (Chapter 2) also looks at how Niebuhr has been variously interpreted and in his chapter shows up the falsity of a number of stereotypical readings.

A conference on Niebuhr was held in London in 1984, followed by a book of essays on him in relation to the issues of that time because it was felt that his theological insights into political realities were much needed and were not receiving proper attention. That was even more true at the height of the influence of the Christian right on the Bush administration and it provoked Arthur Schlesinger, one of the distinguished figures in America much influenced by Niebuhr,⁵ to write a major article for the *New York Times* which was headlined 'Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr: Why has the supreme American theologian of the 20th century dropped out of our religious discourse?'⁶ As well as setting out the main tenets of Niebuhr's thinking and its influence in America in his lifetime, he lamented the fact that not just the religious right, but Christian liberals at that time were ignoring Niebuhr, much to the detriment of their thought. Schlesinger wrote: 'Maybe Niebuhr has fallen out of fashion because 9/11 has revived the myth of our national innocence. . . . Niebuhr was a critic of national innocence, which he regarded as a delusion.'

In fact a Niebuhrian revival was just about beginning at that time, as McCorkle shows. It is in the conviction that this revival is very much needed, and that Niebuhr's thought is still applicable to a whole range of contemporary modern political dilemmas, that this present book has been written. It is both interesting and revealing that Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*⁷ has just been reprinted, with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich which calls it 'the most important book ever written on US foreign policy'.

Niebuhr's approach to political and economic issues was rooted in a carefully thought through Christian understanding of human beings in society. This foundational element in his thought is explored and evaluated by Jean Elsthain (Chapter 3). However, in recent years there has been some strong criticism of Niebuhr from people who believe this foundational position is deeply flawed, and who think that as a result Niebuhr has a wrong understanding of the relationship between the Christian community and the wider society in which it is set. Such criticisms are particularly associated with Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank and we thought it important that they should be reflected in this book and evaluated. The essays by Ben Quash

⁵ Arthur Schlesinger promised to write about the influence Niebuhr had on his own thought for this volume, but sadly he died before being able to do so.

⁶ Arthur Schlesinger, *New York Times*, 18 Sept. 2005.

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Review by Brian Urquart in the *New York Review of Books*, 26 Mar. 2009.

(Chapter 4) and Samuel Wells (Chapter 5), who are in part sympathetic to such criticisms of Niebuhr, provide this element.

Other criticisms of Niebuhr include the fact that his ecclesiology is either non-existent or thin, and he has virtually nothing to say about Christian liturgy and its relationship to his political stance. The first subject is considered by Wendy Dackson (Chapter 6), who suggests that what Niebuhr had was an outsider's view of the church, and that this might be particularly useful for us today, if we can build on its implications by taking seriously the humility such a perspective presupposes. Stephen Platten (Chapter 7) argues that it is a mistake to understand liturgy as being enacted in a place of withdrawal from society. Liturgy is a public event with a relationship to public life. If this is understood it ought to be possible to have a much more integral relationship between the kind of political theology represented by Niebuhr and liturgy as performative and transformational for society as a whole.

One of the fundamental features of Niebuhr's political theology was the importance he placed on the concept of sin, not least in its corporate aspect. In our time, however, the concept of sin, at least in Europe, has virtually disappeared from discourse. Martyn Percy (Chapter 8) argues that the concept of sin is still vital for a true understanding of human beings in society, and suggests a way in which sense can be made of it for our time.

The concept of Christian hope was also important for Niebuhr, but Ian Markham (Chapter 9) rightly distinguishes this from all forms of utopianism about which Niebuhr was highly critical. He argues that the neo-conservative years were driven by a utopian hope that the years of 'boom and bust' were ended for ever. This has now been exposed for the folly it was. At the same time we must beware of developing utopian hopes about what state action can achieve in this time of crisis. Christian hope urges us to work for a better world, but always with an awareness of our limitation and fallibility as human beings.

One of the major themes in this book is the relationship between the radical teaching of Jesus and the brutal political realities of the world in which we live. Nigel Biggar (Chapter 10) considers this in relation to the tension that is felt between the call to forgive and the demands of justice. Whilst appreciating Niebuhr he believes that by careful analysis of the nature of forgiveness, it is possible to go further than Niebuhr in bringing forgiveness and justice together.

Richard Harries (Chapter 11) considers Niebuhr's defense of liberal democracy and argues that he did not give a firm enough theological foundation to the first part of his famous aphorism, namely that 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible.' He then considers the criticism of Oliver O'Donovan who, whilst regarding democracy as good for our own society rejects the idea that it is of universal validity and applicability. Harries

suggests to the contrary, that whilst rejecting any hint of imperialism, there are elements within liberal democracy that are fundamental to a Christian view of every society.

Anatol Lieven (Chapter 12) considers the tension between realists and progressives in American policy and argues that Niebuhr's approach is still needed to avoid a triumphalist moralism on the one hand, and an inadequate realism on the other. John D. Carlson (Chapter 13) considers the issues in relation to humanitarian interventions, arguing that moral compassion without a sense of the political realities can be disastrous. He also looks at Niebuhr's ethical realism in relation to the Just War tradition as represented for example by Paul Ramsey.

During George W. Bush's administration the religious right was a dominant influence. At the same time, other evangelicals have been critical of this identification of evangelicalism with the Republican cause and have called for a stronger social message based on the Gospel. Kevin Carnahan (Chapter 14) considers this development and argues that to be effective this brand of evangelicalism must take on board both Niebuhr's criticism of the evangelicals of his time and some of his abiding insights about the application of the Christian faith to public affairs.

One of the most pressing challenges of our time is how different religions can live peacefully together. Wilfred M. McClay (Chapter 15) explores the contribution that Niebuhr's fundamental approach to conflict might make to this and identifies some insights which seem both illuminating and potentially helpful to the issue. However, as he shows, the basis of Niebuhr's approach to pluralism is in fact deeply rooted in assumptions that belong to the Western Christian tradition: one is the conviction about the universality of original sin; the other is the imperative towards progress, albeit on Niebuhr's highly qualified form of understanding of such progress. This poses, in an acute way, the question of whether Niebuhr's basis for a fruitful pluralism can in fact exist without those religious assumptions, and even more somberly, whether religious pluralism is even possible.

It seems appropriate that this note, in the final contribution, should be somber and salutary, forcing us, in true Niebuhrian mode, to think more critically about our own tradition and draw more deeply from the wells of Christian faith. It is the hope of the editors of this book that these chapters will help us do this.

Richard Harries
London, 2009

Reinhold Niebuhr in Historical Perspective

Robin W. Lovin

In 1932, Reinhold Niebuhr made his reputation as a fierce critic of American Protestant liberalism. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he subjected the work of his immediate predecessors to withering social and economic analysis and dismissed the hopes cherished by a generation of Social Gospel reformers as sentimental illusions, unsupported either by social reality or by genuine theology.¹ Later, he came to a more moderate position, appreciative of the contributions of those who had gone before him, but still clear that they were so closely tied to a modern understanding of historical progress that they could not identify the points where biblical faith parts company with it. In a 1958 article titled ‘Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective’, he shows how the leading theologian of the Social Gospel accommodated the Christian doctrine of original sin to the historical materialist’s notion that individual ideas and actions are the product of social structures. But he also acknowledges that it is difficult to transcend the assumptions of one’s time, and he even recognizes that some of his own early criticisms were rooted in the same assumptions that shaped Rauschenbusch’s work.² Rauschenbusch saw historical progress beyond the present social crisis. Niebuhr expected a social catastrophe that would be the necessary prelude to social reconstruction. But both of them shared the modern assumption that the meaning of history is available to those who live in it. There was more continuity between the

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). See especially 68–72. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was first published in 1932.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective’, in *Faith and Politics*, ed. Ronald Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 40. This essay originally appeared in Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective’, *Religion in Life*, 27 (Autumn 1958), 527–36.

liberals and their critics than the critics could see at the time, Niebuhr concludes.

Niebuhr might appreciate the irony that his own work was judged harshly by a younger generation that followed him in the pulpit, political activism, and the seminary classroom. Some of the criticism began in the late 1960s, when the rapid pace of change made Niebuhr's earlier caution about legal challenges to racial segregation seem like an apology for the status quo. Similar criticisms followed as feminist writers noted the conventional assumptions about gender roles in his writings and suggested that even his characteristic emphasis on the sin of pride assumed that the important moral failings and temptations are those faced by men in positions of power.³ A second wave of criticisms pronounced Niebuhr's work theologically unsatisfactory. His willingness to compromise, to accept the lesser of two evils as measured by some secular, consequentialist standard reveals an indifference to the radical demand of the Gospel. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, Christians are called to be faithful, not effective. 'Christians are engaged in politics, but it is a politics of the kingdom that reveals the insufficiency of all politics based on coercion and falsehood and finds the true source of power in servanthood rather than dominion.'⁴

The terms in which Niebuhr is criticized sound curiously like his own judgments on Protestant liberalism. Indeed, from this new perspective, Niebuhr tends to disappear into the liberal background. The decisive moment that signals the arrival of a newer and truer theology is shifted to some other time—the emergence of liberation movements in the 1970s. Renewal is found in some other place—the Barthian theology of the Word, rather than the residual liberalism of Niebuhrian realism. In the hands of these critics, Niebuhr's work is not so much discarded as it is rendered obsolete by its entanglements with secular values that no longer claim the attention of serious Christians. Stanley Hauerwas pronounces the judgment: 'Niebuhr's work now represents the worst of two worlds: most secular people do not find his arguments convincing; yet his theology is not sufficient to provide the

³ On Niebuhr and the civil rights movement, see Herbert O. Edwards, 'Racism and Christian Ethics in America', *Katallagete* (Winter 1971), 15–24; and Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 39–41. For the feminist critique, see Valerie Saiving Goldstein, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960), 100–12; Daphne Hampson, 'Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique', in Richard Harries (ed.), *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 46–60.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 102.

means for Christians to sustain their lives . . . Niebuhr's theology reflects the loss of truthful Christian speech and, hence, of faithful Christian practice.⁵

It would be a mistake to count Niebuhr out, however, especially among 'secular people' who increasingly find his assessment of the limits of power and his arguments for self-restraint newly relevant to global politics in the post-Cold War era.⁶ Even some of Niebuhr's theological critics now make use of his critique of the quasi-religious claims of imperial powers, and with the passage of time, we see his imprint more clearly on all the ways in which religious thinkers have understood the relations between faith and politics.⁷

Perhaps, then, it is time to put Reinhold Niebuhr in historical perspective, in the same way that Niebuhr himself arrived at a more balanced appreciation of Walter Rauschenbusch and the generation that brought American Protestantism through the years of 'social crisis' and the First World War. By this, I do not mean that we should seek some sort of neutral standpoint from which to locate Niebuhr objectively and permanently in relation to the flow of historical and theological change. I intend, rather, to treat Niebuhr's work with the same sort of Christian realism that he himself eventually applied to Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel. What follows, then, is a Niebuhrian view of Niebuhr and his critics which seeks to recognize both continuity and difference and to further our own reflections on what it means to be realistic about our place in history.

HOPE

Feminist and liberation theologians questioned whether Niebuhr's 'Christian realism' could be realistic enough, given his entanglements with the centers of political and economic power in the Cold War years. Niebuhr's commitments to American democracy were never uncritical, but he tended to accept the social limitations placed on women and legalized discrimination against African Americans as lesser evils when compared to the general loss of freedom in totalitarian systems. Even when he opposed the more egregious

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 139–40.

⁶ See especially Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, *Ethical Realism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008). Bacevich has also provided a new introduction to Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁷ Robin Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19–42.

forms of discrimination, his concern for order made him reluctant to move vigorously against them. His views on gender and the role of women remained grounded in the physical differences that structure relationships in heterosexual families.⁸ His enthusiasm for the end of legalized racial segregation was tempered by a fear that massive resistance by white Southern culture would wipe out the incremental gains that could be made in Federal courts and the Congress, or that impatient African Americans and idealistic whites would demand too much, too fast, producing a reaction that would actually slow progress.⁹

Niebuhr's critics concluded that he lacked the capacity to see the world through the eyes of the oppressed. As a result, his realism about the possibilities and limits of change reinforced the existing structures of power. In historical perspective, we must acknowledge that these critics were right in important ways. Because they were involved in local, grass-roots movements where political identities are formed and new ideas gain strength, the critics saw something that Niebuhr did not see, even when it was happening in Harlem, a short distance from his home at Union Theological Seminary.¹⁰ Niebuhr neglected such movements in his assessments of power, but they proved decisive in setting the pace of change, first in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, then in ending apartheid in South Africa, and finally in toppling Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Today's Niebuhrian realists have to take this failure of Niebuhr's realism into account. We may hesitate to affirm a 'hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed' that accepts their view of reality uncritically, but in a realistic assessment of the possibilities for change, the hopes and aspirations of people in their local communities, churches, and cultures have to figure in the calculation. Barack Obama's rapid rise from community organizer to the presidency is one indication of why a new kind of Niebuhrian realism needs to take account of these resources. Established systems of power have an obvious role in shaping events, but shared hope is not a negligible force in social life, especially when that hope is articulated by someone who has shared direct experience with the people who hold it. Hope is not the naive optimism for which Niebuhr criticized his liberal Protestant contemporaries. Hope is closer to the 'essential freedom' that must be recognized by any lasting

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 75.

⁹ See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, 'The Effect of the Supreme Court Decision', *Christianity and Crisis* 17 (4 Feb. 1957), 3; 'Civil Rights and Democracy', *Christianity and Crisis* 17 (8 Jul. 1957), 88.

¹⁰ See Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3–35.

political system.¹¹ The freedoms protected by law in a stable democracy are less the results of politics than its preconditions. Human beings are capable of imagining other possibilities, no matter how limited their actual choices may be. They dream of other things in songs and prayers, in the lives they want for their children, and in the words they want to say to their neighbors and to those in authority, long before the law tells them what they may or may not do.

Niebuhr's fully developed argument for democracy rests on the way that this freedom of consciousness requires political freedom.¹² It is one of the points at which his political thought recognizes constraints that are very much like requirements of natural law. No police power can repress all talk of change, just as no ideology can render a different order of things unthinkable. Over the long run, that is part of what makes democracy more stable and more adaptable than the totalitarian systems that seem at first to exercise a tighter control over people and events. Totalitarian politics flies in the face of the realities of human nature.

Niebuhr spoke of 'essential freedom'. He might also have spoken of 'hope', although he rarely did so.¹³ Even people without knowledge or power know that the system that oppresses them is not as permanent as it pretends to be. No one can impose a direction on us and call it necessary, or demand that we accept it as inevitable. People do not arrive at hope by a careful calculation of their political chances. They maintain hope against the odds, even when totalitarian constraints seem for the moment to be successful. This irrepressible hope is unsettling for those who prefer the way that things happen to be going now, but it is empowering for those who seek conditions of life more suited to their sense of their own dignity and possibilities.

Niebuhr thus had the resources for an account of hope that affirms the aspirations of ordinary people and their ability to change their surroundings, despite the forces that give prevailing social arrangements a sense of permanence, even rightness, that is difficult to overcome. That is why community organizers and grassroots movements for change have drawn heavily on Niebuhr's thought in recent years,¹⁴ although Niebuhr himself had doubts

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Freedom', in *Faith and Politics*, 81. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence* (New York: Scribner's, 1972), 3.

¹² See Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 123–8.

¹³ A more extensive study of these possibilities is found in John K. Burk, 'The Foundation of Hope: An Examination of Christian Realism as the Basis for Hope in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr' (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2008), 151–87.

¹⁴ See Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1990), 69–78.

about the prospects for some movements for peace and racial justice that were active during the last two decades of his life.

His political realism perhaps made him hesitant to rely too much on this hope, for while freedom is essential, its triumph is not inevitable. Power cannot control the sources of hope, but hope cannot overcome oppression without acquiring some countervailing power. Niebuhr was clear about that point already in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and his insistence on it provided important guidance to Martin Luther King, Jr., as he began his non-violent campaign for civil rights in the American South.¹⁵

By the time King had studied and adapted *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, however, Niebuhr was less confident in the direction of historical change and more clear that the meaning of history lies in a judgment beyond history. Niebuhr continued to believe in the strategic value of his ideas about power, but he now set them in the context of a divine reality that transcends our strategies and evaluations. As Langdon Gilkey put it,

Unless the meaning of life in the midst of its passage is perfectly clear and fully secure—and [Niebuhr] has surely shown that it is not—then the presence of the power and mercy of God at the Beginning and at the End, to complete what we cannot complete and purge what we have corrupted, are the sole grounds for any real hope.¹⁶

Niebuhr's conviction that the judgment of God lies beyond history protects those who risk change from despair when their hopes are disappointed. But it makes a Christian realist more cautious about the calculation of political forces than a liberal Protestant who shares the modern conviction that the direction of history is determined and can be known. It was not just the conservatism of old age that made Niebuhr cautious. It was the wariness of one who knows that history can move backward as well as forward. A movement for change that sparks massive resistance may be crushed, and the hope that seemed within reach may then be lost for decades.

Niebuhr's caution at these points can seem like pure consequentialism, ready to acquiesce in injustice if that seems the lesser evil. This is particularly true when we know in hindsight that the risks run by Freedom Riders in Mississippi, Anti-Apartheid marchers in South Africa, and the citizens of Prague, Warsaw, and Leipzig produced changes out of all proportion to a political realist's reasonable expectations. The problem with consequentialism is that the results of a new strategy, applied on a large scale, are impossible to

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail', in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 292.

¹⁶ Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 222.

predict. Niebuhr was no better at those predictions than anyone else. His realism was most effective in analyzing the constraints on decisions from the perspective of those who have to make them, avoiding temptations to claim too much mastery of events, with too much certainty about one's own virtue and too little imagination for how the situation looks to one's adversaries. He could think his way into the situation of politicians and diplomats after the Second World War, but age and ill health gave him too little time in church basements with civil rights leaders and community organizers, where he might have seen for himself the power of hope that today's Niebuhrian realists have to take more seriously.¹⁷

The first group of Niebuhr's critics thus leaves us with the suggestion that his ethical analysis is detached from the situation of the poor and marginalized, too distant to understand the power of hope in a concrete situation. This may have been partly the result of age and experience, but it owes something, too, to the development of his theological thinking, which comes to place more emphasis on God's judgment beyond history than on the ambiguous moral directions within the movements of history. This avoids despair, but Niebuhr's critics appropriately ask whether it is sufficient to sustain real hope.

JUDGMENT

By contrast, a second group of critics argues that Niebuhr is entirely too closely tied to his own time and place. Their complaint is the opposite of the feminist and liberation critics. They argue that Niebuhr lacks the theological distance required to proclaim an authentic word of judgment.

Stanley Hauerwas is perhaps the most prominent of these critics, and he has made the most extended effort to understand Niebuhr on Niebuhr's own terms before launching his critique.¹⁸ For Hauerwas, the key to understanding Niebuhr is the pragmatic understanding of religion, which he first explored in a B.D. thesis on William James. According to Hauerwas, James' account of religious experience remained central to Niebuhr's thought for the rest of his career. In James' understanding of religion, God is limited by the bounds of experience that all persons share. There is no place for a Word that breaks into our experience and disrupts its unity and order. Niebuhr's

¹⁷ See Reinhold Niebuhr, 'A View of Life from the Sidelines', in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert M. Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 250–7.

¹⁸ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 87–140.

theology, Hauerwas argues, is thus reduced to saying what everyone needs to believe to make sense of experience. 'It appears that for Niebuhr, God is nothing more than the name of our need to believe that life has an ultimate unity that transcends the world's chaos and makes possible what we can achieve in this life.'¹⁹ A pragmatist's theology is necessarily confined to what everyone already believes, at least implicitly. By contrast, the central affirmations of Christian theology 'cannot help but appear a "confessional" assertion that is unintelligible to anyone who is not already a Christian.'²⁰ Niebuhr's work thus enjoys an immediate resonance with the culture to which it is first delivered, but it loses power and influence as that cultural context becomes more distant.

Because we are trying to understand Reinhold Niebuhr in historical perspective, it should give us pause that Hauerwas' criticism of Niebuhr is very similar to the one Niebuhr levels at Rauschenbusch, whose work, he says, 'proves how vulnerable we are to the illusions of our generation.'²¹ In historical perspective, it seems, each generation seeks a theology that escapes the limits of history and culture, and their successors always say they failed to find it. But Niebuhr lived long enough to recognize this pattern, and he tried not simply to repeat it.

During the 1930s, Niebuhr moved rapidly through three ways of thinking about the meaning of historical events that carried him a considerable distance beyond the pragmatism that he had studied at Yale. First, at the beginning of the decade, he thought that the economic depression and political unrest that spread around the globe after the First World War were manifestations of deeper historical forces that were bringing bourgeois civilization to an end. The theologian's task was to face up to these hard realities and dispense with the sentimental illusions of liberalism. That was the message of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and, even more, of *Reflections on the End of an Era*.²²

His quest for understanding moved on quite quickly to a second, different objective. What was needed was not a way of understanding events from within, but a place to stand apart from them. So he turned with a new seriousness to theology, in search of 'an independent Christian ethic' that would provide a basis for choice and action uncompromised by Protestant liberalism and more relevant to modern life than Protestant orthodoxy.²³ *An*

¹⁹ Ibid. 131.

²⁰ Ibid. 15.

²¹ Niebuhr, 'Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective', 42.

²² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner's, 1934).

²³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 1–3. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* was first published in 1935.

Interpretation of Christian Ethics worked this out in great detail, arguing that the ethics of Jesus transcends all ordinary moral choices and yet remains relevant as an ‘impossible ideal.’²⁴ We are able to understand what justice is, and even in some measure to do it, by reference to a divine standard which transcends the world’s chaos, in which competing interests are ultimately reconciled. Or, to put the matter more precisely, we are able to understand ethics only in light of Jesus’ ability to see the world wholly in light of that ultimate judgment. The author of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, who declares that ‘obligation can be felt only to some system of coherence and some ordering will,’²⁵ still sounds like the pragmatist Hauerwas criticizes in *With the Grain of the Universe*, but he is now seeking his coherences in a prophetic faith that supplies what human experience of the moral life cannot. In that, he also sounds like Hauerwas in his search for an independent Christian ethic.

That quixotic idealism did not last long. To understand Niebuhr’s final assessment of Walter Rauschenbusch and of his own early writings, it is essential to see a third change, as his thinking developed from *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* to the Gifford Lectures of 1939–40.²⁶ Niebuhr comes to see that the aspiration for an independent Christian ethic is theologically unsatisfactory when it leads us to think that we can participate in God’s judgments on particular events, even by way of approximation. Human freedom gives us the capacity to make history, but not to escape from it. This duality of finitude and freedom, which Christianity understands better than any of the ancient or modern alternatives, preserves a meaningful moral life, but does not allow us to complete it. Indeed, it is our efforts at premature completion that fall most directly under divine judgment.

The Christian faith affirms that the same Christ who discloses the sovereignty of God over history is also the perfect norm of human nature . . . As the revelation of the paradoxical relation of the divine justice and mercy, He discloses the ultimate mystery of the relation of the divine to history. This revelation clarifies the meaning of history; for the judgment of God preserves the distinction of good and evil in history; and the mercy of God finally overcomes the sinful corruption in which man is involved at

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) 62–83.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 63.

²⁶ Much later, Niebuhr summarily dismissed *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* as the product of an early period in his thinking about Christian ethics that he no longer wished to defend. See Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘Reply to Interpretation and Criticism’, in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 434–5. The Gifford Lectures were first published in 1941 and 1943 as Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

every level of moral achievement by reason of his false and abortive efforts to complete his own life and history.²⁷

The resolution of history's conflicts can only be known from a point which lies outside history and which is, to that extent, beyond reason as well. God's judgment stands beyond the inadequacies and contradictions in our judgments, and there is no formula by which the distance between them can be measured to calibrate our response. God's judgment is eschatological, not dialectical.²⁸

It is important not to be misled at this point by criticisms of Niebuhr's earlier theology, which located God more clearly within the boundaries of human experience and the comprehension of human reason. Niebuhr is at one here with Karl Barth and other theological contemporaries, who sought to place God beyond the reach of political ideologies that would claim the right to remake history in their own image. Like Barth, Niebuhr will allow no appeal to our own reason or our own righteousness to justify our choices in ultimate terms. We are completely dependent on God's mercy to 'complete what we cannot complete and purge what we have corrupted', as Gilkey puts it.²⁹

To summarize the development of Niebuhr's thinking, then, he continues to believe that the meaning of history lies beyond history, not within it. But he no longer thinks, as he did briefly around the time of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, that the judgment that gives meaning to history provides us with the starting point for an independent Christian ethic. Indeed, he now questions whether such independence of our contemporaries, our circumstances, and the thinking of those who have gone before us is possible.

RESPONSIBILITY

It is at this point that Niebuhr returns to pragmatism, not as a way to locate God in human experience, but as a way to handle the specifically human choices that must not be confused with divine judgments. It is this return to politics that distinguishes Niebuhr from Barth, without diminishing the theological emphasis on divine judgment that the two share.

Pragmatism now takes the form of 'responsibility', an idea that became increasingly important to Niebuhr and to ecumenical social ethics in the years

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, II.68.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 2. See Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 213–22.

²⁹ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 222. See p. 1. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.

after the Second World War.³⁰ Responsibility involves us in judgments that can only be made in light of particular circumstances and social relationships. Awareness of God's ultimate judgment keeps us from defining the scope of responsibility too narrowly or taking our accountability lightly, but theology does not make the choices for us. That is why, for Niebuhr, a 'critical attitude', which brings every course of action under God's judgment, must be paired with a 'responsible attitude, which will not pretend to be God nor refuse to make a decision between political answers to a problem because each answer is discovered to contain a moral ambiguity in God's sight'.³¹

It is no easy task to put Reinhold Niebuhr in historical perspective, especially if we think about history in his way. To make a responsible judgment about the way he related to his times, we have to understand our own. These conclusions can never be final, but we have enough distance to stand a little apart from the early critics who sometimes saw Niebuhr's realism as a defense of the existing order. We may also want to create more intellectual distance between ourselves and the contemporary critics who find Niebuhr insufficiently theological.

We view Reinhold Niebuhr in historical perspective from the other side of a remarkable period in history in which movements of people with little apparent power toppled systems of segregation and apartheid and finally undid the 'structure of nations and empires' that provided the terms in which Niebuhr thought about global politics.³² Those developments were unprecedented, and they may over the longer run prove to have been unique. But no one who claims to be a realist about the forces of change can hedge the power of hope with as many constraints as Niebuhr placed on it when the civil rights movement in the United States was just beginning, when courts and legislatures were still trying to undo the structures of legalized segregation. A realist now may be more hopeful than Niebuhr was. Indeed, it would be unrealistic and irresponsible to repeat Niebuhr's caution in his own terms, as though nothing much had happened since then. The field for responsible politics is much larger today than it was in Niebuhr's time, both within the United States and on a global scale.

Niebuhr's theological critics, however, find this new reality irrelevant to Christian politics. The task of Christian politics remains what it has always been: It reveals 'the insufficiency of all politics based on coercion and

³⁰ See, for example, Study Department of the World Council of Churches, *The Responsible Society* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1949).

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Theology and Political Thought in the Western World', in *Faith and Politics*, 56.

³² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

falsehood', as Stanley Hauerwas puts it.³³ The problem that 'all politics based on coercion and falsehood' becomes for Hauerwas the field of politics generally. 'All social orders and institutions to a greater and lesser extent are built on the lie that we, not God, are the masters of our existence.'³⁴ The key point is the ubiquity of the lie. Questions of degree, the 'greater and lesser extent', do not figure in the subsequent moral evaluation.

Here, then, we come to the central difference between Niebuhr and his theological critics. Both sides share the theological judgment that political systems tempt leaders and people to think that they are more righteous and less vulnerable than they really are. All political systems do this, ancient and modern, democratic and totalitarian. Reinhold Niebuhr does not disagree on this point. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he gives one of the most compelling modern expressions of it.³⁵ What he insists, however, is that responsible choices between relative goods and evils must still be made, 'even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history, and probably no pure evil either'.³⁶ Nothing about those responsible choices justifies them in the face of God's ultimate judgment on all politics, but that judgment does not relieve us of the burden of the proximate choices. 'The fate of civilizations may depend upon these choices between systems of which some are more, others less, just.'³⁷

Niebuhr does not deny the ambiguity of history, the fragility of our best achievements, or the likelihood of ironic reversals in which freedom will yield new kinds of tyranny or deteriorate into new forms of meaningless consumer choices. The final meaning of history lies beyond the narratives of triumph, tragedy, and irony by which we make sense of it for ourselves. Christian faith tells us that, but it does not provide a theological alternative to deciding between the concrete possibilities available to us. In historical perspective, Reinhold Niebuhr appears to be someone who was increasingly aware of the dignity and misery of that distinctly human task. He did not always get it right, but he saw enough of the possibilities and limits to help us find our way through our own difficult and very different choices.

³³ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 102.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 142.

³⁵ See especially Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, i. 186–207.

³⁶ Niebuhr, 'Theology and Political Thought in the Western World', 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*