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### Reinhold Niebuhr: His Theology in the 1980s

by [Robert McAfee Brown](#)

Robert McAfee Brown, whose name is symbolic for engaged theologian and ethicist, is perhaps best known for being able to write clearly, for example, in *Theology in a New Key: Responding to Liberation Theology and Saying Yes and Saying No: On Rendering to God and Caesar*.

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#### SUMMARY

Niebuhr's lifelong prophetic commitment to exposing the sins of American imperialism prepares us for similar themes in the writings of those who view us from "the underside of history." His insistence that personal faith and politics go together prepares us to hear (from the very beginning) about a "spirituality of liberation."

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The editor offered a subtitle: "Why Am Still a Niebuhrian." After due reflection, I declined the offer. In my seminary days, the self-styled "Niebuhrians" were not above carving Niebuhr's offhand comments in stone in order to crush their opponents in dormitory debates, often betraying rather than emulating their mentor, and their contemporary counterparts frequently seem indistinguishable from them. ("Thank God," Reinhold Niebuhr may never have said but should have, "that I am not a Niebuhrian.") Disclaiming the title will not necessarily save me from stone-carving of my own, or otherwise betraying my teacher, but at least it will relieve him of responsibility for my sins. So this essay is a celebration of the teacher, not a justification of the pupil.

In that spirit, I offer six reflections on Reinhold Niebuhr's contribution to the 1980s.

1. The first of these is Niebuhr's own posture, which I shall describe as that of a *pessimistic optimist*. (The phrase at least has a Niebuhrian ring in recalling one who wrote about "tamed cynics" and "impossible possibilities.") Against the conventional wisdom that Niebuhr's theology is pessimistic, lacking in hope and therefore immobilizing, I propose that, whatever its provisional pessimism, his theology is ultimately optimistic, hope-filled, and therefore energizing. He reminded us of the tragedy of the human situation, but he also reminded us that faith takes us (as he expressed it in the title of one of his finest books) *Beyond Tragedy*. He rang the changes on sin more eloquently than anyone of our time, but that dissection, set forth with particularly telling power in the first volume of his Gifford Lectures, was followed by a second volume in which his acknowledgment of the power of the gospel as grace made it possible for him to speak of "the *agape* of the Kingdom of God [as] a resource for the infinite development towards a more perfect brotherhood in history" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II [Scribner's, 1943], p. 85)

Niebuhr's optimism is not optimism about human achievements but about divine achievements that can transform the destructive character of our human achievements. The word about sin is the penultimate rather than the ultimate word of the gospel, which witnesses to the power of God, in both judgment and mercy, to provide by grace the resources we cannot provide for ourselves. Pessimistic optimism.

2. Niebuhr similarly insisted that *mystery and meaning* are intertwined. He was as aware as anyone that we cannot "prove" the truth of Christian faith. (The only empirically verifiable doctrine of Christianity, he noted on more than one occasion, is the doctrine of original sin.) But he also believed in an "indirect" vindication of Christian faith -- namely, that "it makes more sense out of more facts" than any of its alternatives. We *do* find pointers to meaning in our lives -- in acts of human love, in the way justice can be partially achieved even through structures of injustice, in a life of perfect sacrificial love that ends upon a cross. But those partial meanings are always encompassed by mystery -- love, justice, atonement: mysteries all. Acknowledgment of mystery, however, is not capitulation to meaninglessness; while we do not have full meaning, neither are we left with total mystery.

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of "grace" in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope [ibid., p. 321].

3. Niebuhr likewise refused to separate *the world of faith and the world of politics*. He lived with equal skill in both worlds, and had unequaled skill in bridging the gap that lesser folk create between them.

As a person he was incessantly embroiled in politics -- on the local, state, national and international levels. But he simultaneously lived the life of theologian, ethicist and church person, demonstrating that politics uninformed by the judgments of faith, and faith aloof from the human struggle, are twin seductions to which we must not succumb. He certainly never did.

The connection is equally manifest in his writings. When he offers a book-length "vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense," he does so by employing the biblical imagery of "the children of light and the children of darkness." When he reflects on the meaning of the Kingdom of God, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he does so in the light of the human struggle for justice. When he describes the immersion of Christians within the political

process, he does so in terms of the "push" of duty and the "pull" of grace, noting that while a sense of civic responsibility can thrust us into the process, we need the resources of divine empowerment to draw us beyond what we might otherwise not dare to attempt or be able to achieve.

4. What, then, of the possible lines of connection between Niebuhr's thought and the very "political" *liberation theology* of the 1980s? The lines of connection, I believe, are particularly helpful to those of us in North America.

Niebuhr's analysis of social sin in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* prepares us for the concept in liberation theology of "systemic evil." His constant use of Scripture as a resource for mounting attacks against contemporary injustice prepares us for Pablo Richard, Severino Croatto, José Miranda and a host of others. His use of - and dismissal of -- much of Marx's social analysis prepares us for the same kind of discriminating use by Gustavo Gutiérrez, on whom not even all the power of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith has been able to pin the label "Marxist." Niebuhr's lifelong prophetic commitment to exposing the sins of American imperialism prepares us for similar themes in the writings of those who view us from "the underside of history." His insistence that personal faith and politics go together prepares us to hear (from the very beginning) about a "spirituality of liberation." And so on.

This is not to suggest that Niebuhr was the first liberation theologian (an honor that probably belongs to Jesus de Nazareth), but simply to suggest that as we North Americans confront liberation theology in its properly indigenous forms -- whether in Asia, Africa or Latin America -- the similarities to Niebuhr's thought are a help rather than a hindrance in that encounter. With whatever quarrels he might have with certain aspects of liberation theology, it is unthinkable that he would have repudiated it, as some of his self-styled followers are doing today in his name.

5. Niebuhr's most important contribution to the 1980s may be his consistent recognition of the need for *self-criticism*. He is unsurpassed in his ability to dish out broadsides against positions with which he disagrees, and anyone who wants a lesson in the art of godly polemics can go to no better source. But what is often overlooked, especially by contemporary "Niebuhrians," is that the keen eye of the

critic is turned on the beholder just as unsparingly as on the beholder. Those who rejoice in Niebuhr's fulminations against Stalinism, or Russian betrayals of human dignity, usually hear him with only one ear, and fail to listen with equal seriousness to his insistent reminder that the sins we see so clearly in others are likely to be the sins we most subtly replicate in ourselves. Rule Number One in reading Niebuhr: when you find yourself agreeing with a paragraph beginning, "On the one hand . . .," do not stop reading until you have read another paragraph, perhaps several pages later, beginning, "On the other hand . . ."

I will say only in passing -- since it is a comment on a passing fad -- that recent attempts to make Niebuhr into the guru of neoconservatism leave me both sad and angry, for I believe they betray both the man and his thought, particularly on this crucial point of the need for self-criticism. In one of his last writings, Niebuhr describes "the guiding principle" of his mature life in relating religious responsibility to political affairs, as a "strong conviction that a realist conception of human nature should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism which defends unjust privileges" (*Man's Nature and His Communities* [Scribners, 1965], pp. 24-25). Perhaps that is one statement that *should* be carved in stone.

We need to remember today that whatever else he was, Niebuhr was "the troubler of our [national] conscience," rather than the composer of *Te Deums* in praise of capitalism. Niebuhr's message to a generation that has become idolatrous in its worship of "the American way of life" is his reminder that "we must fight their falsehood with our truth, but we must also fight the falsehood within our truth."

6. Finally, Niebuhr provides us with a marvelous example of the *integration of life and thought*. One of the contributions of Richard Fox's *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* will be its reminder that Niebuhr was not just a great analytic thinker or brilliant essayist from whom we can extract nuggets of theological wisdom. Fox acquaints his readers with the Niebuhr who was a preacher, perhaps pre-eminently a preacher; the Niebuhr who was pastor as well as professor to generations of seminary students; the Niebuhr who was (as a Jewish friend of mine put it beautifully) "a holy man."

To be sure, he was no more exempt than the rest of us from the anger and impatience that define us all, and he acknowledged how hard it was to accept the limitations brought about by his stroke and the consequent diminishment of his energies during his last 15 years. But he also acknowledged that what kept him going was the Pauline recognition that "if we live we live unto the Lord, and if we die we die unto the Lord; so, therefore, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." That was not just a truth he enunciated; it was a truth he embodied.

Niebuhr's contribution to the 1980s will be not only the brilliance and the sharpness of his thought, but also the authenticity and integrity of his life. We need to learn from his prayers in *Justice and Mercy* (edited by his wife, Ursula M. Niebuhr, and, unhappily, out of print), as well as from his analyses in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (in print, one hopes, in perpetuity) Since it is wholeness that we seek, Reinhold Niebuhr can be pre-eminently helpful in our quest, not only as guide but also as exemplar.

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