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### The Niebuhrian Mean

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procedural international state system—would have to provide for the dispersal of power and the circulation of power-holders and thus be not only compatible with but indispensable to ‘true’ belief.”

Gerecht’s equally brief essay adopts a similar remedy, albeit one less philosophical and historical, and more focused on the nature of contemporary Islam, especially its more radical expressions since 9/11. He wastes no time in confronting our dilemma head-on: Westerners clearly support democratic reform when it is a question of ending the regimes of the virulent Iranian theocrats, the thuggish Bashar Assad, the nightmarish, genocidal Saddam Hussein, or the mad Colonel Qaddafi—although less so after the Iraqi violence, during which Americans soured on the expense of blood and treasure on behalf of what seemed sullen and ungracious allies. But the real rub comes with pro-Western dictatorships that claim they have put a lid on Islamic extremism in return for American money, alliance, or exemption from human-rights criticism: Why should we help topple our “friends,” only to see our enemies win ensuing plebiscites, especially given the troubling paradox that illiberal autocrats often seem more liberal than their illiberal grassroots publics?

As he has argued in the decade since 9/11, Gerecht says that Arab strongmen only feign support for the U.S. while privately encouraging home-grown dissidents to turn on us, on the pretext that Washington, not Cairo, Tunis, or Amman, made the Arab Street poor and unfree. The Middle East public, Gerecht believes, is anti-American and seemingly illiberal not necessarily because of radical Islam or intrinsic hatred of the West, but because it has been so abused and manipulated by its own governments, often with a Western wink and nod.

Thus the only way to end these sick relationships is through the messy catharses of democratic change, for clearly there is popular discontent with both Iranian-style theocracy and Egyptian-style autocracy, the common theme being an oppressive police state that ruins the economy. The trick for the West, Gerecht further thinks, is to promote democratic reformers, concede that under intermediate referenda angry anti-Westerners might come to the fore, but ultimately trust that democracy within an Arab Islamic context will, for all its unpleasant rhetoric and

distance from the American town hall, prove far better for the masses, and hence far better for America as well.

Gerecht has offered a hastily written afterword to take into account the 2011 uprisings, in which he suggests that the present unrest is day by day proving the validity of his theses. Yet as the news changes hourly, and events in Egypt seem to offer more pessimism than hope, readers might challenge Gerecht’s upbeat appraisal of the Muslim Brotherhood:

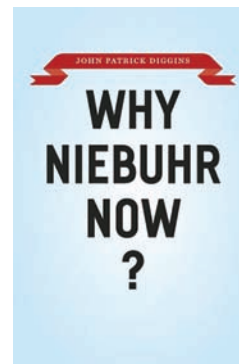
The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, an organization born and raised in clandestine opposition to foreign occupation and domestic dictatorship, has many profound misgivings about democracy. There’s not a fundamentalist alive who doesn’t have misgivings. But what is extraordinary to note about the Brotherhood, since the rebellion in Tunisia began, is the extent to which it has publicly and passionately embraced the idea that democracy is the only legitimate political system for Egypt and the rest of the Muslim World.

As for the Islamist and often illiberal direction of Turkish prime minister Recep Erdogan, who rose to power democratically, Gerecht acknowledges the dangers, and the shrill rhetoric, but is confident nonetheless that the Atatürk legacy, the affinity for and influence from European culture, and the intrinsic liberalizing mechanism of constitutional government will all constrain Erdogan’s Islamist ambitions. In other words, we may not like his anti-Western slurs and obnoxious gestures, but Erdogan’s presence has had the ironic effect of quieting extremism and channeling it within the political realm—just as democracies are wont to do.

Let us hope that Gerecht is correct, and that we can put to rest the warning that Islamists, as in the cases of Iran and Hamas, do indeed favor truly free and open democratic elections—but only one time; or rather, let us concede that even such elected thugocracies are not quite the end of the story, as we see from current popular Iranian and Palestinian unhappiness with both illiberal regimes. Hill and Gerecht are neither messianic neocons nor naïve idealists, but experienced skeptics who came to their advocacy of American support for sweeping constitutional change in the Middle East not as a first option, but as a last resort after a half century of assorted failures. **NR**

# The Niebuhrian Mean

DANIEL J. MAHONEY



*Why Niebuhr Now?*,  
by John Patrick Diggins  
(Chicago, 152 pp., \$22)

**R**EINHOLD NIEBUHR, the distinguished theologian and theorist of “Christian realism,” used to be a major intellectual presence in the United States. He was that rarity, a theologian and public intellectual who wrote with intelligence, competence, and sobriety about world affairs. From the late 1930s through the 1960s, Niebuhr helped shape the judgment of those who were responsible for leading the U.S. during the “American century.” His Christian realism had next to nothing in common with amoral Realpolitik or with the fashionable denial that ideology played a decisive role in shaping the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. It was indebted to St. Augustine and freely emphasized theological and moral categories.

A self-described “dialectical” thinker, Niebuhr was and remains difficult to pigeonhole ideologically. He was respected by thoughtful men of the Left and the Right. The pre-Camelot Arthur

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Schlesinger Jr. was a particularly enthusiastic admirer, and Whittaker Chambers wrote a memorable piece on Niebuhr for *Time* magazine in 1948. A democratic socialist through the 1930s, Niebuhr in the late 1940s and 1950s increasingly leaned toward Burkean conservatism. At the end of his life, disillusioned by the Vietnam War and perhaps concerned to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Christian realism to a new generation of social activists, Niebuhr insisted that his anti-utopian view of human nature was always intended to be at the service of an “ethic of progressive justice.” Like Orwell, Niebuhr was destined to be claimed by all the parties while belonging to none.

Niebuhr came from the left (he helped found Americans for Democratic Action) but directed much of his ire at the “stupidity” of the “children of light.” These were democratic humanitarians and sentimentalists who underestimated the power of evil in human affairs and who had unreasonable faith in the inevitable forward march of History. In classic works like his 1939 Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and 1944’s *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr forcefully rejected the utopian delusions of modern thought, as well as the adequacy of a pacifist response to the totalitarian enemies of civilization. There is an unmistakable pathos that informs his reflections on the self-deceptions of the “children of light,” who are all too vulnerable to manipulation at the hands of the cynical and nihilistic enemies of modern democracy.

These fundamental insights are highlighted with precision and elegance in John Patrick Diggins’s posthumously published meditation on the thought and legacy of the Lutheran theologian and social ethicist. Diggins, a distinguished intellectual historian whose work displayed an admirable sensitivity to the religious undercurrents of American history, impressively demonstrates the depth of Niebuhr’s opposition to the “sociological turn” in modern thought. It was the height of folly to blame the persistence of evil on external social forces. In general, Niebuhr rejected the facile optimism of the Enlightenment—what he called the “traditional defense of democracy”—and made “original sin” the basis of a new understanding of

democracy that was at once realistic and humane. This ability to make the seemingly outdated seem relevant, even compelling, was the source of Niebuhr’s attraction for secular elites who otherwise evinced no interest in religious or theological accounts of political life. Niebuhr argued with great conviction, and no little eloquence, that Christianity offered a more truthful or “empirical” account of the nature of man than the secular alternatives, ancient, modern, and contemporary. His apologia for Christianity had the added attraction of being rooted in reflection on human nature and thus not depending on revelation per se.

In Niebuhr’s view, Christianity put forward a compellingly paradoxical view of humankind as existing at the “juncture” of nature and spirit, “perilously caught,” in Diggins’s paraphrase, “between its freedom and its finitude.” The Christian account of man did not reduce human beings to either pole and thus avoided the extremes of utopian optimism and debilitating pessimism. Diggins pungently summarizes Niebuhr’s position: “The law of love is normative, but the fact of sin is universal.” While respecting the “prophetic” critique of existing society, Niebuhr did not hesitate to criticize social reformers and revolutionaries who exempted

themselves from the self-regard they thought they could expunge from the world.

Diggins is a non-believer (a lapsed Catholic) who nonetheless is attracted to the human wisdom inherent in Niebuhr’s Christian realism. Diggins has no time for clever postmodern nihilism where everything is said to be “contingent” or “constructed” and thus capable of being “deconstructed” out of existence. He finds an exciting and salutary alternative in Niebuhr’s “profoundly new interpretation of Christianity,” one that continues to speak to an “age of anxiety” in which thinking men have lost confidence in the resources provided by either reason or revelation. But Diggins overstates just how new Niebuhr’s “neo-orthodox” approach to political theology really was. He goes too far when he says that Niebuhr “corrects” Jesus’s “impossible ‘love ethic.’” Diggins seems to presuppose that Jesus himself was a political romantic—admirable, pure, quasi-utopian—who shared the naïveté of the “children of light.” What he fails to recognize is the *transpolitical* character of the New Testament (“my kingdom is not of this world”), even if its understanding of human destiny has profoundly important political implications. The political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain has rightly warned against detaching Niebuhr’s anthropological wisdom from its larger Christian framework. In Diggins’s case, we see how that detachment, however benignly motivated, leads to a distortion of the theological character of Niebuhr’s enterprise and even of Christian wisdom itself. Nor is this the only significant defect in *Why Niebuhr Now?*

The book is also marred by a political *idée fixe* about the threat of an ill-defined neoconservatism. This tends to distort its overall analysis. Diggins is convinced that overbearing national pride, a one-sided identification of America with unalloyed goodness, is the dominant contemporary threat to the integrity of the American experiment in democratic self-government. He sees national self-righteousness everywhere and has very little to say about the full range of foreign-policy challenges confronting America today. He knew the Cold War had to be fought (Diggins was in many respects an old-fashioned Cold War liberal) and even acknowledged

## THE MAN ROBBED AND BEATEN AND LEFT FOR DEAD

Across the level road I see  
Somebody. He looks back at me.

(And help will come, or help will pass  
By these outdated wisps of grass.)

No height or depth can intervene.  
Only the smooth stones lie between.

How was my agony outrun?  
I have poured out the wind and sun

(Crickets and flies and passersby)  
And only watch from where I lie.

—SARAH RUDEN

that Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, an older and more sober neoconservative, was right when she attacked the radical Left for always “blaming America first.” But Diggins says little about what is at stake in our ongoing conflict with militant Islam and global terrorism. His focus is nearly exclusively on American “arrogance,” the blind confidence Americans are said to have in our national “innocence.” In a kind of reverse Manicheanism, America becomes for Diggins the principal troublemaker in the contemporary world precisely because of its exaggerated sense of the good it can achieve for itself and others.

There are no doubt powerful strands of national self-righteousness in the American tradition, and no small dose of secular messianism in the Wilsonian imperative to “make the world safe for democracy.” Reinhold Niebuhr was right to warn against such messianism in both its religious and its secular forms. But as we have already suggested, Niebuhr was a supremely “dialectical” thinker. His powerful, and still relevant, warnings against national hubris were not his final word on the subject.

In an otherwise thoughtful discussion of *The Irony of American History* (1952), Niebuhr’s most comprehensive account of the American political tradition, Diggins fails to adequately come to terms with the wonderfully suggestive concluding pages of that work. This can also be said of more strident Left-Niebuhrians such as the foreign-policy scholar Andrew Bacevich. Niebuhr turned to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural to show how it was possible to combine an uncompromising defense of the “moral treasures” of a free civilization with a religious or philosophical vantage point that recognized that the ways of God are not the ways of men (“The Almighty has His own purposes,” as Lincoln so memorably put it). “Lincoln’s model,” as Niebuhr called it, “would rule out the cheap efforts which are frequently made to find some simple moral resolution of our conflict with communism. Modern communist tyranny is certainly as wrong as the slavery which Lincoln opposed.” At the same time, Lincoln invites us to combine “moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment.” To be aware of a “contradiction between divine and

human purposes, even on the highest level of human aspirations,” is in no way to *relativize* the human stakes of politics.

But Niebuhr’s delicate mean would not hold. Today, the author of the seminal 1940 essay “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist” is generally claimed by those who oppose the use of military force, even when dealing with implacable enemies of civilization. Contemporary Left-Niebuhrians do not read Niebuhr “dialectically” enough. But part of the problem may lie with Niebuhr’s theoretical framework itself. Is human nature as radically corrupted by original sin as Niebuhr suggests? Is virtue always and everywhere deformed by pride? Ideological Manicheanism, the temptation to locate goodness entirely on one side of a political divide and evil entirely on the other, was the monstrous hallmark of ideological totalitarianism in the 20th century. It is also a temptation, although of a different scope and scale, for democratic peoples when the promotion of democracy is taken up with evangelical fervor. But relativism, an exaggerated sense of our own faults, and an accompanying masochistic self-criticism can also distort our appreciation of the moral stakes of politics. It takes rare courage and insight, indeed, to combine a spirited defense of human freedom with a sense of modesty and limits, with what Solzhenitsyn calls “self-limitation.” The judicious blending of magnanimity and humility might even be said to be the defining characteristic of true political greatness. Yet, for all Niebuhr’s wisdom, his writings do not provide us with an adequate framework for articulating and appreciating such greatness.

Despite its limitations, this eminently readable volume has the merit of reminding us of Reinhold Niebuhr’s greatness. In a time when theology and philosophy had lost the ability to speak to the common concerns of citizens, when they had too often succumbed to abstruse language and assorted ideological temptations, Niebuhr thought and wrote about things that mattered. And he did so with clarity, intelligence, and good sense. He remains our “contemporary” even if we are not obliged to slavishly follow his path, let alone the one-sided counsel that is sometimes put forward in his name. **NR**

# China’s Big Lie

JOHN DERBYSHIRE

*Such Is This World@sars.com*,

by Hu Fayun, translated by A. E. Clark  
(Ragged Banner Press, 536 pp., \$38; also available as an e-book from Ragged Banner’s website, \$14)

**T**HERE has never been a good time to be an honest writer in Communist China, but the present is an exceptionally bad time. Spooked by the “Arab Spring” and jostling for position in next year’s scheduled leadership changes, the party bosses have been coming down hard on every kind of independent thinking. The cases of Nobel peace prize winner Liu Xiaobo and artist Ai Weiwei have been well publicized, but there are many others.

Essayist Liu Xianbin, released in 2008 after nine years’ imprisonment for “inciting subversion of state power,” was rearrested last summer. In March of this year, he was given a new ten-year sentence on that same charge. Along with this lawless brutality towards their own citizens, China’s rulers do all they can to intimidate foreigners who seek to help dissident writers. A Chinese writer needs a translator, and those best equipped to translate are Western scholars making a career in China studies. Such a career will be handicapped, though, if the scholar is denied visas to enter China. The Communists make sure Western Sinologists know this. Chinese-literature specialist Perry Link, blacklisted since 1996, has written a fine essay about the problem: “The Anaconda in the Chandelier.”

The misfortunes that have afflicted Hu Fayun’s 2004 dissident novel *Such Is This World@sars.com* have therefore been nothing out of the ordinary. The manuscript was posted on a website in 2004; the website was quickly shut down. A Beijing publisher brought out a bowdlerized version in 2006, but the book was proscribed the following year as the Communists tightened controls prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. A Princeton Sinology graduate considered making a translation, but backed off on learning that the book was banned in China.