

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism/Christian Idealism

COLM MCKEOGH

The wicked at heart probably know something.

WOODY ALLEN, *Without Feathers*

The foregoing quip captures a realization that came to the young Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1920s and that turned the liberal Christian pastor away from pacifism and toward a more realist ethic of politics. From then until his death in 1971, Niebuhr was to remain always a liberal Christian of realist bent. He was a liberal Christian in his concentration on the law of love as the only absolute and in his rejection of Christian fundamentalism, biblical literalism, and the consequent clash with science. He was a political realist, and rose to national prominence as such in the 1930s and 1940s, in his dismissal of pragmatic pacifism and his advocacy of American responsibility to use force in opposing the Nazi and Soviet threats to the world. He was famous particularly for his sharp attacks on those who failed to see the limits on morality in politics. Yet this realism was but one strand of Niebuhr's dualist approach to politics, the other being his Christian idealism.

It was disillusionment following World War I that had turned Niebuhr into a reluctant pacifist. Through the 1920s, however, he worried about his motives and whether his professed pacifism was linked to American self-interest and a powerful nation's support of the status quo. He wondered whether he would be as good a pacifist if he belonged to an unsatisfied nation rather than to a satisfied one, and whether his pacifism was really anything more than the "pacifism of the beast whose maw is crammed."¹ Much American pacifism of the time, he suggested, was "an ethical sublimation of an essentially selfish national position," for "it is always the tendency of those who have to extol the virtues of peace and order."²

Niebuhr renounced his pacifism, and began to develop his political realism, not in the face of the deteriorating international situation in the late

1930s, but in response to the sufferings of the American working class during the Great Depression. It was the influence of Marxism on Niebuhr in the late 1920s and early 1930s that led to his acceptance of the necessity of using power and force in the cause of justice. Power, the Detroit-based pastor came to believe, is the core of politics. It is the first source of authority in politics, domestic and international, and it is neither intrinsically evil nor unambiguously good. It is rather the instrument of both good and evil: "power cannot be evil of itself, unless life itself be regarded as evil. For life is power. It is inherently dynamic. Even the purest 'reason' is power. According to the Christian faith, perfect power and goodness are united only in God."³

Power is the necessary means to social change and to the achievement of a more tolerable justice. Yet power comes in many forms and an imbalance in any of these results in injustice. The achievement of a more tolerable degree of justice must come then through the balancing of power. The primary check on the power of groups, classes, and nations will be the power of other groups, classes, and nations. This need for a balance of power is permanent because of the perennial possibility of some dominant power and therefore the perennial threat of injustice. The necessity for a power-based authority means that full justice can never be attained. All societies require an organization of power yet the center of power within any community is always biased and never fully just. Acceptance of this must lead to acceptance that, although political authority must try to be impartial, it can never succeed.

Niebuhr's realist approach, developed in the context of the domestic socioeconomic situation in the United States, was applied by him to international relations in the 1930s. The threat from Nazi Germany was one of which Niebuhr, brought up in a German-speaking family in the American Midwest, was acutely aware. In contact with German churches and conscious of German anger over the Versailles Treaty, he was to warn, as early as 1931, of the threat to peace from the "Hitler movement."⁴ In 1933, with Hitler's accession to power, he appealed to the U.S. churches and government to find ways of relief for German Jews.⁵ By 1934, he decided that a "new war in Europe is only a matter of years."⁶ In the face of the Nazi threat, Niebuhr criticized forcefully and influentially the dominant strain of pacifism in the interwar United States. This was the pragmatic pacifism of which Niebuhr himself had been an exponent and which remained widespread among his fellow liberal Protestants. But in his critique of pacifism, Niebuhr distinguished between two types of pacifism: the absolute

pacifism of the Christian perfectionist and the pragmatic pacifism of many liberals. It was only the latter that Niebuhr rejected. The former he accepted and valued. Indeed, he never failed to pay tribute to the pacifism that was witness to the Christian ideal of non-coercive love but that never claimed to be a political strategy. In 1940, long after he had rejected his own pacifism, he wrote that such pacifists were not fools to be tolerated but witnesses to be heard: "We who allow ourselves to become engaged in war need this testimony of the absolutist against us, lest we accept the warfare of the world as normative, lest we become callous to the horror of war, and lest we forget the ambiguity of our own actions and motives and the risk we run of achieving no permanent good from this momentary anarchy in which we are involved."⁷

Christian Idealism

Niebuhr's distinction between two types of pacifism, and his rejection of only one of them, was of immense significance to the development of his dualist approach. For the perfectionist strand of Niebuhr's approach shares its roots with the apolitical Christian pacifism that withdraws from political life. Niebuhr's highest ideal is the disinterested, heedless, self-sacrificing perfect love of Christ. Love is the only absolute norm for Niebuhr; it is the ultimate referent by which all human actions are to be judged. Niebuhr thus takes a very demanding view of the ethic of Jesus, both in seeing self-sacrificial love as its core and in interpreting love as a pure and heedless self-sacrifice. He sees the ethic of Jesus as an ethic of selfless giving that condemns every form of self-assertion. He interprets that ethic in such a perfectionist manner that to conform to it becomes the "impossible possibility."⁸ No human action or motive can ever conform to it, though it remains the standard for the motives and actions of all individuals. Niebuhr sees guilt even in the reluctant use of the minimum force to resist an evil aggressor who is wreaking havoc. To Niebuhr, the selfless love of God and of others implies that one ought never do harm to anyone.

Christian Realism

The Christian ideal is one strand of Niebuhr's ethic. The other is the Christian recognition of the inevitable human failure to live up to it. At the heart of realism is constraint: the realist claims to perceive disagreeable aspects of reality, disagreeable because they present obstacles to the realization of

our goals. The realist claims to take full account of the resistance of reality to his or her ideals (and claims, too, that the idealist does not). Central to realism then is a certain degree of pessimism, the product of a recognition that reality poses problems for the implementation of ideals. This pessimism need not be total; the obstacles that reality presents to our goals may not be completely intractable. But realism is distinguished by its recognition that the circumstances of choice will always be constraining to some significant degree. The constraints on political choice mean that we must sacrifice some of our ideals if we are to achieve any of our goals. The realist accepts that not all of our goals can be achieved and that many are achievable only by means we would rather not use.

Niebuhr's Christian realism highlights the significant and ineradicable constraints on our freedom of action in politics and international relations that are rooted in human nature. The highest Christian goal is love and the most fundamental and powerful constraint on the achievement of this goal arises from the fallen nature of human beings. The greatest realist in the Christian tradition, Augustine, developed the view of human nature that was to be the foundation of Niebuhr's approach to politics. The concept of original sin, established at the heart of Christianity by Augustine, asserts both the inevitability of sin and human responsibility for it.⁹ Niebuhr's attentions were focused on this fundamental Christian doctrine by the neo-orthodox theology of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (though the American liberal criticized Barthian neo-orthodoxy as a "new kind of fundamentalism" that lent itself to political conservatism).¹⁰ It was Niebuhr's rediscovery of the doctrine of original sin that provided the basis for his claim that pacifism as a political program reflects a perfection that humans do not have. Even to claim that the ethics of nonresistance are possible for human beings is to tempt us to pretend that we are God, not human.

Sin comes from our refusal to accept our inherent human limitations and the perennial insecurity that is basic to our nature. Original sin results not from our finitude and imperfection but from our anxiety about our finitude and imperfection, which is made possible by our freedom and which expresses itself in pride and pretension. The anxiety that Niebuhr detects at the heart of the human condition results in a situation similar to that described in international politics as a security dilemma in which the attempt to lessen one's own insecurity only deepens that of one's fellows, with the paradoxical result that the instability and the risk of conflict

is heightened. To Niebuhr, the insecurity of human individuals is spiritual as well as physical. The result is a more profound version of Hobbes's state of nature and also a more pessimistic one. It is more profound in that the insecurity in human life goes to the very root of our being, our position in creation, being at once in the natural world and transcending it. It is more pessimistic in that no full solution is possible. Insecurity is the human lot because of the ambiguous human condition at the juncture of freedom and necessity, both creatures and creators of our world. No sovereign can eliminate it. Both Niebuhr and Hobbes highlight human anxiety and insecurity; to Hobbes, the resultant seeking of power by all means at one's disposal is a natural right; to Niebuhr, it is a sin. Of this human insecurity, Niebuhr writes: "In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and the finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the external precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness."¹¹

This condition of anxiety is the occasion for sin but not the cause of it; rather it is our refusal to accept the insecurity that is fundamental to the human condition which results in all human life being involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life. Like Pascal, Niebuhr sees original sin as the mystery that makes human beings comprehensible to themselves; it is the most accurate description and explanation of our nature as human beings.¹²

This perception of human nature has implications for our social and political life. We are incurably creative and so our history is dynamic, moving, creative. We have freedom over both the past and the present, we can break old forms, transform them, and establish new ones. This freedom, combined with our rational capacities, our moral urges, and our impulse for survival and well-being, means that there are indeterminate possibilities for higher levels of rational and moral insight, of technical and social development, and of freedom and justice. But there are limits to the new and morally better structures that may be formed. Though humans have indeterminate possibilities, we can never alter our ontological structure as both creature and self-transcendent. No final or permanent society is conceivable in history, and no particular social order can be regarded as permanent or stable. The spiritual creativity of humans, which is part of our essential nature, transcends any form of social cohesion and thus any society is subject to change, transformation, dissolution.

A Dualist Approach

For Niebuhr, the fundamental feature of reality is its paradoxical and self-contradictory nature. The approach to political reality that he adopts is a dualist one. The principal dualism that characterizes Niebuhr's approach to social and political ethics is one of Christian realism and Christian idealism. Such an approach, he believed, would take account both of our highest ideals and of the stark realities of politics. Only an approach to politics that is both realistic and moral could yield an "adequate political morality":

An adequate political morality must do justice to the insights of both moralists and political realists. It will recognize that human society will never escape social conflict, even though it extends the areas of social cooperation. It will try to save society from being involved in endless cycles of futile conflict, not by an effort to abolish coercion in the life of collective man, but by reducing it to the minimum, by counseling the use of such types of coercion as are most compatible with the moral and rational factors in human society, and by distinguishing between the purposes and ends for which coercion is used.¹³

Niebuhr's aim is for an approach that neither abandons hope nor deludes itself that progress will be quick or easy or painless. Hans Morgenthau wrote that, in general, Western civilization has devised two intellectual instruments to reconcile Christianity and politics: the first reinterprets Christian ethics to make them fit the political facts, the second describes political events as better than they are.¹⁴ Niebuhr, however, rejects both the dilution of Christianity and the misrepresentation of politics. He does not compromise the commands of Christian ethics in any way; indeed, his interpretation of the ethic of Jesus is absolute and starkly uncompromising. Nor does he downplay the immorality of the political act; again, Niebuhr is uncompromising in his description of the inherent immorality of the political act. He presents the conflict between politics and morality in a full light. He shows the impossibility of reconciling them and yet this is what he then attempts to do. Niebuhr thus rejects the contention that the conflict between politics and Christian morals is irreconcilable, and that there can be no such thing as a "Christian statesman." In contrast, he insists that Christianity cannot reject politics.

The dualism of Niebuhr's approach has been described as a "tenuous metaphysical proposition fraught with inconsistencies."¹⁵ Indeed, Niebuhr

acknowledged that a realist theory of politics would not be a consistent one; he wrote that he "abhor[red] consistency as a matter of principle because history seems to prove that absolute certainty usually betrays into some kind of absurdity."¹⁶ Consistent theories oversimplify reality. A simplified political theory will not solve the problems of international politics but may foster dangerous beliefs in certainty and in perfect solutions. To Niebuhr's eyes, political idealism tries to negate the fundamentally self-contradictory nature of political reality. It simplifies political reality in its attempt to maintain a clear and unambiguous sense of the world. In contrast, political realism, confronted by a complex reality, accepts it as irreducibly complex and self-contradictory. Niebuhr's aim in his political theory was to acknowledge fully the paradoxes, ironies, and tragedies of reality. In approaching political reality we are forever confronting the discrepancy between our ideals and the prevailing situation, between our aspirations and our attainments, between justice and power. Niebuhr's dualism accepted this discrepancy as the cause and character of politics; it worked toward an understanding of this discrepancy and endeavored to set and attain limited goals within the framework of it. It recognized its own limits and admitted that there were no permanent solutions to political problems. Prescriptively, it emphasized self-criticism and pragmatism.

Niebuhr adopted a dualist approach as the only one that could make sense of the facts, tensions, and contradictions of human existence. It might not have been intellectually defensible but it was pragmatically necessary. Niebuhr's dualism is not a straightforward one that requires Christians to act by one set of rules in their personal life and by another in their civic life. Instead, his approach takes two perspectives on all actions, whether they are acts of state or of the individual; the two perspectives of Christian realism and Christian perfectionism. The former has justice as its highest norm; the latter love. All acts, whether of state or of the individual, are to be criticized from both perspectives. An action that meets the requirements of the Christian realist perspective will still be found wanting from the perfectionist one.

There is thus an ineradicable tension between the requirements of the two ethics. One takes account of the realities of fallen humans in a sinful world; the other is transcendent and other-worldly. Niebuhr did not believe it possible for humans to act always in accordance with the standards of Christian perfectionism; he went so far in an interview as to claim boldly that "only mothers, martyrs, mystics and monastics can perform acts of self-sacrifice."¹⁷ If there is little chance of the perfectionist ethic motivating

the acts of individuals, then there is much less chance of it influencing the acts of groups, for in groups, Niebuhr holds, human selfishness is magnified. In a realist vein, he stresses time and time again that there is almost no possibility for moral action by groups. This he does to prevent our optimism from deluding us about the moral potential of collective behavior. Nations cannot adhere to the morality of individuals; love is an impossibility in inter-group relations. The proof of this is that one cannot point to a national policy that persists in going beyond national self-interest. A pure self-sacrificing love is not a possibility for groups for no "nation, or any other group for that matter, will ever sacrifice itself for another."¹⁸ Nations never commit suicide, nor should they. Neither the leaders nor the citizens of a nation ought to conclude, from the law of love, that they should abandon all their responsibilities and sacrifice all their interests.

To Niebuhr, neither Christian realism nor Christian idealism is adequate alone. Neither love nor justice is sufficient on its own. Love can never take the place of justice, even under the best possible conditions. Love is the only absolute but to try to live entirely by love and to discard the structures of justice is to risk destroying love, for we need structures of justice to protect people from love that can be biased and misdirected. Love without justice can be harmful even within the family or the church: justice is always needed too as a guide to the ordering of any relations. Socially and politically, love is not enough because individual goodness does not solve any issue of social justice. To do this we need structures of justice and rights. Therefore, in the process of building communities, every impulse of love must be transformed into an impulse of justice. Justice must be the first instrument of love.¹⁹

Yet justice alone is never enough, either. We cannot dismiss love from social and international ethics because justice requires love in order to overcome the inevitable bias of self-interest. Niebuhr writes that a justice that is only justice is less than justice; what is needed is an "imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other rather than the self" if a modicum of fairness is to be achieved.²⁰ Justice, as the calculation of rights and the discrimination between competing claims, needs reason and yet that reason is corrupted by self-interest. Love can overcome that bias and corruption. So love is not irrelevant to justice: it establishes the viewpoint from which all norms and structures of justice are to be judged, from which their ends may be recognized as proximate and not ultimate, and their loyalties as parochial rather than universal.

A Productive Tension

The product of Niebuhr's dualist approach is a constant tension between its two elements. An action that seems to approach the requirements of the realist ethic will fall far short of the demands of the perfectionist one. This tension is fundamental and permanent: it cannot be resolved or lessened. The idealism and the realism cannot be synthesized, reconciled, or harmonized. The permanent tension between ideals and realities is, to Niebuhr, the essence of human life on earth. This approach, which sets up two standards by which all acts are to be judged, allows Niebuhr to meet his aim of applying Christian morality to political reality without doing an injustice to either. He does not water down or corrupt the ethic of pure love in order to make it applicable to the interactions of groups and nations. Nor does he overstate the possibilities of moral action in politics. The tension between the two ethics produces a constant self-criticism of all political action and an awareness of its moral limitations. More important, the tension urges the political actor to always go further and to be more creative in seeking the coincidence of the national self-interest with the interests of other nations.

The tension between Niebuhr's realism and his perfectionism has at least four productive consequences for political action. First, the universalist and idealist perspective reduces the bias in our perception of political and moral issues. There is always a danger that the realist ethic will conceive the national interest too narrowly, but the universalist ethic helps the political actor to realize that our destinies are intertwined and that a narrow conception of the national interest will be self-defeating.

Second, the ethic based on love motivates the actor to find the point of coincidence between the interests of the nation and the values that transcend those interests. Niebuhr's realism accepts that the national leadership cannot pursue policies that jeopardize the national interest but he wishes them to recognize that, since all nations live under a common peril, they must pursue policies that transcend, as they fulfill, the national interest. Niebuhr sees a common weakness among the adherents of realism in that "they usually do not go far enough in meeting new problems and situations. They are so conscious of the resistance in history to new ventures, and are so impressed by the perennial problems of politics, which manifest themselves on each new level of history, that they are inclined to discount both the necessity and the possibility of new political achievements."²¹ The

higher ethic both motivates and assists the realist to view the national interest in a broader, more objective, and more long-term manner. Though prudence alone may motivate the search for justice, religion adds both a broader perspective, a stronger motivation, and greater staying power to that unending quest: "justice . . . is on the whole an achievement of rational calculation. The will to do justice ultimately has a religious root and no rational reason can be given why a man ought to be just, unless it be the prudential one that injustice will finally destroy its beneficiaries as well as its victims."²²

A third productive consequence of the interaction between the two ethics is that idealism can stop realism from decaying into cynicism. Realism is based on an acknowledgment that we must come to terms with the harsh facts of political reality; cynicism arises when these facts are accepted as setting the standards for conduct. Niebuhr detected such cynicism in many other realists of the time; for example, he agreed with George Kennan's rejection of the "moralistic-legalistic" approach to international politics and foreign policy but thought that "Kennan's solution for the problem of our pretentious idealism is a return to the concept of 'national interest.' He thinks that this concept should guide our foreign policy on the grounds that we must not pretend to know more than what is good for us. This modesty is important. But egotism is not the cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism. Preoccupation with national interest can quickly degenerate into moral cynicism even if it is originally prompted by moral modesty."²³ The perfectionist ethic can stop the realist ethic from decaying into cynicism, by judging all political realities and acts from a higher perspective and showing how they all fall short of the ultimate norm. Niebuhr believes too that a religious stance is required to give meaning to crisis and to avert despair: "those who have not this key to the mystery of life and of God are tempted . . . to be either complacent or hysterical when confronted with the evils of history."²⁴ Christianity does not guarantee that good will triumph over evil in history, but it does assure one that evil will not triumph over God's designs.²⁵

A fourth and final impact of the perfectionist ethic on the realist ethic is to stop the latter from leading to moral pretension. States claim that they cannot act beyond their own interests, yet when they go to war they can claim to be fighting for universal values such as democracy, freedom, or civilization. No action of the state, when viewed from the higher perspective, can be seen as a moral act. The idealist perspective reveals the self-interest that underlies all political action, however virtuous it may seem.

In these ways, Niebuhr's realist/idealist approach helps the actor to deal with the paradoxical realities of politics. The realist ethic urges the political actor to be aware of power and self-interest and to seek the overlap of interest and principle. However, this realist ethic remains under criticism from the perfectionist ethic that has love as its ultimate value. By seeking justice through a broad conception of the national interest, the political leader may satisfy the realist ethic but never the perfectionist one. From the higher perspective of Christianity, one could always do better. The higher ethic provides the constant self-criticism of motives and questioning of means. It ensures we never claim moral purity for any political act and that we remain always self-critical.

The Tragedy of Politics

Niebuhr's dualist approach yields a sense of the inevitable tragedy of politics. Often in politics, one must do wrong either way. Guilt is unavoidable. The most we can realistically aim for is justice, and the achievement of any degree of justice requires the use of power. Justice, whether within society or between nations, must be based on a balance of power. This balance of power implies a conflict of wills, a contest of interests in which gross injustice is avoided only because the contending forces are evenly matched. Injustices must usually be corrected through the vehement resentments of their victims. This is even more so in international relations where the cause of justice is even more precarious: unscrupulous nations are punished only if sufficient power is aligned alongside moral condemnation. Justice relies on power and yet power corrupts justice.

This moral ambiguity of politics implies the inevitable guilt of all involved in politics. The paradox of political and social action is that moral responsibility requires us to take sides and to use power, which is sinful. Justice means the calculation of rights and often the taking of sides for the weak and against the strong. The result is that it "is not possible to engage in any act of collective opposition to collective evil without involving the innocent with the guilty."²⁶ Yet we must engage in political action and in the use of power against others for we "cannot be good unless we're responsible, and the minute we're responsible, we're involved in compromise."²⁷ That we must be responsible for our common guilt does not annul our responsibility to strive for relative justice.

Central to the tragedy of politics is the inability to act in history without sin. For there will always be selfishly used power and therefore a responsi-

bility to use countervailing power. The use of that countervailing power is, from the perspective of a total love of others, sinful. Niebuhr's perfectionist interpretation of the ethic of Jesus implies that all use of power in the name of justice falls short of the ideal of love and is therefore sinful. It remains our moral responsibility to counter the power of others yet this implies (if we do so effectively) that we will inflict harm on them. From the perspective of love, to inflict harm on others is to sin.

The result of this is Niebuhr's tragic view of human history. A clear conscience is unattainable, through political involvement or through political noninvolvement. Often we will find ourselves in a position where both action and inaction will lead to harm being done to others. Those who wield political power are unavoidably culpable, yet Niebuhr criticizes equally those who have sought to keep their hands clean by staying out of the morally ambiguous arena of politics. Any attempt to avoid the guilt of political involvement is itself immoral: "we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice."²⁸

Political Action

It is not possible to move in history without becoming tainted with guilt. How then is one to act in politics and international relations? How does the productive tension between irreconcilable realism and perfectionism work in practice? Niebuhr refused to criticize national leaders for defending national interests; political leaders are responsible to national and local constituencies and must give voice to national and local interests. To the end of his days he was skeptical of utopian thinkers who presented the possibilities of transcending the national interest as greater than they actually were. He repeated frequently that nations could never go beyond the area of congruence between their national self-interest and a concern for the needs of other peoples or of the world community as a whole. But he was critical, not only of moralists who preached the transcending of the national interest, but also of national leaders who viewed the national interest too narrowly, with insufficient and with short-term horizons.

Niebuhr accepted the pursuit of self-interest as an ineradicable feature of human beings and their groups. He recognized that nations do support universal values and principles but only when they accord with their perceived self-interest: "Every nation is guided by self-interest and does not

support values which transcend its life, if the defense of these values imperils its existence. A statesman who sought to follow such a course would be accused of treason. On the other hand nations do become the bearers of values which transcend their national interests."²⁹

Nations must act on the basis of self-interest, but that self-interest can coincide with the global interest. No nation is good enough to do what is right unless its sense of duty is compounded with its sense of survival.³⁰ Niebuhr's repeated assertions that the national interest is, and must be, at the heart of national policy would seem to leave little scope for morality in foreign policy. But his conception of the national interest is a distinctive one. He writes: "Nations are, on the whole, not generous. A wise self-interest is usually the limit of their moral achievements; though it is worth noting that nations do not achieve a wise self-interest if generous impulses do not help to drive them beyond the limits of a too-narrow self-interest."³¹

Niebuhr cites a "wise self-interest" as often the limit of a nation's moral achievement; crucially, though, the true self-interest of a nation is more than just a narrow exclusive national interest. All nations share an interest in peace and order; the wise see this. Thus, he claims, it is not in any nation's self-interest to be selfish.

Underlying all his recommendations to national leaders and policy makers is the belief that the real interest of nations is not a narrow, exclusive one, and that the national interest, when conceived only from the standpoint of the self-interest of the nation, is bound to be defined "too narrowly and therefore to be self-defeating."³² A too narrowly defined national interest is one that fails to consider those national interests that are bound up in a web of mutual interests with other nations. Thus, to Niebuhr, a consistent emphasis on self-interest is as counterproductive in national life as in individual life: "a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests because it will fail to do justice to the broader and longer-term interests which are involved with the interests of other nations."³³

Niebuhr insists that international politics is not a zero-sum game and that national interests are not mutually exclusive. Underlying this claim was not just his faith in a benevolent creator. The existence of nuclear weapons made it clear that peace was in the interests of all nations; justice too was a common national interest, as there could be no stable peace without justice. Niebuhr's advice to all national policy makers was this: always seek the overlap of national and global interests, and never accept that conflicts of real interests (and therefore war) are inevitable. He urged on them a "wise self-interest informed by loyalty to principles transcend-

ing national interests” and stressed that the art of statecraft is to find the point of concurrence between the “parochial and the general interest, between the national and the international common good.”³⁴ This is not just the art of statecraft, it is the moral duty of all involved in national policy.

Political realism alone is not enough to achieve this, for prudence alone will often define the national interest too narrowly. It will approach common problems from the perspective of a particular interest and will fail to seek the longer-term solution. What are also needed, says Niebuhr, are moral and religious perspectives in order to widen our conception of interest and also to motivate us to seek the coincidence of national and global interests. Both reason and the religious spirit are required to inspire a broader interpretation of the nation’s interests. To Niebuhr, the pursuit of the national interest will never in itself lead to a recognition of the coincidence of interests. One must be inspired by the religious ideals of love and justice to search for and to recognize the coincidence of interests. One must aim for something more than justice if one is to achieve justice.

A national leader who got the balance right, in the domestic political circumstances of his time, was Abraham Lincoln, Niebuhr’s hero from an early age (the German pastor’s son grew up in an Illinois town named after the president, the Niebuhr house being less than a mile from the court where Lincoln had argued cases as a circuit lawyer). Lincoln was the model of an able politician whose religious humility allowed him to fight for what he believed to be right without feeling the need to portray the other side as wholly wrong. He combined a political shrewdness (without the cynicism Niebuhr detected in Roosevelt’s 1936 campaign) with a religious perspective (without the moralizing that turned Niebuhr against Wilson). That religious perspective made him aware that God’s purposes were partly contradicted by the moral issues of the vast historical drama in which Lincoln was playing his part, and yet were not irrelevant to it. It brought to light the element of pretension in the idealism of both sides and allowed Lincoln to remain modest about the virtue and wisdom of his own side. It gave to the president’s stance of “malice towards none and charity for all” a firm basis in contrition about the human frailties and vanities that were common to both sides to the conflict. “The prophets of righteousness who would make no compromises could not have achieved their ideals but for the statesmen who did make compromises,” a young Niebuhr wrote in 1918. “Abraham Lincoln was just as necessary to the abolition movement as William Lloyd Garrison. Christian statesmen are essential to the kingdom of God as Christian prophets.”³⁵

As an example of a too narrow national interest in international relations, Niebuhr cites the post-1918 fixation of the United States on German debt repayment and reparation: self-interest, conceived in inadequate and short-term ways, deflected the true interests of the world and of the United States itself. A generous policy of debt liquidation would have helped the Weimar leadership to rebuild the German economy, to establish democracy, and to reenter the community of nations.³⁶ The Marshall Plan, on the other hand, is an example of the wise self-interest that Niebuhr sought. The reconstruction of Germany was in the long-term self-interest of the United States as well as in the broader world interest, yet it took a great deal of generosity for that to be seen. Bitterness, narrow nationalism, and a desire for vengeance could all too easily have stood in its way: "Our aid need not, however, be prompted purely by either humanitarian concern for the starving or by concern for the preservation of political liberty in Europe, though it is to be hoped that these motives will be operative. We must furnish aid also in the interest of our own economic health . . . It is highly significant that motives of self-interest thus come to the support of a policy which generosity alone might well prompt. It is good that this is so, since even the best nations are incapable of pure generosity."³⁷

Yet, though the plan stands as a prime example of a Niebuhrian political act, it should not be seen as primarily a moral act. One should not claim too much moral quality for what is still a political action. Niebuhr wrote at the time: "As is always the case in international relations, what is called for is not an act of benevolence but of wise self-interest."³⁸ The plan was a case of enlightened self-interest united with a concern for the general welfare; as such it stands as an example of the most attainable virtue of nations.

American entry into World War II provides another example of national self-interest coinciding with the greater world interest. In 1941, when some voices were calling for the president to be more circumspect in his neutrality, Niebuhr was calling for the repeal of the Neutrality Act and for material assistance to Britain and her allies.³⁹ But he was not, at this stage, seeking direct American participation in the war against Germany. He made it clear that such action was indeed demanded if the United States was to be truly responsible but, ever the realist, he acknowledged that the interests of the United States had not yet been imperiled in a sufficiently obvious manner for the administration to be able to unite the nation in a declaration of war. From the moral perspective, the United States should have entered the war against Germany; it was in the self-interest of the United States to enter the war if that interest was interpreted in an enlight-

ened and far-seeing manner. But, practically, American involvement had to wait upon a clearer perception of that interest and responsibility. The attack upon Pearl Harbor in December 1941 united the nation in the war effort and in the fulfillment of its responsibilities. This example throws light on the relationship that Niebuhr sees between a nation's self-interest and a nation's ethical responsibilities: a nation *is* loyal to ideals that transcend its life, but it can act in loyalty to these ideals only if its vital interests are not prejudiced; it can do so more easily when the ideals and the interests coincide.⁴⁰

In a 1941 article, Niebuhr defines immoral behavior on the part of a nation in the following terms: "The essence of immorality is the denial or evasion of moral responsibility. An irresponsible nation is an immoral nation, while a nation that is becoming dimly aware of its responsibilities and acts accordingly is moving towards morality."⁴¹ Niebuhr defines morality as the recognition of the interdependence of life. This applies to persons as to nations, as both live in a web of relations with their fellows. A nation best fulfills its obligations by pursuing policies that recognize that its welfare is bound up with that of other nations. In that 1941 article, in which he was urging the repeal of the Neutrality Act, Niebuhr was arguing against isolationists, neutralists, and pacifists, and he wrote: "Do-nothingness for the sake of peace is not moral. It is pure escapism in a world where nations can escape no longer from the ethical consequences of their interdependence."⁴² This last sentence contains a key phrase that illuminates Niebuhr's view of politics and morality: *the ethical consequences of their interdependence*. The economic, technical, and commercial developments of the twentieth century had ethical implications. Because of growing interdependence between nations, the world is closer to a community of nations; consequently, nations now have new and expanded moral responsibilities to each other. To deny those responsibilities is immoral as well as counterproductive. Because of greater interdependence, an old-style narrowly defined national interest in terms of power and interest is no longer any nation's true self-interest.

Conclusion

Niebuhr was very much a man of his time, who rose to prominence with a message that resonated throughout his country at that juncture in its history. Yet his approach has relevance today as his warnings about human nature, politics, and the scope for moral action in our collective life still

hold. A truly realistic approach is one that takes account of the highest yearnings of human beings as well as their selfishness and recalcitrance. We must acknowledge both how far short of the ideal the current international economic and political order is and how great the obstacles to progress are. The tension between ideals and realities is the perennial stuff of politics, but the relationship between realism and idealism cannot be precisely fixed. With changing times, a new balance of realism and idealism is required in our outlook and in our actions. Niebuhr's own siding with capitalism and bourgeois democracy in the 1930s was pragmatic: he still considered them to be selfish and less than the highest at which humankind should aim. It was in the face of a threat to capitalist civilization from an even worse system that he swung his support behind the old order. To Niebuhr, for whom the idealism of the Christian gospel is required to save us from cynicism and complacency and the realism of the Christian faith to save us from sentimentality, it was clear where the danger lay in his own time. "In America at least," Niebuhr wrote in 1942, "the dangers of a perverse sentimentality have been greater than the perils of cynicism."⁴³ Times have changed and the reverse may now be the case. Indeed, the imbalance of power in the world today can only lead to injustice. Yet with vision, political leaders may see how the interests of their own people are best served, in the long run, by the creation of a more just international economic and social order. As ever, the attempt to secure only the national interest will fail. Only the attempt to go beyond the national interest toward justice will effectively secure the national interest. These failings of foreign policy are never just failures of reason. Human reason fails because it is always biased, partial, and self-interested. It is inevitably biased, not simply because of stupidity, but because of sin: "There is something more than mere ignorance in this stupidity," Niebuhr commented in the 1940s. "The stupidity of sin is in this darkness."⁴⁴ The sin is the original sin of all human individuals and groups: their pride and self-righteousness and arrogance and narrow egotism. Human egotism cannot be wished away and perfect peace and justice will never prevail in human politics. Yet with wisdom and courage, real opportunities can be recognized and significant steps taken to enhance the well-being of nations and the peace of the world. As Niebuhr forecast during World War II:

The new international community will be constructed neither by the pessimists, who believe it impossible to go beyond the balance of power principle in the relation of nations to each other; nor by the cynics, who

would organize the world by the imposition of imperial authority without regard to the injustices which inevitably flow from arbitrary and irresponsible power; nor yet by the idealists, who are under the fond illusion that a new level of historic development will emancipate history from these vexing problems. The new world must be built by resolute men who "when hope is dead will hope by faith"; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good.⁴⁵

Niebuhr's famous (and realist) prayer of 1943, which asks God for the 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, applies to our political endeavors as to any others.⁴⁶ To a political realist, it remains the nature of this world, as Woody Allen reminds us, that the lion may lie down with the lamb but the lamb won't get much sleep.

NOTES

- Epigraph: Woody Allen, *Without Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 25.
1. Niebuhr, "Why I Am Not a Christian," *The Christian Century* 44 (December 15, 1927): 1483.
 2. Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism," *The Atlantic Monthly* 139 (May 1927): 641, 640.
 3. Niebuhr, "Power and Justice," *Christianity and Society* 8 (Winter 1942): 10.
 4. Niebuhr, "Let the Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves," *The Christian Century* 48 (March 25, 1931): 402.
 5. Niebuhr, "Germany Must Be Told!" *The Christian Century* 50 (August 9, 1933): 1014–15.
 6. Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 247.
 7. Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 31.
 8. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1936), p. 68. Niebuhr's famous description of love as such is rejected by John Howard Yoder. The ideal of love has been lived up to in history by Jesus, writes the Mennonite pacifist, and Christians as a community should bear witness to this. Love, and love alone, therefore, should motivate Christians; John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), pp. 47, 52–84, 115.
 9. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (London: Nisbet, 1941), p. 256.
 10. Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 117.
 11. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 182.
 12. Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (London: Nisbet, 1938), p. 114.
 13. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 234.
 14. H. R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1962), p. 102.

15. Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 6.
16. Niebuhr, "Pacifism and the Use of Force," *The World Tomorrow* 11 (May 1928): 218.
17. Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, "The Ethics of War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," *War/Peace Report* 7 (February 1967): 3.
18. Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 92.
19. Niebuhr's claim that the Christian norm of love requires responsibility for the social order is rejected by Yoder (indeed, claims Yoder, in Niebuhr's approach social responsibility replaces love as the primary duty of the Christian). Niebuhr, Yoder asserts, lacks an adequate eschatology when he sees the Christian's duty in trying to control history and helping it to turn out right. Ultimately, Yoder is accusing Niebuhr of lacking an adequate faith in God, not a faith that God would make things turn out right in human history in human terms, but a faith that, even though may not turn out right in human history, there is still a reason for it. See John H. Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Menonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101-17.
20. Niebuhr, "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem," *Religion in Life* 1 (Spring 1932): 200.
21. Niebuhr, "Plans for World Reorganization," *Christianity and Crisis* 2 (October 19, 1942): 4.
22. Niebuhr, "The Christian Perspective on the World Crisis," *Christianity and Crisis* 4 (May 1, 1944): 3.
23. A comment on Kennan's *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* in Editorial Notes, *Christianity and Crisis* 11 (October 29, 1951): 139.
24. Edmund Fuller, ed., *The Christian Idea of Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 24; see also Niebuhr, "The Christian Perspective on the World Crisis," *Christianity and Crisis* 4 (May, 1, 1944): 2-5.
25. Fuller, ed., *The Christian Idea of Education*, p. 241.
26. Niebuhr, "The Bombing of Germany," *Christianity and Society* 8 (Summer 1943): 3.
27. Niebuhr to his classes at Union Seminary, New York, recorded in June C. Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1961), p. 149.
28. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (London: Nisbet, 1943), p. 294.
29. Niebuhr, "The Good People of Britain," *Radical Religion* 4 (Summer 1939): 7.
30. Niebuhr, "Our Responsibilities in 1942," *Christianity and Crisis* 1 (January 12, 1942): 1.
31. Niebuhr, "Streaks of Dawn in the Night," *Christianity and Crisis* 9 (December 12, 1942): 162.
32. Niebuhr, *The World Crisis and American Responsibility: Analyses by Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Ernest W. Lefever (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 40.
33. Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 130.
34. Reported by Kenneth W. Thompson, "Toward a Theory of International Politics," *American Political Science Review* 49 (September 1955): 741.
35. Niebuhr, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings 1911-1931*, ed. William G. Chrystal (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1977), p. 98; see also Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (London: Nisbet, 1952), pp. 147-49.
36. Paul Merkeley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1975), p. 118.
37. Niebuhr, "The Marshall Plan," *Christianity and Crisis* 7 (October 13, 1947): 2.

38. Niebuhr, "American Wealth and the World's Poverty," *Christianity and Society* 12 (Autumn 1947): 3.
39. Niebuhr, "Repeal the Neutrality Act!" *Christianity and Crisis* 1 (October 20, 1941): 1-2.
40. Niebuhr, *Europe's Catastrophe and Christian Faith* (London: Nisbet, 1930), p. 40.
41. Niebuhr, "Repeal the Neutrality Act!" p. 1.
42. Ibid.
43. Niebuhr, "The Churches and the War," *Town Meetings of the Air* (August 27, 1942).
44. Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1946), pp. 51, 48.
45. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, pp. 295-96.
46. Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. v; so popular did Niebuhr's prayer become that, Fox reports, it was credited variously in the post-1945 years to Marcus Aurelius, Francis of Assisi, and Friedrich Oetinger; see Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 290. The grace of God can change only some things, Niebuhr here suggests.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Bingham, June C. *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*. New York: Charles Scribners, 1961.
- Fox, Richard W. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- Merkeley, Paul. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account*. London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1975.
- McKeogh, Colm. *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Christianity and Power Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940.
- . *Christian Realism and Political Problems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.
- . "A Critique of Pacifism." *The Atlantic Monthly* 119 (May 1927): 637-41.
- . "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem." *Religion in Life* 1 (Spring 1932): 198-208.
- . *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. London: Nisbet, 1938.
- . "Germany Must Be Told!" *The Christian Century* 50 (August 9, 1933): 1014-15.
- . *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1936.
- . *Justice and Mercy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
- . "Let the Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves." *The Christian Century* 48 (March 25, 1931): 402-4.
- . "The Marshall Plan." *Christianity and Crisis* 7 (October 13, 1947): 2.
- . *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.
- . *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. 2 vols. London: Nisbet, 1941 and 1943.
- . "Power and Justice." *Christianity and Society* 8 (Winter 1942): 9-10.
- . *Reflections on the End of an Era*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- . "Streaks of Dawn in the Night." *Christianity and Crisis* 9 (December 12, 1942): 162-64.

- . *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings 1911–1931*. Edited by William G. Chrystal. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1977.
- . “Why I Am Not a Christian.” *The Christian Century* 44 (December 15, 1927): 1482–83.
- Yoder John H. *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971.
- . “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101–17.