

### The 1950s: The Ironies of American Power

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The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr

*Edited by Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin*

Print Publication Date: Mar 2021

Subject: Religion, Protestant Christianity, Theology and Philosophy of Religion, Religious Organizations

Online Publication Date: Feb 2021 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198813569.013.4

### Abstract and Keywords

In the 1950s, Reinhold Niebuhr advanced a theology of history rooted in his theology of the Cross. From that vantage point, he challenged conventional, dualistic interpretations of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and America's post-Second World War economic and technological prominence. While he favoured democracy over communism, African American rights over segregation, and abundance over scarcity, he rejected what he thought of as the human pretension to simplify such complex historical phenomena by appeals to American goodness. Instead Niebuhr saw the logic of the Cross as the surest route for navigating the confusion and ironies of history while also creating the conditions for greater forms of justice in history.

Keywords: irony, Cold War, civil rights, justice, theology of the Cross

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THEOLOGIAN and pastor Reinhold Niebuhr refused to approach history as a contest of clear winners and losers. Instead he preached that all civilizations, groups, and individuals won and lost, sowed goodness and evil in life and history and were in need of redemption. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Niebuhr framed this view of history—really a theology of history—by his interpretation of the doctrine of original sin and what he called the 'logic of the Cross'. This chapter explores how Niebuhr's theology of the Cross anchored and animated his analysis of history and demonstrates its centrality to his Christian realist vision of the intricacies and ambiguities of the 'vexing problem of our togetherness' (Niebuhr 1953b, 143).

Following the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther, Niebuhr stressed the paradox of the Cross (Hall 2009; Markham 2010). In one event, the crucifixion of Jesus revealed both the judgement and mercy of God. It was not that half the Cross judged and the other half saved humanity and history; the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus were interdependent and simultaneous. God's judgement and grace rendered human judgement provisional, a humbled position that inspired the possibility of graciousness among competing persons and interests. Humans were not privy to the exact nature of God's judgements or

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mercies; therefore, Niebuhr warned against persons, groups, or nations that pretended to know the contours of good and evil absolutely.

Niebuhr's mid-century sermon on the parable of the wheat and the tares captured the essence of this historical approach. The parable taught the opposite of good farming. The householder refused to separate the wheat (good) from the tares (evil), suggesting that 'perhaps more evil may come from the premature judgements of men about themselves and each other'. The mixture of creativity and destruction, love and self-love in history complicated 'final distinctions' in history. But 'moralists, whether they be Christian or secular' thought themselves master farmers and relished 'playing God to the universe'. Their pretension to strength 'was a strategy of weakness'. History did not (p. 60) cooperate. The incongruous twists and turns of life, the 'sinful conditions of history', mystified those who wanted and told a linear story of history (Niebuhr 1986b, 43-45; Niebuhr 1946, 190).

Niebuhr told a labyrinthine story of history, not a linear one. *The Irony of American History* provided his most accessible summary of that theology of history. The category of irony followed from his 'logic of the Cross'. The Cross was, of course, ironic. The humiliation and weakness of Jesus on the Cross ultimately signalled the triumph and power of God. The ironies Niebuhr observed in 1950s America stemmed from estimations of greatness, not weakness. America, Niebuhr observed, was 'less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy' (Niebuhr 1952, 3). The impotence originated in American pretensions to that very strength. The overestimation of the nation's power, wisdom, virtue, and way of life exposed weakness, foolishness, vice, and kinship with America's communist enemy (Niebuhr 1952, 3, 154).

Niebuhr understood these ironies as predictable symptoms of faith in humanity rather than God. During the Cold War, the stakes of such human pretension were high. The historic contest of power between the United States and the Soviet Union tempted both empires, in Niebuhr's eyes, to treat their respective ways of life as God, as the redeemer of humanity. Such messianism ensured neither redemption nor a winner, but rather threatened nuclear annihilation. For Niebuhr, combating that moralism called for a theology of history premised on the theology of the Cross—the final, loving gesture of God towards the human saga.

## Reinhold Niebuhr in Context

Niebuhr combined his theology of history with a theology of action. As America's war machine slowed after the Second World War, Niebuhr's career and influence accelerated. He was active in the labour movement, Americans for Democratic Action, the World Council of Churches, the State Department, and he founded and edited the journal *Christianity and Crisis* while publishing widely elsewhere. Then it all came to a standstill. The release of *Irony of American History* in 1952 coincided with a devastating series of strokes. After months of recovery his writing continued but his public theological activity waned.

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Niebuhr's cultural rise and his confrontation with physical weakness paralleled America's experience of both ascendancy and limitation after the Second World War. With Europe and Japan in rubble, the United States stood alone as the pre-eminent power on the globe. Events challenged America's global position almost immediately. Russian efforts to secure its interests from Moscow to Berlin stressed the European recovery. The communist triumph in China (1949) and the Soviet Union's successful test of an atomic bomb (1949) signalled a new rival to a democratic way of life. By 1950, (p. 61) bullets flew between American forces and Chinese-backed Koreans, adding a hot war to the entrenched cold one posed by duelling nuclear powers. Cold War stand-offs and proxy conflicts continued throughout the 1950s including, but not limited to, the coup d'état in Guatemala (1954), the Suez Canal crisis in Egypt (1956), and the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Uprising (1956).

At home, Americans experienced dizzying abundance. After nearly two decades of depression and war rationing, a consumer economy roared to life. New suburban homes, automobiles, televisions, washing machines, holidays, and the disposable income to purchase them filled the imaginations and the reality of citizens across the country. By comparison to earlier generations, Americans after the Second world War had won the lottery. Yet cultural commentators simultaneously documented the consequences of that surge in wealth and comfort. Concerns about rampant consumerism, bored suburban housewives, listless teenagers, and white-collar emasculation preoccupied media accounts of the new-found prosperity.

The economic whipsaw joined other powerful domestic forces including a red scare, a revival of religion, an 'age of psychology', a space race, and an accelerating Civil Rights Movement. These forces, among others, shaped Americans in dramatic ways. The 'red menace' catalyzed patriotic narratives of American exceptionalism blessed by a pro-United States God. Psychological balm and positive thinking added to the self-congratulation and became requisite in religious, business, and pop culture circles. After Sputnik's launch in 1957, self-congratulation turned to self-flagellation. American leaders, educators, and everyday citizens faced the public embarrassment of falling behind the Soviet Union in scientific and technological advances.

Meanwhile African Americans experienced a different America, one exceptional for its discrimination. Generations of resistance against that disenfranchisement coalesced in the late 1940s and 1950s, sparked by the desegregation of the military in 1948 and the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that struck down segregation in public schools. One year after *Brown*, Martin Luther King Jr led the incredible Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56. For thirteen months, determined African Americans walked and car-pooled in an effort to stop the Jim Crow practice of privileging whites on the buses. The boycott catapulted King and the Civil Rights Movement to the forefront of American consciousness. King led subsequent desegregation campaigns until his assassination in 1968.

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A host of novelists and cultural critics chronicled and scrutinized both the placid surface and tormented depth of the post-war moment. They included, but were not limited to: Hannah Arendt, Saul Bellow, William F. Buckley, Ralph Ellison, John Kenneth Galbraith, Mary McCarthy, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Lionel Trilling, and John Updike. These authors' books, articles, and, for some, *Time* magazine cover stories made the era one of hyper-awareness of the promising and perilous historical moment. They contributed to a cultural mood poet W. H. Auden characterized as the 'age of anxiety'.

Niebuhr's theological criticism joined and influenced many of these public intellectuals, particularly Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Yet scholars have since labelled this era not an (p. 62) 'age of anxiety' but an age of consensus. In these accounts, the chastened temper of the post-war era, excepting African American activism, was a safe one. It dissected but never truly challenged the conventions of individualism, consumer capitalism, and democracy. From this dominant perspective, Niebuhr appears as an establishment figure, arguing within the confines of agreed-upon institutions and social mores (Pells 1985; McCarragher 2000; Craig 2003; Greif 2015).

Charges that Niebuhr belonged to an establishment tradition have several variations. On issues of race and gender, scholars rate him as a gradualist supporter of African American equality and, for some feminist scholars, a near chauvinist for what they understand as his male-centric interpretation of sin (Cone 2011; Miles 2001). Liberal and conservative thinkers, Christian or not, appreciate his thought, but typically appropriate it too easily for their left or right perspectives (Crouter 2010; Diggins 2011; Elie 2007; Fox 1986). Often these interpretations insinuate or outright argue that his theories of human nature, power, and justice do not stand or fall on the basis of Christianity (Marsden 2013; Hollinger 2013; Hauerwas 2001). Sometimes Niebuhr appeared to agree. Taken together, these perspectives view Niebuhr as a toughened moderate whose ideas pushed mid-century boundaries, but often not far enough. This view of Niebuhr presents a legacy both celebrated and lamented, whose supposed inconsistency of thought allows right and left to cherry-pick his ideas to suit their disparate causes.

Niebuhr's fallibility—something he readily acknowledged—and his unsystematic, paradoxical theology invite these criticisms and estimations of his work. They also demonstrate his core methodology. Niebuhr treated history and the big sociopolitical issues of his day in both/and (not either/or), synthetic, and Christian terms. This focus on the majesty of history interpreted through the majesty of God kept him suspicious of human articulations of meaning and purpose, justice and injustice. Human truths, however laudable, were always fragmentary and self-regarding, unable to muster the humility, charity, and love necessary for greater approximations of human flourishing and community.

That was Niebuhr's sermon, the medium of his pastoral vocation. Too often the vast body of work on his writings forgets Ursula Niebuhr's reminder: 'Reinhold Niebuhr was a preacher and a pastor' (U. Niebuhr 1976, 1). Viewing Niebuhr as perpetually speaking from the pulpit roots his suspicions of humanity in the basic homiletic formula of Law and Gospel. He objected to what he understood to be the idolatries of politics, economics, rea-

son-science-technology, and progress because of their legalism and the ironic contraventions of these four organizations of life: political idealism turned evil; rational economics turned irrational; the promise of science, technology, and reason turned perilous; belief in progress turned to despair. Instead he read history through the lens of the Cross because for him it revealed those false gods and yet answered history in love. In other words, as Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard had done before him, Niebuhr proclaimed the foolishness of humanity in sore need of redemption by the foolishness of the Cross (Niebuhr 1949, 139–50).

### (p. 63) **The Idolatries of Cold War Politics**

Niebuhr entered the Cold War atmosphere with fervent warnings about communism, especially Soviet communism. At his most strident, he called it a ‘demonic religio-political creed’, and authored the essay ‘Why Is Communism So Evil?’ (1952, 3; Niebuhr 1953b, 33–42). Such language has invited interpreters of Niebuhr’s thought to characterize him as a typical representative of 1950s hawkish anti-communism (Stevens 2010, 16, 62–63; Mattson 2004; Craig 2003, 81, 86–89; Fox 1996, 247). This view fails to recognize that Soviet communism under Stalin had perpetrated real evil. It also fails to recognize that with few exceptions, and in contrast to his contemporaries, Niebuhr portrayed American democratic capitalism as the lesser evil, not the greater good (Inboden 2008; Thompson 2007). America was less ‘city on a hill’ and more modern-day Babylon (Niebuhr, 1953b, 144–145; 160). He summarized his suspicion of democratic capitalism and communism by calling it a ‘debate between errors, or between half-truth and half-truth’ (Niebuhr 1952, 91).

For Niebuhr, their half-truths fuelled delusions of grandeur reminiscent of Cervantes’ classic literary figure, Don Quixote. Like Quixote, both civilizations operated as knights errant. Their chivalrous quests to save history differed in degree, but not in kind. Liberalism prescribed social harmony through economic, educational, social, and technological reform, while communism focused singly on the abolition of private property as the answer to social-political cohesion. To Niebuhr, the many errands of America distributed its power and made it less prone to the tyranny of communism’s single errand (1952, 19, 22). In the end, Niebuhr damned America by faint praise: America was ‘brought to judgment’ by the greater, ‘demonic fool’ of the Soviet Union (1952, 12).

Niebuhr credited the lesser evil of America to the negative political genius of James Madison. America’s democratic stability had less to do with the Jeffersonian vision of the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Instead Niebuhr cited Madison’s ‘Christian realism’ and corresponding ‘shrewd awareness of the potential conflicts of power and passion in every community’ (1952, 96, 98) as the reason for American democratic stability. That was an irony of theological importance: pessimism about human goodness, not fabled American optimism, underpinned the structure of the United States government. Madison’s suspicion of human nature and faction explained the Constitution’s checks and balances, mechanisms that blocked runaway power. The found-

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ing father's contention that humans were 'more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good' (Madison 2013) expressed Niebuhr's concerns about rampant illusions of sociopolitical harmony. Rather, for Niebuhr, Madison planned the frustrations and logjams of American politics to diffuse the power individuals and groups craved.

Niebuhr's appreciation of Madison was second only to his appreciation of Lincoln. Madison diagnosed history. Lincoln, for Niebuhr, modelled a Christian politics that (p. 64) could save it. Niebuhr regularly invoked Lincoln's second inaugural address as the archetype of a Christian politics (Erwin 2013). Niebuhr signalled Lincoln's importance to his theology of history by closing *The Irony of American History* with an analysis of the famous speech.

According to Niebuhr, Lincoln in his second inaugural address asserted the guilt of both the North and South for the bloody Civil War, a conflict sparked by their mutual unwillingness to end slavery. Southern defence of slavery was more conspicuous, and Niebuhr quoted Lincoln's moral condemnation of it: 'It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces' (Niebuhr 1952, 172). Yet Niebuhr admired that Lincoln finished the sentence 'but let us judge not, that we be not judged'. The speech represented for Niebuhr 'almost a perfect model' of the importance of moral resoluteness—slavery was wrong—and the recognition that final judgement remained with God: 'The Almighty has His own purposes'. Lincoln's deferral to the Almighty and his 'double attitude' of judgement and grace, Niebuhr observed, was the only source for the 'true charity' that prompted the president's magnanimous phrase, 'with malice toward none, with charity for all' (Niebuhr 1952, 171–172).

Niebuhr saw Lincoln's theology as emblematic of his 'logic of the Cross', and he advanced it as the standard for negotiating the Cold War. Lincoln's insistence on the culpability of North and South ruled out America's 'effort to establish the righteousness of our cause by a monotonous reiteration of the virtues of freedom compared with the evils of tyranny'. It provided a vivid reminder that America, facing a supposedly 'godless' enemy, was 'never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire' (1952, 173; Niebuhr 1959, 340–341).

In this way, Niebuhr's Christian, lesser-of-two-evils anti-communism differed from the dominant anti-communist expressions of the early 1950s. Niebuhr's views of course contrasted with McCarthyism's hysteria, but also with the zero-sum religious opposition to communism from popular evangelical and Catholic leaders such as Billy Graham and Bishop Fulton Sheen. Neither did his Christian Realism fit comfortably into the liberal, often atheist anti-communism of the likes of Lionel Trilling, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Thurgood Marshall, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morgenthau.

# The Idolatries of Economics

The Cold War pitched two rival economic systems against one another. The irony of the rivalry, however, was that they were not truly opposites. Niebuhr linked communism and capitalism through their mutual overestimation of economics as the prime mover of humans and human relations. ‘Our orators profess abhorrence of the communist creed of “materialism”’, Niebuhr observed, but American capitalism demonstrated that ‘we are rather more successful practitioners of materialism as a working creed than the communists’ (1952, 7). Their shared materialist fixations led to false confidence about the harmonies possible by management of the economic sphere.

Communists, Niebuhr repeatedly warned, offered a single source resolution for the complexity of history. Abolition of private property ‘guarantee[d] the return of mankind to the state of original innocence’ (1952, 19). This economic idealism intended for the betterment of the working class instead created a capricious party elite vested with oligarchic control over economic and political power.

While communists pressed for the elimination of unequal distribution of wealth as the means towards harmony, capitalists asserted that wealth accumulation resolved conflicts in history. Proponents of capitalism understood self-interest in primarily economic terms, equating ‘interest with rationality’. That is, Niebuhr contended, capitalists naively presumed self-interest to be ‘inherently harmless’ (1952, 33).

Niebuhr faulted both ideologies for neglecting other expressions of power. Glory, honour, ambition, envy, hatred, love, and other cravings also shaped human behaviour. The concept of ‘economic man’ simply could not account for the ‘mystery of human incentives’ such as the ‘desire for security, for social prestige and approval, and the desire for power’ (1953b, 88). Economic power, moreover, was not equilibrated through enlightened self-interest or by the absence of property. Capitalist hierarchy and conspicuous consumption wreaked havoc within such societies while the power of the bureaucrat, the ‘manager and manipulator’, bred its own dysfunction and conflict within communist organization (1952, 31, 33, 93-94, 95, 104).

Niebuhr’s certainty about communism’s error on the issue of private property allowed him to analyse capitalism in more detail. Capitalism’s principal virtue was, not unlike democratic checks and balances, the diffusion of economic power. Niebuhr found a partial truth in Adam Smith’s vision of an everybody-wins-theory of capitalism where self-interest, not benevolence, motivated butchers, brewers, and bakers to specialize, produce good products, and exchange them for a profit (1952, 92-93). With so many economic actors producing and buying goods, economic power levelled without excessive regulation or coercion.

Niebuhr’s recognition of the virtue of diffuse economic power prefaced his two objections to the standard capitalist narrative. First, Niebuhr reminded Americans of the fact that the vast economic production of the United States owed a significant debt to the rich, untapped natural resources of the continent. By comparison to Europe, Africa, or Asia,

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America had been relatively uninhabited, which preserved pristine tracks of land for settlement, farming, logging, mining, and drilling for fossil fuels. The economic opportunity in these arenas expanded as the United States consolidated its borders through the Louisiana Purchase and by nearly 'wiping out the native peoples in the way', and using force to acquire Texas and California after the Mexican-American war. Against these realities, Niebuhr refused to credit American prosperity on self-congratulatory terms of pluck and ingenuity. Rather luck, aggression, and historical accident contributed to the fortunes of the nation (Niebuhr 1952, 45-46, 48-49, 54; 1957, 143).

Second, Niebuhr argued, the nation's indisputable material abundance, however accidental its origins and management, shackled Americans' sense of meaning and purpose (p. 66) to acquisition. This veneration of things 'created a culture which makes "living standards" the final norm of the good life and which regards the perfection of techniques as the guarantor of every cultural as well as every social-moral value' (Niebuhr 1952, 57). Embarrassing ironies of American 'fixation with the gadgets and goods of life' (1953b, 102-103) confused the culture. Americans, Niebuhr averred, discovered that it bred decay as much as virtue, unhappiness as much as happiness, and global suspicion as much as global respect (Niebuhr 1952, 43-64).

These ambiguities demonstrated once again that finite gods—in this case the god of prosperity and the cult of happiness—produced incomplete effects. As he closed his chapter in *Irony* considering 'Prosperity and Virtue', Niebuhr offered instead a pessimistic and hopeful Christian orientation that accepted the incongruities while reaching 'serenity within and above' them. The change of perspective necessary for achieving that serenity has become among his most famous articulations of the faith.

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

(Niebuhr 1952, 63)

Niebuhr placed this sweeping statement relatively early in the book, and yet it reads more like a possible conclusion to his analysis. The odd placement of the sentiment may have reflected how seriously he understood the threat posed by the conflation of happiness and virtue with prosperity. It may have also reflected an oversight of the editing process given his tendency to draw material for his books from stand-alone sermons or essays where a conclusion like this one would not have been out of place. Regardless, faith in comfort introduced 'larger incongruities' and, Niebuhr warned, prompted the 'derisive' laughter of God (1952, 63).



## The Idolatries of Reason, Science, and Technology

The threat of nuclear war supplied Niebuhr with an incredible example of the irony of the American post-war moment. Flush with cash and opportunity, Americans were yet 'suspended in a hell of global insecurity' (1952, 7). The 'hell' confounded because the development of the atomic bomb hinged upon the best of human ingenuity, organization, technology, and economic production. It was, Niebuhr maintained, a marvel of human ability, but it launched an arms race capable of ending human existence.

(p. 67) Niebuhr understood the mushroom cloud as both cause and consequence of American faith in reason, science, and technology. The possibility of nuclear conflagration epitomized his broader worries about overconfidence in the tools and techniques typical of the 'dogmas of the Enlightenment' (Niebuhr 1955, 138). For Niebuhr, scientists and technocrats treated reason as their god and forecasted that its increase promised a benevolent and objective direction for history.

Niebuhr fiercely challenged this orientation. He warned that scientific and technological knowledge was power, and power was never merely or mostly beneficent or objective. Individuals and groups were 'notoriously interested and unobjective' (1953b, 75). Drawing on Marx's notion of 'ideological taint', Niebuhr pressed America's Enlightenment culture to recognize 'the conscious dishonesty' of ideology (Niebuhr 1953b, 90, 78; 1953a, 239). Just as Marx criticized capitalists for arguing their interests on the assumption of capitalism's truth, Niebuhr resisted rationalists arguing their interests on the assumption of rationality and scientists arguing on the assumptions of science. 'Actually the logical process' evinced bias: 'we readily see how the premises determine the conclusions and how interest determines the adoption of the premises' (1955, 151). Scientists and technocrats no less than social scientists lived as 'creatures and creators' within the governing assumptions of a given time and place (1953b, 4). In sum, for Niebuhr, ideologies—whether capitalist or scientific—as well as their practitioners were hardly neutral.

Yet advocates of reason, science, and technology often claimed impartiality, and worse still, 'claimed to know too much' (Niebuhr 1986a, 237). Such overconfidence bred dogmatism in religious circles to be sure, but also characterized much of secular, scientific thought. 'The prestige' and unquestioned 'scientific method' mirrored the 'priestly incantations' that established religious authority (Niebuhr 1953b, 4).

These pursuits were not without authority, however. On the contrary, Niebuhr defended the value of what he called the 'cultural disciplines' and technological advance. Natural science and social science discovered coherences about the world and human behaviour unknown and unspecified by biblical revelation. To doubt these contributions belittled human freedom and creativity, which, in Niebuhr's view, contradicted God's creation of those capacities within humanity. The cumulative knowledge and wisdom of culture allowed humans to see the world, just not as clearly as they supposed. Therefore Niebuhr counselled humanity to follow Paul's admonition and admit, 'we see through a glass dark-

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ly'. Paul's perspective critiqued the rationalists' tendency to equate sight with clairvoyance without eliminating the fact that humans could see.

Apart from the irony of reason and science creating the atomic bomb, fostering ideological taints, and claiming perfect vision, Niebuhr argued that individuals, groups, and nations did not live on the plane of reason alone. The experience of life involved passions, emotions, and incongruities not captured by the purported 'known causes and consequences', of science; moreover, such knowledge still fell short of being self-explanatory. The 'known causes and consequences' rang hollow as explanation for the experience of 'ethnic loyalties, cultural traditions, social hopes, envies and fears' (Niebuhr 1952, 41). The aspiration of reason to overcome or manage what Niebuhr called the 'organic' (p. 68) features of human life missed the 'fact that human communities are never purely artefacts of the human mind and will'. Life, in short, is lived in a dimension of value, and not merely at the level of technical and quantitative efficiencies (1952, 142).

These multivalent 'irrational' allegiances of self and group interest frustrated and surprised those who saw resolution in history through increased reason, science, and technology. Human vitality made history unpredictable. 'We feel', Niebuhr observed, 'that history has tricked us'. The deception came from the worship of reason: 'Mind was to not just be king; it was to be Messiah' (1957, 136). But for Niebuhr humans were both more and less magnificent than mind; they were mind, body, and spirit. History, furthermore, proved that the worship of mind was a false god that sowed evil as easily as it might contribute to the common good.

## The Idolatry of Progress

These confidences in humanity produced a comprehensive idolatry of American culture: belief in a doctrine of progress. Ever alert to this presumption, Niebuhr summarized his long-standing objections to it under the title 'From Progress to Perplexity' in 1957. In this vision of history, 'the present is the culmination of the past and the steppingstone to a brighter future'. It was as if history moved 'as an escalator carrying man to perfection' (Niebuhr 1957, 135, 136; 1949, 1-13).

Niebuhr argued that this progressive eschatology rested on four truths. Science could control nature by discovery of the laws of nature; reason could control human nature by expunging the irrational, especially religion; technology could control lived environments by providing tools to expand freedom; and capitalism could control economic activity by the laws of the marketplace (1957, 136-137). Together these four truths or faiths, as he saw them, would protect humanity from the caprice of life and allow humans to manage, even master, history and human destiny.

Niebuhr countered that history and humanity were not so predictable. The ambiguity of both meant 'belief in the perfectibility of man has had to make rolling readjustments to fact' (1957, 137). The litany of twentieth-century readjustments especially embarrassed the notion of progress. During the First World War, nations harnessed technology for an

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unprecedented scale of human destruction; the staggering loss of life belied the idea that technology led 'automatically to human betterment'. A decade later, the global economic depression challenged the 'benevolent working out of economic self-interest'. In the 1930s, Nazism, a party emerging from 'one of history's most lettered nations', perpetrated 'technically ingenious cruelties', which disproved 'the notion that universal education would raise men to rational virtue'. The Cold War highlighted the irony of 'rival bands of world savers' intent on the uplift of society, who 'now threaten each other with weapons' capable of ending history (1957, 138, 140–141).

These histories, indeed all of history, animated Niebuhr's rejection of past as prologue to progress. They affirmed instead a conclusion he quoted from the *Times Literary Supplement* (p. 69): 'the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian church' (Niebuhr 1965, 24). The modern world, however, denied this doctrine in favour of the self-justifying doctrine of historical progress. For Niebuhr this meant that the managers and masters of history forgot that they were as much creatures of history as they were creators of it. They forgot they were unreasonable and reasonable, warmongers and peacemakers, blind and far-seeing. They forgot, in short, that the 'progress of history arms the evil, as well as the good, with greater potency' (Niebuhr 1986a, 246).

These unreal expectations of historical mastery always disappointed, created confusion, and tempted humans towards two dangerous responses. On the one hand, Niebuhr warned that frustration at unrealized progress might encourage redoubled efforts to control history, including waging 'preventive war'. On the other hand, Niebuhr cautioned that the same frustration might propel them 'into the lethargy of despair' (1957, 144–145).

Niebuhr refused to be trapped by such either/or logic. He argued instead that human beings have always been 'neither masters of our fate nor pawns relieved of the burden of responsibility'. While the tragedies and trials of history undermined easy notions of progress, recognition of that strife did not preclude action or abolish motivation for improving the world. 'Men', he wrote, 'do not have to believe they are permanently or progressively resolving their problems in order to take them seriously'. On the contrary:

Men have always, with a true spiritual instinct, reserved their highest admiration for those heroes who resisted evil at the risk or price of fortune and life without too much hope of success. Sometimes their very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible.

(Niebuhr 1957, 145)

Niebuhr's insight overturned the simple and disingenuous winner-loser dichotomy that has prevailed in American culture. Positive interventions in history were possible but the outcomes were not absolute, linear, or innocent. To think otherwise cast the problem too simply and too dangerously. 'Progress or despair', he concluded, 'is a choice between two poles of foolishness'. Overestimation or underestimation of progress all but guaranteed retrogression (Niebuhr 1957, 145; 1949, 1–13).

# The Love of God in History

The sting of Niebuhr's prophetic criticism has led to his reputation as an intellectual 'counter puncher'. Critics and champions alike admire the brilliance of his critical capacities, but Niebuhr's defensive posture has raised questions about his positive contribution to social and political organization. They wonder, to follow the metaphor, whether Niebuhr entered the ring of history with more than feints, slides, and counters. In other words, did he have a concrete, offensive strategy for navigating the dangers of the world's pugilistic realities?

(p. 70) Niebuhr regularly asked this question of himself. Amid the 'the fact that we ought to love one another, but do not', he inquired, 'how do we establish tolerable community in view of the fact that all men, including Christians, are inclined to take advantage of each other?'. He believed Christianity, for all its sinful expressions, spoke constructively to that dilemma. The task was straightforward: 'to present the Gospel of redemption in Christ to nations as well as to individuals'. The task was also daunting because it called on modern people and nations to lose their life in order to save it through a radical apprehension of divine love at the Cross (Niebuhr 1953b, 109, 111, 159).

This was the work of a preacher, and Reinhold Niebuhr had never really left the pulpit. Like all good parsons and without fail, he proclaimed 'the ageless Gospel to the special problems of each age' (1949, vii). As he saw it, the 'various economic and social evils' of history called for 'the full testimony of a gospel of judgement and grace to bear upon all of human life' (1953a, 242). No one doubts the power and legacy of Niebuhr's articulation of 'the full testimony of a gospel of judgement'. Few appreciate his 'full testimony' of grace, his insistence that 'the suffering divine love' of God was 'the final coherence of life' (1953b, 184). This was a view that made the 'law of love...not something extra to be added to whatever morality we establish in our social relations' but 'the guiding principle of them' (1953a, 238).

Augustine shaped Niebuhr's view that love is a central force in human history. The universality of 'man' using 'his freedom to make himself falsely the center of his existence does not change the fact that love rather than self-love is the law of his existence'. The power of love over self-love, while no simple possibility, nevertheless creates possibilities for 'the most tolerable form of peace and justice under conditions set by sin' (Niebuhr 1953b, 130, 131). That understanding prompted a well-known refrain of Niebuhr's: 'Love may be the motive of social action but...justice must be the instrument of love' (Niebuhr 2013, xxxii).

Yet Niebuhr thought Augustine's interpretation missed just how radical the motive of love is. The love of God inspires 'answering love' towards God and neighbour—not just a love of neighbour—as a sign of the love of God (Niebuhr 1953b, 153, 165). The motive of love is a sacrificial one modelled after the Cross and the 'insistence that the self must sacrifice itself for the other' (1953b, 140). The sacrifice of the Cross beckons individuals and nations to forgive, to follow the paradoxical message of the Cross: 'self-realization through

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self-giving'. The humbled position of being forgiven—whether as individual or nation—creates 'the only possible peace within and between human communities' (Niebuhr 1946, 187).

Niebuhr's understanding of the resolution of history through love offended modern sensibilities as much as his diagnosis of history in light of original sin. The revelation of God's love at the Cross scandalized human pride. It forced a double humility on the part of humanity. First, it positioned human beings as constitutionally sinful. Second, it positioned them as constitutionally loved. And the word of love could be just as assaulting as the diagnosis of sin. To be worthy of love despite known unworthiness flattens self-justifying pride or self-justifying despair. It frees human beings to express their glory and misery without being seduced by either their greatness or weakness. The Cross, (p. 71) then, renders individuals and communities as ultimately dependent, not independent, and saved, rather than self-saving. Released from the perfectionism of justification by achievement and power, and its consequent messianic illusion, Niebuhr preached the hope of a humanity 'baptized into Christ's death', so that they 'may rise with him to newness of life' (1953b, 201; 1955, 238; 1949, 143–144, 240).

## Conclusion

Niebuhr affirmed this scandalous truth and defended its capacity for working out the problems of history. It provided an alternative to the regnant idealistic or cynical approaches to politics, economics, technology, and progress. Idealism supplied the pretensions and vanities of these endeavours that invite God's judgement while cynicism proved hostile to human aspirations, with its vision of a dog-eat-dog world of self-interest (Niebuhr 1953a, 241). Niebuhr also avoided a mid-century absurdist posture towards history that understood existence as 'basically tragic' or 'basically pathetic' (1952, 167). Idealists, cynics, and absurdist evangelized a false heaven and hell whereas the drama of Christ preserved the promise and peril of every life and historical moment (Niebuhr 1955, 154–155).

During his career and after his death, Niebuhr's thoroughly Christian presuppositions have provoked the ire of his critics, some of them fellow Christians, and the ardent but ultimately disingenuous embrace of many of his admirers. Morton White challenged Niebuhr on grounds of his belief: 'One thing is perfectly clear, and that is that Niebuhr without theology is a pale Niebuhr indeed' (White 1976, 259). Nearly seventy years later historian David Hollinger repeated that objection, censuring Niebuhr for privileging Christianity as the ultimate source of truth (Hollinger 2013, 213). These curious analyses invite the question: would White or Hollinger fault a secularist for privileging secular thought? His Christian critics, conservative and liberal, faulted him for not privileging the elements of the faith that most aligned with their own perspective. Many of Niebuhr's admirers likewise refused the Christian dimension of his perspective. On both counts, Niebuhr 'lost' them because he employed the 'irrationalities' of Christianity to expose the limitations of reason. He therefore disturbed generations of interpreters because he mea-

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sured history by the paradoxes of faith, rather than by the certitudes of human technique (Crouter 2010, 3–18).

Yet Niebuhr's theology of history was neither a blind nor otherworldly walk by faith. He offered a practical theology for realization in history. Three of the world's most important historical figures, one analysed by Niebuhr and the other two influenced by him, demonstrate the applicability of his Christian perspective. Abraham Lincoln's theologically rich second inaugural address, has become uniformly recognized as one of the greatest speeches ever delivered on American soil. Its greatness, as Niebuhr argued, owes to Lincoln's insistence on shared guilt, shared consequence, and shared charity. These traits animated Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr as well, and (p. 72) Niebuhr figured prominently in their respective defiance of Nazism and American apartheid.

Finally, Niebuhr's own life witnessed to the power of a public intellectual guided by the judgement and mercy of God. Like Lincoln's second inaugural address, Niebuhr's writings—from the Serenity Prayer, to his statement that human nature made democracy both possible and necessary, to the *Irony* quotation 'Nothing worth doing...'—have achieved a timeless quality. His public activities as an intrepid participant and founder of civic organizations; a prolific author and speaker; an editor of leading Christian journals; and a policy advisor to the State Department placed him in the thick of the perplexities of his moment. In particular, he became a leading voice against the either-or Cold War logic that positioned America as an innocent in a world threatened by communism. He exposed both overt and covert expressions of racism that typified post-Second World War America. And he disputed 1950s unqualified faith in capitalism, science, and reason, especially the tendency to view these endeavours as leading automatically towards progress. These contributions place Niebuhr in the pantheon of the nation's best and most critical minds and distinguish him as the most important American intellectual of the twentieth-century.

His distinction is beautifully ironic. Like the prophet-heroes Lincoln, Bonhoeffer, and King, it rested on Christian humility. Niebuhr saw the Cross as the source of that humility. It found all individuals and nations wanting and justified. This levelled human distinctions on the basis of shared guilt and on the basis of a final, divine love. This orientation challenged theories of history that presumed to save history 'by a victory over our foe or by the triumph of our scheme of wisdom'. Such winner-loser ideologies 'only [brought] the final evil into history by the claim of a final righteousness'. Christianity asserted instead 'we are saved, not by what we can do, but by the hope that the Lord of history will bring this mysterious drama to a conclusion, that the suffering Christ will in the end be the triumphant Lord' (Niebuhr 1959, 341). Niebuhr's theology of history was finally the illogic of divine love at the Cross, a vision that doubted the calculated political economic, social, and scientific approaches to history in favour of a vision of love active in history.

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