

How to Read Reinhold Niebuhr, After 9–11

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Attempts to appropriate Reinhold Niebuhr always end by transgressing the most enduring elements of his thought. As the great twentieth-century theorist of original sin, the phrase *we are guilty* looms in every book he wrote, sermon he gave, and essay he revised. Those who use his work for polemical purposes, or to give their own prescriptions a veneer of seriousness, inevitably exempt themselves from the corruptions about which he warned. Niebuhr is called a prophet, but, curiously, his jeremiads never seem to be directed at those invoking his name.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the uneven efforts after 9–11 to use Niebuhr to sanctify a plethora of policy positions. He has been construed as an exemplar of nearly every imaginable approach to politics, particularly foreign affairs, a phenomenon thoroughly documented in Paul Elie's essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*, tellingly titled "A Man for All Reasons." Niebuhr emerges in Elie's piece as a kind of Rorschach test, someone in whose work readers have infused all their sundry preoccupations, a thinker they ultimately interpret in their own image. Curiously, this spectacle has not led to a different line of argument about Niebuhr's theology and politics: if a thinker, with at least some superficial plausibility, can be arrogated for almost every cause, perhaps it means this entire mode of approaching him is the problem? A man for all reasons might be a man for none at all, a figure who illuminates general conditions rather than posthumously endorses specific policies. Indeed what is most interesting about Niebuhr is the way he resists labeling, not because his thought is marked by a snide

contrarianism, but rather because of the facile contemporary categories through which we try to interpret him.

Raising this possibility, however, draws us into more vexing territory. Efforts to channel Niebuhr have forestalled the deeper and more profound questions about why we have turned to him. By squabbling about what Niebuhr "really" would do today, the debate over the importance of his work has remained rather stultifying, almost petty. The least helpful approach to his writings is to mine them for clues as to what position he would take on issues that have emerged decades after his death, attempting to conscript him for the ends of some political faction. The vital matter is not who is "right" in the fevered arguments over what Niebuhr might conclude, say, about our adventure in Iraq or our efforts in Afghanistan – unanswerable queries to begin with – but rather what the *reemergence* of interest in his work tells us about the particular political, intellectual, and religious moment in which we find ourselves.

The Unaccommodated Niebuhr

One would have hoped that the recent reissue of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* would have facilitated such in inquiry. And, with some effort, it still might. But the text is marred by a new introduction by Andrew Bacevich, one that barely makes it a few pages before mentioning President Bush and Iraq, as if the chief reason for reading the book is for its prospective condemnation of cowboy diplomacy. *Irony* displays the mature Niebuhr at the height of his powers, it being the last major project he would complete before illness beset him, in varying degrees, for the rest of his career. Besides the comprehensive, utterly brilliant *Nature and Destiny of Man*, *Irony* deserves to be considered as insightful as anything Niebuhr wrote. Unfortunately,

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Bacevich's introduction encourages us to read it in the narrowest fashion possible – that is, as a commentary on current events. Rather than allowing *Irony* to lead us away from contemporary policy debates, and consider, if for a moment, the broad sweep of American history, Bacevich uses its reissue mostly as an opportunity to provide his entry into the ongoing contest to secure Niebuhr's imprimatur for a particular posture towards the war in Iraq.

What is most striking about Bacevich's introduction is its utter lack of a Niebuhrian sensibility. It is written with a high tone of indignation, without a trace of Niebuhr's keen sense of irony – all the stranger given the book's central theme. To take one example, Bacevich praises Niebuhr for encouraging us, in the latter's words, to recall "the morally ambiguous element" in our political causes. This surely is an important part of Niebuhr's teaching, and Bacevich is correct to call our attention to it. But then he goes on to note, on the same page, that "The illusions of Osama bin Laden find their parallel in the illusions of George W. Bush" because both are "intent on radically changing the Middle East," as if such a comparison is analytically useful in any measure. When these two figures are considered of a piece with one another, it is fair to say ambiguity and nuance are no longer present. What begins as a call for acknowledging moral complexity ends with a rather crude instance of shunting aside real ethical distinctions.

One never gets the sense that Bacevich doubts for a moment the total righteousness of his position. And it is the surety of being in the right that makes his reading of Niebuhr so lacking in balance, so prone to ignore countervailing statements and arguments that should give him pause. Niebuhr's thought simply is too dialectical to be used to make straightforward pronouncements. For instance, Bacevich rightfully notes that, "In Niebuhr's view, history is a drama in which both the story line and the denouement remain hidden from view. The twists and turns that the plot has already taken suggest the need for modesty in forecasting what is still to come." We should not, then, "force history to do our bidding." All this is fair enough, and a genuine part of Niebuhr's project is to push against a naively progressive view of history. But it is worth recalling Niebuhr's words in *The Self and the Dramas of History* that "... if man does not acknowledge his status as creator, his freedom over the historical flux, his right and duty to challenge the inherited traditions of the community, his obligation to exercise discriminate judgment in rearranging or reconstructing any scheme of togetherness which has been faulty in providing justice, he will merely become the victim of the past which accentuates its vices when it is studiously preserved into the present."

On the one hand, Niebuhr urges us not to play God, to be too ready to move history along in the direction we pretend to know it is heading. Yet he is loath to acquiesce to the

status quo, to tolerate the injustice bequeathed to us by the past. In short, he gives no easy answer as to what to do in the face of evil, hardship, and suffering. Matters are not as simple as Bacevich implies. Reconstructive action really can slip too easily into the prideful belief that justice is a simple possibility. The temptation is to seek more than "proximate solutions for insoluble problems," to use Niebuhr's phrase from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. But inaction is rife with its own sort of pride, evinced by those moralists who value keeping their hands clean above all else – they always seem to overlook the sinfulness found in the retreat from responsibility. And so it is worth emphasizing that, in *Irony*, Niebuhr criticizes two types of "idealists." With Bacevich, he rejects "those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous." Surely, Niebuhr's puncturing of the American sense of innocence and exceptionalism, which undoubtedly taints our foreign policy to this day, finds admirable summation here. Our good intentions, which we frequently pride ourselves on, really do tempt us to ignore our own transgressions. However, Niebuhr also censures another group of idealists, "those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul..." A more honest grappling with *Irony* would have meditated on the meaning of these words as well.

The nuances of Niebuhr's thought, then, are evacuated by Bacevich and replaced by a strident moralism. This means that *Irony* ceases to be a book that should give any reader pause over his own motives and assumptions, and, in Bacevich's words, becomes "the master key...to understanding the myths and delusions that underpin this new American view of statecraft. Simply put, it is the most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy." Bacevich appears to view himself as a latter-day Niebuhr, a lonely truth-teller who sees beneath our collective presumptions. In this reading there is, in a sense, a secret history of American perfidy that can be unlocked for those capable of being roused by the prophet's injunctions. We might understand this as Bacevich placing Niebuhr among his two other favored chroniclers of the tragedy of American foreign policy, Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams, whom he urges us to revisit in his 2003 book, *American Empire*. What each supposedly has in common is a myth puncturing meta-theory that explains the hidden impulses that drive American politics. Nearly alone in an intellectual culture dominated by apologists for American hegemony, these men – and now Bacevich, their heir – have the courage to grapple with the seedy underbelly of American militarism, imperialism, and assorted other pretensions.

It is difficult to square this appropriation of Niebuhr by Bacevich with what we actually find in the former's work.

Niebuhr tells us in *Irony* that “even the best human actions involve some guilt.” Again and again, he explains how there is an ideological taint in all political philosophies, that all perspectives are somehow marred by self-love. Bacevich’s search for a “master key” lacks the Niebuhrian emphasis on engaging in self-criticism and does not exhibit a trace of anxious self-doubt. It comes perilously close to claiming a privileged position exempt the usual human tendency towards self-deception. Bacevich differentiates between those who labor under a kind of false consciousness, who believe the propaganda of American virtue, and those who possess true knowledge of the American empire and its attendant injustices. One is tempted to call this a sort of Manichaeism, a tendency in Bacevich’s thought all the more strange given that he is, ostensibly, commending to our attention a profoundly Augustinian thinker.

None of this is to say that Niebuhr would have supported the course of American foreign policy after 9–11, nor is to condemn every word Bacevich has written in his introduction to *Irony*. As a reminder of our limits, Bacevich’s efforts deserve our sustained attention. He is a noble exemplar of a certain type of conservatism that, if nothing else, rightfully questions American optimism. Still, his attempts at appropriating Niebuhr show the profound limits of a particular style of thought, and ultimately cannot be taken to do justice to the breadth of Niebuhr’s work. It does nothing to reduce the importance of Niebuhr for the present moment to insist that his thought is more elusive and less easily applied to specific policy decisions than has been noted. His achievements do not relieve us from the burden of thinking, and he is far more than a vague symbol to be invoked in response to the real frustrations we are now experiencing. Any serious confrontation with Niebuhr’s work must add complexity to our self-understanding rather than simplify the decisions before us.

Beyond the Vital Center

A significant feature of this misguided approach to Niebuhr, exemplified by Bacevich, seems to be a category mistake on the part of his contemporary readers, a rather desperate attempt to interpret Niebuhr through old categories and as a participant in outmoded debates. Indeed Bacevich provides a telling instance of this when he discusses Niebuhr’s criticisms of preventative or preemptive war in his introduction to *Irony*. It is true, as Bacevich notes, that Niebuhr thought we “must resist such ideas [of preventative war] with every moral resource.” Of course, what Niebuhr was arguing against was a nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union. Surely *that* context matters when considering Niebuhr’s arguments. There is, simply put, no real equivalence between the destruction resulting from a nuclear attack of the scale Niebuhr was urging restraint from and what has

happened in Iraq, even if we accept some of most severe criticisms of the latter. It especially is difficult to grasp why a historian would wrench ideas and arguments out of context, to take a statement about nuclear catastrophe and apply it to a war of choice – even a woefully misguided one – to depose a tyrant.

Bacevich’s infelicitous analogy intimates something broader about how Niebuhr has been read of late; lurking behind all the assorted appropriations of his thought is an inability to move beyond the Cold War. This is not to say those vying to renew a Niebuhrian sensibility do not realize that the War on Terror – to use that hoary phrase – is something new. What does seem to be happening is that modes of thought are subtly being perpetuated. And this is one significant facet of why Niebuhr has become a man for all reasons – each reading of Niebuhr roughly corresponds to a Cold War archetype, something familiar and already part of our political imagination.

Again, it is notable that Bacevich, in his previous work in diplomatic history, has sought to rejuvenate interest in Beard and Williams, two writers whose work was inextricably bound up with Cold War debates. His reading of Niebuhr seems to be a continuation of that project. Yet he is not alone. Peter Beinart, in his *The Good Fight*, turns to Niebuhr in so far as he represents a certain strand of Cold War liberalism, the “vital center.” In this noble tradition, both the excesses of the naive Left and the crude, militaristic Right are supposedly avoided. Niebuhr, in this way of thinking, is like Arthur Schlesinger with a divinity degree and a Bible in hand; both men stood between the Soviet sympathizers and the red baiters, succumbing neither to progressive illusions nor the paranoia of the populist right. And so while admitting the new-fangled challenges of terrorism, turning to Niebuhr, for Beinart and others, really is a way of recalling this older tradition, forged in another era but needed yet again. The shift is one of form more than content, and as such can be understood almost as a type of nostalgia.

Somewhat differently, those on the Right who urged war in Iraq could be said to have emphasized Niebuhr’s understanding of tragedy more than irony, using his sense of moral responsibility and the inevitability of coercion, force, and ethical tradeoffs to justify our adventures abroad. In Cold War terms, they are a recapitulation of those stalwart defenders of America’s superiority to its enemies. Their chief concern in many ways is to prevent self-criticism from turning into self-loathing, and to ensure that problematizing, in moral terms, vigorous action does not result in abstaining from the active pursuit of the American interest – an interest which for them, by happy coincidence, often is considered of a piece with the aspirations of many beyond our borders. We might call this the Niebuhr-as-neoconservative approach, one that, like all the rest, seems to exempt some vital part of Niebuhr’s thought from their formulations. With

Niebuhr, they grasp the burden of power and the demands of responsibility. But unlike him, they tend to underestimate not just the limits of power, but the way its exercise warps our own self-understanding and soon becomes an end in itself.

The typical use of Niebuhr after 9–11, then, has been a curious compound of speculation about contemporary policy debates and a pronounced lack of hermeneutical creativity. If renewed interest in his thought has been occasioned by events, then that interest has been carried forward in old terms; Niebuhr ultimately has served less as an illuminator of new conditions than as an excuse to remain within old political and intellectual patterns, a source of comfort more than provocation and challenge.

Niebuhr as Theorist of Modernity

One question that has not been answered satisfactorily, or at least not dwelled upon sufficiently, is *why* Niebuhr has so captured our attention of late. It is not enough to write of his profundity or relevance; there are any number of other thinkers who might be considered profound and relevant. And, even more, such a statement merely induces us to ask about the nature of his insights or the particular ways in which he is supposedly timely.

More or less unremarked upon is the prevailing preference for Niebuhr *over* others belonging to his cohort, those who came to prominence roughly at mid-century in the wake of two world wars, the carnage of the Holocaust, and the onset of the Cold War. Niebuhr has been the man for all reasons, not Leo Strauss or Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin or Michael Oakeshott. Of course some of these thinkers have been at the center of vigorous debates – think of the arguments about Leo Strauss and neoconservatism, the efforts to describe Islamism in terms of Voegelin’s notion of political religion, or Andrew Sullivan’s attempt to revive Oakeshott’s understanding of conservatism. But none have had their legacies be the source of so much partisan and ideological squabbling. The accessibility of Niebuhr’s work surely plays a part in this – *The Irony of American History* and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, to take two examples, are pithy and not intended for narrow specialists. Yet a tome such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* really is demanding; if Niebuhr’s work is not particularly scholarly, in the worst sense of that word, it is not so on account of a lack of depth.

The turn to Niebuhr, then, may be at least a tacit acknowledgement both of the paucity of our intellectual resources for thinking about religion in the contemporary world and the great deficiency in our theorization of modernity. Of the great American intellectual figures of the twentieth century, Niebuhr was almost alone in being a

theologian. And so to the extent he defended modernity, we might understand him as doing so on fundamentally religious grounds – or rather, he intimates what a religiously defensible modernity might resemble. While certainly criticizing the naïve optimism of “modern man,” above all his inability to embrace the doctrine of original sin, Niebuhr evinces almost no longing for the ancient polis, Medieval Christianity, or the pretensions of an aristocratic order. His is no narrative of declension or story of decline, and as such his work allows us to engage in genuine self-criticism rather than wallowing in a kind of philosophically-informed anti-modernism or fretting about a decadent liberalism. At a time when modernity itself is under vociferous assault, all those 20th century critics of modernity writing in Europe and America suddenly seem strangely removed from the problems we now confront.

Part of Niebuhr’s qualified defense of modernity is his celebration of the two great sources of modern thought and culture, the Renaissance and the Reformation. If the former has eclipsed the latter, and thus impaired our understanding of human limits, Niebuhr nevertheless defines the preeminent intellectual task of modern man as reformulating and holding in tension the truths of these two movements. As he wrote in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, “Because both Renaissance and Reformation have sharpened the insights into the meaning of the two sides of the Christian paradox, it is not possible to return to the old, that is, to the medieval synthesis, though we may be sure that efforts to do so will undoubtedly be abundant.” Perhaps the great temptation of modernity, Niebuhr understood, would be to search for a unity and certainty – whether philosophical, theological, or political – that no longer belonged to us, and even more importantly, never should have. And so he in no way urges us to somehow return to or re-appropriate classical thought; he never sides with the ancients against the moderns. Nor does he advocate clinging to the old certainties of the natural law, a mode of thinking that, for Niebuhr, almost always was a rationalization of the ethics of a particular age – he once wrote, for instance, that St. Thomas’s work was in part the codification of the norms of a feudal society. He persistently condemned, as he wrote in *Faith and History*, “the error of claiming absolute and final significance for contingent, partial, and parochial moral, political, and cultural insights.” Whatever his criticisms of modern life, then, he did not give into the reactionary temptation. Niebuhr’s problems with what he saw around him never were formulated in the name of a virtuous past from which we have somehow fallen away.

Modernity, in short, can be redeemed. Niebuhr puts forward a politics of hope, rather than return, and he insists on nuance rather than nostalgia. His basic posture is one of grappling with the perplexities and constant flux that result from our indeterminate freedom rather than searching for

ways to repress the astonishing variety and creativity of man. Perhaps we should take his efforts in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* as somehow emblematic of his project as a whole. The subtitle of that text, “a vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense,” points to the way Niebuhr gives a creative, alternative account of and justification for a nearly universally valorized aspect of modern politics. His criticisms are, above all, with the way democracy typically is theorized rather than the form of political association itself. And by giving a contrarian defense of democracy, Niebuhr subtly transforms the way we understand it.

Something very similar to this could have been Niebuhr’s posthumous contribution to American intellectual life after 9–11. His work could have helped us reconsider the nature of modernity itself, to ultimately defend it against its foes, both at home and abroad, but do so in a manner profoundly aware of its weaknesses – and all in the idiom of theology.

Perhaps no one has elaborated the possibilities for religious faith in the modern world with Niebuhr’s seriousness, his willingness to accept all that is good and true about the contemporary world while resolutely pointing to the limits and indeed shallowness of the thought undergirding certain forms of secular liberalism. Sustained confrontation with Niebuhr’s work could have helped us elaborate that which is most needful – a political theology of, and for, modernity. In many ways, Niebuhr’s moment really was not the Cold War, the dualities of which meant the full genius of his thought would be obscured, but rather the arrival of a time in history when the relationship between modernity and religion would be at its most perplexing.

Politics and Forgiveness

Niebuhr understood, perhaps above all else, the difficulties and dilemmas posed by the rapidly changing, ever globalizing modern world. He consistently affirmed that good and evil grow apace in history, and so the scale, and profundity, of the problems confronting modern man would be tremendous, concomitant with the dazzling technological and material achievements that were evident in his day, and even more in our own. For better or worse, the preponderance of problems we now experience are somehow global problems; as Niebuhr wrote in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, “all aspects of man’s historical problems appear upon that larger field in more vivid and discernible proportions.”

Part of the very structure of modernity, then, would be perils unimagined in previous ages. Our inevitable fallibility, combined with the “larger field” of some manner of world community, would mean that our mistakes would be severe. Nearly all of human experience, for Niebuhr, was

heightened in the modern world – our triumphs would be more remarkable, and our tragedies more costly. Modern life would require a real acknowledgement that the pace of change, driven by the same forces that compel us to admit the global dimension of our existence, likely would grow; yet, also, it would demand creativity and responsibility in responding to this flux. As Niebuhr described the matter in *Faith and History*, “The rapidly shifting circumstances of a technical civilization require the constant exercise of this responsibility, not merely in order to achieve a more perfect justice but also to reconstitute and recreate older forms of justice and community which the advent of technics tends to destroy and disintegrate.”

Niebuhr grasped that the very source of this creative destruction, man’s indeterminate freedom and position as creator of history, contained within it the tragic paradox of our ultimate insufficiency to the world, and to each other. The final chapter of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* bears eloquent witness to this fact, perhaps as much as any other of his writings. As Niebuhr puts it, “The task of building a world community is man’s final necessity and possibility, but also his final impossibility. It is a necessity and possibility because history is a process which extends the freedom of man over natural process to the point where universality is reached. It is an impossibility because man is, despite his increasing freedom, a finite creature, wedded to time and place and incapable of building any structure of culture or civilization which does not have its foundations in a particular and dated locus.” Only a few pages later he admonishes us to acknowledge that “the highest achievements of human life are infected with sinful corruption” and, as he closes the book, implores us to understand “the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements...”

Niebuhr really was arguing for a theory of human failure, a way of understanding our existence and striving as being defined by perpetual, intransigent problems, problems that could not be “solved” but at best mitigated. And in the context of modernity, these failures would take on new dimensions – the stakes would be higher, and so our awareness of the inevitability of sin, our pride and partiality, would become all the more vital. He understood a kind of “growth” in history, arguing in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that “history obviously moves toward more inclusive ends, towards more complex human relations, towards the technical enhancement of human powers and the cumulation of knowledge.” But because evil was parasitic, it too would grow – there would be a “new peril of evil on every new level of the good...” The burden of Niebuhr’s thought is to gird us for precisely this reality.

This, again, is why his conception of the modern world differed in important ways from so many other thinkers of his era. Niebuhr never searched for some moment in time where we “went wrong”; the tribulations of the twentieth

century were not the inevitable dénouement of a decline began centuries before, but the actualization of our always already there capacity for sin – and, even more, the dark side of our achievements. A political theology of modernity must grapple with this basic understanding of our situation. Descriptively, it contains a *political* element because it fundamentally is an analysis of the various schemes of human togetherness. The “growth” of history includes the growth of community, of the extent and scale of our political problems and obligations. But it also contains a *theological* dimension because the Christian faith, for Niebuhr, set forth the paradoxes of our existence with a nuance and depth that he found nowhere else. The old categories of sin and grace would continue to prove necessary when confronting the breadth of human experience.

But Niebuhr, at his most profound, also gives the resources for a political theology for modernity. He does not leave us with mere analysis, but urges us to adopt a particular political ethic appropriate to his description of those problems attending history’s “growth.” If Niebuhr’s understanding of modernity stresses our fragility and fallibility, then the more constructive and normative elements of his thought calls on us, above all, to develop the capacity for forgiveness and charity. For Niebuhr, these were the supreme political virtues, and those most necessary in the bewildering conditions of the contemporary world.

This, of course, only makes sense. Any theory of guilt and sin by necessity is a theory of forgiveness. It is no accident that Niebuhr dwells so much upon both, and that his political model was Abraham Lincoln, the figure looming over the conclusion to *The Irony of American History* and who embodied Niebuhr’s ideal of charity. It would be fair to argue that Lincoln’s Second Inaugural was perhaps the greatest American expression of the ethic for which Niebuhr was arguing. Tellingly, Niebuhr kept a bust of Lincoln displayed in his office. In *Irony*, Niebuhr writes about the necessity of charity in this way: “The realm of mystery and meaning which encloses and finally makes sense out of the baffling configurations of history is not identical with any scheme of rational intelligibility. The faith which appropriates the meaning in the mystery inevitably involves an experience of repentance for the false meanings which the pride of nations and cultures introduces into the pattern. Such repentance is the true source of charity; and we are more desperately in need of genuine charity than of more technocratic skills.”

Contrition, repentance, and forgiveness comprise the essence of Niebuhr’s political theology for the modern world. In an age where our inevitable mistakes are bound to be severe, the necessity for cultivating an ethic of forgiveness becomes all the more vital. This does not mean we forsake moral purpose; instead, it is to recognize the ultimate disjunction between God’s purposes and our own, and thus understand that our political striving needs to be concomitant with charity and the capacity for self-criticism – in other

words, leavened with a form of grace. Politics, for Niebuhr, was not a sphere for moralists. The children of light – those sure of their own righteousness – always seem to incur the greater share of his displeasure. This should not be taken to mean he simply is arguing for a “politics of limits.” For all his brooding, Niebuhr was not a pessimist in any straightforward sense of the word – indeed, he closes his essay, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” by declaring that we secular moderns read Augustine too cynically; he could just as well have written the same about his own interpreters. And so, instead of providing us with a too consistent realism, Niebuhr argues for inhabiting the world in a particular way, for *engaging* political life with both love and justice in mind, fully aware of the corruptions of power without abandoning the premise that it can be exercised responsibly.

Against Despair

To read Reinhold Niebuhr, after 9–11, then, is to encounter a thinker who least of all encourages shrill recrimination or self-righteous pronouncements. His writings should not be searched out for passages that can be used as mere political tools, to oppose or support this or that policy. Instead, we must realize that Niebuhr’s work is best thought of as a mirror in which we contemplate our *own* sin, depravity, and self-deception. In a way, it is a preface to politics, the articulation of a prophetic stance more than a program or manifesto for action. He tells us in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* that “Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all political ends are relative) is a threat to communal peace. But religious humility is no simple moral or political achievement. It springs only from the depth of a religion which confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties and values, and persuades him to confess: “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.” The seeds of both religious and political wisdom, then, are one and the same. The core of Niebuhr’s political ethic was forgiveness; but this was only a possibility for those with contrite hearts. And all this was part of a posture of humility that he thought was more necessary than ever – not the false humility of the cynic or an easy going conservatism satisfied with the status quo, but a humility that follows from a deep awareness of the tragic and ambiguous elements always found in our pursuit of justice.

We have heard very little of this as we grope to find our way through a newly terrifying world, least of all from our self-appointed Niebuhrians. The language of sin pushes against our enlightened sensibilities, and in our pride we resist the call to contrition and repentance. Niebuhr, then,

eludes all efforts to be conscripted for some cause. He is a theorist of theories, a prophet, a voice in the wilderness. As with all such figures, he has no honor in his own country. Yet he taught us not to despair; the very last word of his treatise on human destiny was *hope*. History has meaning not because of our own striving and pseudo-achievements, but because it is in the hands of One whose suffering love can overcome our corruptions.

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