

L'ironie de l'histoire américaine Reinhold Niebuhr et la société américaine

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Abstract

Trois années après la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, le 2 mars 1948, le magazine hebdomadaire TIME célébrait son vingt-cinquième anniversaire. Sur la page de couverture de l'édition publiée à l'occasion de cet anniversaire se trouvait une photographie de Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) avec pour légende « L'histoire de l'homme n'est pas celle d'une réussite ». Cette expression faisait allusion aux principes théologiques de Niebuhr, à sa critique de la société en général et plus particulièrement de l'expérience américaine. Les éditeurs du Time voyaient dans la doctrine théologique de Niebuhr une force capable d'affronter les crises de l'histoire de l'humanité. Ainsi pouvait-on saisir l'autorité conférée par Niebuhr au sein de la sphère des intellectuels américains de l'époque. Pendant près de trente ans, Niebuhr a exercé une influence incontestable sur la pensée américaine par ses prises de position dictées par une série d'événements qui a vivement affecté sa génération : la Grande Guerre et la désillusion qui en suivit ; la Grande Dépression ; le durcissement de l'isolationnisme américain ; la Deuxième Guerre mondiale puis la Guerre froide ; l'émergence de l'âge nucléaire et la tragédie du Vietnam, symbole s'il en est de l'impérialisme américain. Cet article s'attachera à étudier « l'ironie de l'histoire américaine » vue par Niebuhr, tout au long du XXe siècle, selon des perspectives sociales, politiques et théologiques éclairées par les ironies et les paradoxes qu'incarne cet homme prolifique.



The Irony of American History Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Experience*

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Three years after the end of World War II, on March 8, 1948, the American weekly newsmagazine *TIME* celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday. Featured on the cover of the anniversary edition was a picture of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), captioned "Man's Story is not a Success Story."¹ The phrase alluded to the principles of Niebuhr's theology and to his criticism of human society in general and the American experience in particular. To *TIME*'s editors Niebuhr's theological doctrine, more than any philosophical system of his time seemed to provide the capacity and strength to contend with the crises of human history in the twentieth century. Thus was popularly confirmed Niebuhr's high standing in American intellectual life and his status as the leading theologian of his age.

The tribute is not surprising. For close to three decades Reinhold Niebuhr exercised a profound influence on American thought and ideas in his response to the series of events that affected his generation: World War I and the disappointment that followed in its wake; the Great Depression; the strengthening of American isolationism and the shunning

* I am indebted to Jon Butler, Jonathan Steinberg, Dorothy Ross, Gerald McDermott, Walter Nugent and Stephen Whitfield for their comments and suggestions on earlier version of this essay.

¹ The *TIME* magazine cover is reproduced in Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York, 1985), 212 (Henceforth: Fox, *Biography*).

of involvement in Old World affairs; World War II and the Cold War that followed; the emergent nuclear age and the tragedy of Vietnam as a symbol of American imperialism. Niebuhr was the philosopher most often quoted in the United States in the middle third of the twentieth century, becoming the leading critic of modern American thought in its shift from accepted Christian values toward more liberal and pragmatic outlooks.

A number of writings contributed to Niebuhr's influence on public discourse. His *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932),² an exposure of the brutality pervading modern capitalist and industrialist society, aroused great interest immediately on publication. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941)³ Niebuhr analyzed the sinfulness rooted in the human condition, echoing the medieval perception of man as having an essentially corrupt nature. This book was enthusiastically reviewed in *TIME*, which declared it "the religious book-of-the-year," and named its author the "Establishment Theologian."⁴ In 1952 Niebuhr published *The Irony of American History*, where, against prevalent attempts among American intellectuals to define the "uniqueness" of American history, he maintained that it was pervaded by irony "because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history" in the twentieth century.⁵

Niebuhr's critique of the American experience influenced many intellectuals and statesmen of his time. Martin Luther King said that Niebuhr had a greater influence on him than Gandhi. Many well-known figures were among his confidants, including the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and the Democratic senator from Minnesota Hubert Humphrey. Many leading intellectuals, among them Isaiah Berlin and the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, were deeply affected by his teachings and by conversations with him. Several leading American historians, such as Perry Miller, C. Vann Woodward and Henry May, acknowledged their indebtedness to him for many of the notions that they pursued in their work.⁶

Niebuhr's ability to influence and draw in people from different circles is clearly shown in his encounter with Felix Frankfurter. The latter, a Jew Supreme Court Justice and declared agnostic, heard Niebuhr

² R. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932). (Henceforth: Niebuhr, *Moral Man*).

³ R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. I: *Human Nature* (London, 1949 [1941]); Vol. II: *Human Destiny* (London, 1948 [1943]). (Henceforth: Niebuhr, *Destiny of Man*).

⁴ R. W. Fox, *Biography*, 201, 238.

⁵ R. Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York, 1952), 2.

⁶ David A. Hollinger et al. (eds.), *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York, 1993 [1989]), II, 255; Fox, *Biography*, 245-247.

deliver a sermon in a small town in Massachusetts and was deeply moved. As he left the church, he went to Niebuhr, thanked him, shook his hand and said: "May a believing unbeliever thank you for your sermon?" Niebuhr replied without hesitation: "May an unbelieving believer thank you for appreciating it?"⁷

The recognition that TIME accorded Niebuhr in 1948 was not in itself surprising, given his renown by that time. What is surprising is that Niebuhr was a minister and a professor in a religious seminary, a devout Protestant minister who belonged to the German Evangelical Synod, a Neo-Orthodox theologian, whose doctrinal principles reflect a bleak view of human nature and an utter pessimism regarding the course of history. His philosophy runs counter to principles rooted in American ideology, preeminently expressed in the Declaration of Independence, such as faith in human nature and human beings' ability to shape their fate; rationalism; humanism; and a profound confidence in the steady progress of history.

The paradox embodied by Niebuhr lies in the fame he achieved with his pessimistic theology concerning human nature, based on the perception of original sin as the source of humanity's innate corruption, excluding the possibility of redemption within history, and denying the possibility of the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The contradiction is sharpened when one recalls that Niebuhr was one of the most prominent exponents of Neo-Orthodox theology – a stream of thought arising within the Protestant movement in the early twentieth century which fought against the humanist and rationalist principles of liberal theology, attacking as well the social theories of the Protestant Social Gospel movement in America and the conceptual foundations of Pragmatism.

How, then, we are to explain this Neo-Orthodox theologian and conservative philosopher's extensive influence, given the incongruity of his philosophy with the core values of the American experience which are based on faith in human nature and in the advance of human civilization?

This criticism of the American experience is particularly interesting from the perspective of the history of ideas and their power to affect reality. Niebuhr was an astute and eloquent analyst of human existence and of the drama of human society in a time of great historic upheaval. He spoke about guilt and responsibility, sin and repentance, corruption and redemption, in light of the two World Wars and the atrocities they inflicted upon humanity. Broadly speaking, the fact that so many people were enthralled by his views exposes an ironic dimension in American history, a spillover of theological attitudes from the realm of religion into that of political and social philosophy. Niebuhr's

⁷ Fox, *Biography*, VIII-IX.

“theological signature” is evident in the thought of many secular intellectuals of his time. A similar phenomenon of the “spillover” of ideas from one discipline to another is, of course, Darwinist doctrine, in which the idea of evolution was co-opted from biology and applied to the fields of politics, society and economics in late nineteenth-century America.⁸

Yet, many well-known Neo-Orthodox theologians among Niebuhr’s contemporaries did not see their ideas make inroads into secular fields of thought, whereas the principles of Niebuhr’s doctrine were adopted by many people as an exposition of the American experience in the period between the two World Wars. Further, until the time of Niebuhr, many social and intellectual movements active in the United States in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries reflected rationalistic trends and optimistic liberal views regarding the possibility of social remedy and human redemption. In opposition to the Social Gospel movement, the Progressive Movement and Pragmatic Philosophy, Niebuhr formulated his Neo-Orthodox theological precepts – an alternative conceptual pattern to apply to American social development.

The many paradoxes related to Niebuhr’s portrayal of the American experience, show that not only did he write about the “irony” of American history, but that his own life and mind contained many ironies. In *The Irony of American History* he defined “irony” as constituted of “incongruities in life.”⁹ This definition may help to grasp the “Niebuhrean ironic moment” – the tendency to describe the human condition in ironic, paradoxical terms. Indeed there is an essential ironic dimension in his thought, and consequently in his consideration of the American experience. A double irony marks Niebuhr’s “irony of American history”; the irony he found and described, and the ironies or incongruities embedded in his own thought, given his ideological and theological premises.

The writer who with great skill portrayed the irony in American history, was not lacking in many ironies in himself. Consider for example the irony of adopting conservative Neo-Orthodox theology while advocating political liberalism. Consider further the wide gap between Niebuhr’s evangelical views and the social and political progressiveness which made his conception of sin inherent in human nature an impetus for social action. The man who joined the Socialist Party in 1929 and defined the tensions in American society in terms of Marxist class struggle, also wrote *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1945),

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, 1955), 3-12; Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston, 1947).

⁹ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, viii.

where he described in theological terms the basic struggle in society between the children of this world, or the “children of darkness,” who admit no law beyond their will and interest, and the “children of light” who acknowledge the law. Another apparent irony is related to Niebuhr’s conception of the development of American history: while arguing that redemption is not possible within history, he worked tirelessly ceaselessly to achieve it for the United States.

Niebuhr’s thought is further paradoxical, hence ironic, because of his corollary regarding the tension between “moral man” and “immoral society.” His negative view of an ‘immoral society’ strengthens the individualist, hence capitalistic, trend in America that he attacked. By adopting the Hobbesian concept of human life as marked by a perpetual “war of each against all,” he denied the possibility of salvation and redemption within society. Since God is not to be encountered in history, history becomes the battlefield of human egoism. Unrestrained individualism is the basis of man’s action. Thus, the writer who sought to examine life on earth in light of God’s gospel of redemption found himself arguing that human salvation is only possible outside the bounds of history.

The following therefore is an attempt to investigate Niebuhr’s “Irony of American History” in a series of contexts – social, political and theological – in the light of the ironies and paradoxes evidenced in his life and mind.

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, the son of a Lutheran minister, and was educated mostly in religious schools. His father, Gustav, who immigrated to America in 1881, preached liberal religious positions and believed that Christ’s gospel of salvation and redemption was not only an individual matter but that it was incumbent on the Christian to work for social change while he sought personal redemption. Gustav Niebuhr denounced the religious fundamentalist groups of the period, who disdained scientific and social progress. At the same time he was critical of the tendency of liberal Protestant theologians to reduce religion to nothing more than a philosophy and an ethical doctrine, thereby annulling the redemptive dimension of Christ’s mission in the world and emptying the Holy Scriptures of supernatural and enlightening content.¹⁰

After high school Reinhold Niebuhr attended Elmhurst College in Illinois, a Reformed Pro-seminary, from which he graduated in 1910. He then went to Eden Seminary, a Reformed Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, 1912-13, and later to Yale Divinity School (1913-1915). On completing his studies, aged twenty-three, he became the pastor of Bethel Church, a

¹⁰ Fox, *Biography*, 1-12.

small, working-class Evangelical congregation in Detroit founded by German-Americans. He served in this position for thirteen years, during which the church experienced a considerable increase in membership and became renowned throughout Detroit. But Niebuhr was not satisfied with the job of pastor to a small community; he aspired to leave his mark on the wider world. He began publishing articles and essays in religious and local newspapers and in 1916 saw himself in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a national magazine.

Niebuhr knew how hard life was for workers in Detroit's industrial belt. During this period, he remained faithful to the Social Gospel movement which flourished in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The leaders of this movement believed that sin and salvation are social and not only individual problems, hence the name "Social Gospel." They sought to mobilize society according to the Christian gospel of love and justice by working with the labor movement, supporting settlement houses, etc.. During this period Protestant churches were becoming middle-class institutions, and the Social Gospel movement emphasized the credo of this class: faith in the American promise, minor individual sacrifice, and a commitment to social action.¹¹ As a moderate, progressive school of thought, the movement represented a social dimension in Christianity, arriving in the wake of massive urbanization impelled by intensive industrialization and large waves of immigrants.

The leaders of the Social Gospel movement preached a liberal theology that stressed the immanence of God in the world and in history, Christ's teachings as the primary source of ethics, the organic nature of society, human brotherhood, and a deep faith in the Second Coming. Theologically, given their stress on social reform, the leaders of the movement were post-millennialist, believing Christ's Second Coming would occur only after humankind rid itself of social evils by its own efforts. They applied the principles of Christian ethics to the fields of economics and the social sciences, and emphasized faith in human progress, an optimism concerning human nature and a confidence in society's ability to organize itself on rational principles and to realize the utopian dream of brotherhood and justice.¹²

In Niebuhr's view, such optimism was incompatible with the cruel reality he saw in Detroit. His years as a pastor in Motor City left a mark on his thinking. In his sermons he harshly criticized the capitalist system

¹¹ Henry F. May, *The Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York, 1967 [1949]), 170-171; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," *The Shaping of American Religion*, eds. James W. Smith and A. Leland Jamison, 2 Vols. (Princeton, 1961), I, 232-321.

¹² William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York, 1976); Sydney E. Ahlstrom (ed.), *Theology in America: From Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (New York, 1967); Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, 1960).

and the conditions of labor workers, maintaining that the industry's exploitation of the workers denied Christ's gospel of redemption, for it depressed and destroyed the human soul. As tremendous fortunes continued to be amassed, Niebuhr believed that the rapidly spreading consumer culture corrupted the nation's soul. He held the Protestant clerical establishment directly responsible for the fact that the church did not meet people's needs in modern society. It preached a gospel of wealth rather than Christ's redemption.

Niebuhr seems to have saved his fiercest criticism for Henry Ford. "Henry Ford is America," he wrote. He expressed his aversion to the unbridled greed and lack of social responsibility displayed by the magnates of industry: "What a civilization this is! Naïve gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds and thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not make some provision for its unemployed."¹³

The unmediated knowledge of working-class poverty, combined with his repeated failure to get African Americans to join his church, led Niebuhr to pessimism about racial integration. "The situation which the colored people of the city [Detroit] face is really a desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time in gathering the facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people, recently migrated from the south and unadjusted to our industrial civilization. Hampered both by their own inadequacies and the hostility of a white world they have a desperate fight to keep body and soul together."¹⁴

From this period on, Niebuhr called himself a "brutal realist," i.e., someone who believed that "modern industry, particularly American industry, is not Christian. The economic forces which move it are hardly qualified at a single point by really ethical considerations." Contrary to the beliefs of Social Gospel movement, he said that there "is no Christian basis to modern industry. It is based upon a purely naturalistic conception of life and cynically defies every spiritual appreciation of human beings. Christianity has had nothing to do with the organization of industrial civilization. It ought therefore to have no pride in it."¹⁵

Niebuhr analyzed Protestant liberal theology, which, he believed, espoused a groundless sentimental optimism about human nature. The liberal stream that reached a peak in the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the First World War rejected the orthodox

¹³ Fox, *Biography*, 95-6; R. Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York, 1957 [1929]), 123. (Henceforth: Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*).

¹⁴ R. Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*, 115.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*, 151-2; Fox, *Biography*, 77.

concept of the corruption of the human race. Liberal theologians adopted the Age of Enlightenment's theory of progress as well as its basic premises, such as rationalism, and developed an optimistic outlook on human destiny and the future of human society. They emphasized man's necessary confidence in the universe. Under the influence of Darwin and Herbert Spencer, they combined the theories of Enlightenment and Evolution with the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.¹⁶

Niebuhr's pessimism grew stronger as a result of the First World War, in which millions of young men "walked eye-deep in hell/ believing in old men's lies," in the words of Ezra Pound.¹⁷ Another observer noted that the Germans and French used "huge death engines to mow down men and cities" and that we "go about in a daze, hoping to awake from the most horrid of nightmares."¹⁸ In this war, everyone heard "death's clever enormous voice" that left "all the silence filled with vivid noiseless boys."¹⁹ The disasters of the First World War put an end to optimistic confidence in the future and gave rise to an era of disillusion. As one of the leaders of the Progressive Movement in America lamented, with the war "Civilization is all gone, and barbarism comes."²⁰ "History," as Niebuhr wrote, "permitted the nineteenth century to indulge its illusions into the twentieth. Then came the deluge. Since 1914 one tragic experience has followed another, as if history had been designed to refute the vain delusions of modern man."²¹

In the words of Henry May, "The Great War" spelled "the end of American innocence. Innocence, the absence of guilt and doubt and the complexity that goes with them, had been the common characteristic of the older culture," defined by faith in human nature and in progress.²² Thus, the First World War marked the death knell of the Progressive Movement, the movement of social reforms that sought to change the society into one that embodied the liberal ideals of the American Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment. For Niebuhr, more specifically, "the whole liberal world view was challenged by world events," especially World War I. "But that war," he continues, "did not essentially challenge the liberal culture of America. It required a depression and

¹⁶ Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, 31-51.

¹⁷ Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts* (New York, 1920), 4:11, 12.

¹⁸ Mary Beth Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation: History of the United States*, 2 Vols. (Boston, 1990), 664.

¹⁹ e. e. cummings, "The Bigness of Cannon," *XLI Poems* (New York, 1925).

²⁰ Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation*, 664.

²¹ R. Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York, 1949), 6-7.

²² Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our own Time, 1912-1917* (New York, 1979 [1959]), 393-394.

another world war to corrode an optimism in America which was lost in Europe after the first world war."²³

These changes reinforced Niebuhr's pessimism about human nature, based as it is on sin and corruption. He found corroboration in Spengler's *The Decline of the West*²⁴ on the inevitable decline of Western civilization. "I have been profoundly impressed," he wrote, "by the Spenglerian thesis that culture is destroyed by the spirit of sophistication and I am beginning to suspect that I belong to the forces of decadence in which this sophistication is at work."²⁵ Accordingly, Niebuhr embraced the principles of the Neo-Orthodox theology that was flourishing in the Protestant world, particularly in Europe, between the First and Second World Wars. The catastrophe of the First World War led to the growth of "crisis theology" or "dialectical theology," the most prominent feature of the Neo-Orthodox theology.²⁶

"Crisis theology" has three important elements: a dialectical separation between human history and God's redemptive activity; the wrath of divine justice on all human effort in history, because of mankind's innate corruption; and a sense of catastrophe and crisis regarding the course and progress of history – as, for example, in the First World War. In opposition to the optimism of Liberal Theology, the outstanding exponents of crisis theology, such as Karl Barth (1886-1986), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) and Paul Althaus (1888-1966), completely rejected the possibility of the realization of God's Kingdom on earth.²⁷ These writers denied the identification of the course of history with the fulfillment of Divine prophecies, the view of the liberal theologians.

Pessimism regarding human beings' essential corruption led to a very bleak perception of history, a view in which humanity would eventually be judged by a God who would wreak destruction and ruin. In other words, God intervenes in history not for the sake of the progress of human society, but rather to bring it to its final, ultimate crisis.²⁸

²³ Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*, 1.

²⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (New York, 1926-8).

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*, 105.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, 1996), 13-14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-22.

²⁸ The ravages of the First World War led not only to the rise of Neo-Orthodox theology but also greatly influenced the creation of a specifically Jewish philosophy of history, as in the writings of Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem and others. Like Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy's crisis theology, in Jewish philosophy following World War I the connection between the dimension of Divine goodness and human history was severed, thus rejecting the concept of historical progress. For example, in his *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig rejected Hegel's concept of "wisdom in history." For Benjamin, history is "a process of unstoppable decline." As he wrote in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), "This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon

Niebuhr's response to the events of his time is marked by this outlook. The bitter experience of the First World War is expressed in his first book, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927)²⁹, in which he tried to develop a transcendental religious viewpoint from which to examine evil and the hardships of life on earth. This collection of essays covers a variety of issues and includes criticism of the Labor movement, a scathing attack on Henry Ford, and on the disproportionate privileges of the wealthy. Niebuhr also voiced deep pessimism and despair regarding a solution to the race question in the United States.

Niebuhr maintained that human civilization desperately needs religion, since only religion can provide a supreme moral objective and also impart the impulse to achieve it. In face of the "brutalities of the economic conflict, the disillusioning realities of international relations, the monstrous avarice of nations and the arrogance of races," it is "religion" which gives "human personality dignity and self-respect." Hence "the task of redeeming Western society rests in a peculiar sense upon Christianity."³⁰ The supreme objective of religion is thus to safeguard the domain of each human soul and allow for its development within an inhuman universe and an immoral society. This is where Niebuhr's fundamental opposition between spirit and nature, divine reality and human society, is situated, as well as his basic pessimism with regard to the human race: "It ought not require an undue amount of spiritual imagination to perceive that a kingdom of God cannot be built in a society in which a few exercise power, however benevolently, and in which a few gain unequal privileges, however generously they may return a portion of their wealth."³¹ In another place he writes: "in this [brutalized industrial] civilization we cannot enter the kingdom of God."³²

Niebuhr's pessimistic outlook on human nature, in keeping with Neo-Orthodox theology, is prominent in this book. His liking for a paradoxical approach is epitomized in the remark: "For though man is always worse than most people suspect, he is also generally better than most people dream."³³

wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 257-8.

²⁹ R. Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (New York, 1927).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 207, 227, 235.

³¹ Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* as quoted in Fox, *Biography*, 104.

³² Niebuhr, *Tamed Cynic*, 106, 45.

³³ Niebuhr, as quoted in Fox, *Biography*, 103.

This strain became a central part of Niebuhr's philosophy in the ensuing years. His thinking posits an unbridgeable tension between the absolute and supreme in terms of religious truths, and the historical, temporary and ephemeral dimension. The former relates to absolute good, the latter to the passing and to sin. The historical experience, ephemeral and conditional, is no more than a part of the supreme and absolute reality in whose light life on earth must be examined. "The mystery of history" is due to its being "a realm of both divine and human freedom."³⁴ This tension is immanent in history, and the reconciliation of the dualism is not possible in our world. Redemption will not take place within time and history, but rather beyond them. One can therefore say that Niebuhr transposed Augustine's basic dualism into the context of capitalist industrialist society.

In 1928, Niebuhr's growing acclaim as an influential clergyman and critic of American civilization led to his appointment as Professor of Christian Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, an institution which educated for a Christian ministry that was to be scholarly, pastoral, and engaged with contemporary life. Less than a year after Niebuhr moved to New York, Wall Street crashed and the Great Depression set in. Niebuhr saw this event as a complete and final denial of the hope of liberal theology. In 1929 his social criticism led him to join the Socialist Party, and from then on he tended to define the tensions in American society in terms of a class struggle. During this period he wrote *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) where he declared that on the evidence of the Great Depression, Christian love would never be able to bring social perfection and harmony to this world.

The book marks the beginning of Niebuhr's attack on secular liberal doctrines, in particular the Pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952), the preeminent social philosopher of the time. "The most persistent error of modern educators and moralists,"³⁵ is their faith, as Dewey declared it, in the "assured building up of social science just as men built up physical science," leading to the ability to "control social consequences."³⁶ But Niebuhr saw no basis for belief in a solution to "the modern social problem," because the social impulse is primarily based on "our predatory self-interest."³⁷ He therefore rejected the proposition that

³⁴ R. Niebuhr, "The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization," in *The Essential Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, Robert M. Brown, ed., (New Haven, 1986), 190. (Henceforth, Brown, *The Essential Niebuhr*).

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, xiii.

³⁶ John Dewey, *Philosophy and Education* (New York, 1926), p. 329, as cited in Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, xiii-xiv.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, xiii-xiv.

the steadily acquired knowledge of experts and social scientists could yield an uncorrupted understanding of human nature.

Niebuhr's criticism of Dewey and Pragmatism reveals his deep pessimism about human nature – the view that there is no possibility of progress in human society because the egoism of the individual is not directed by “rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill”, as members of the Social Gospel movement and supporters of Pragmatic philosophy contended. Their great error derived from an inability to recognize that man's collective behavior contains elements that “belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience.”³⁸ The theological dimension in Niebuhr's criticism was reinforced when he maintained that the hopes of the Social Gospel movement and the humanist and rational principles of Pragmatic Philosophy had been dashed by the Great Depression.

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr gave voice to the Neo-Orthodox criticism of liberalism. The “Liberal Movement both religious and secular seemed to be unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes or nations,”³⁹ he wrote. Human collectives are not guided by rationality for they possess “less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others.”⁴⁰ Thus, the liberal outlook that says “the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill, and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish harmony between all the human societies and collectives”⁴¹ is groundless.

Faithful to the principles of Neo-Orthodox theology, Niebuhr argued that there is an essential difference between the “state of nature,” in which imperialist, inter-racial and class struggles are waged, and the state of “reason or wisdom.” He had Dewey in mind when he said that “the most persistent error of modern educators and moralists is the assumption that our social difficulties are due to the failure of the social sciences to keep pace with the physical sciences which have created our technological civilization.”⁴² He insisted that the “world of history, particularly in man's collective behavior, will never be conquered by reason, unless reason uses tools, and is itself driven by forces which are not rational.”⁴³

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

Niebuhr criticized the “modern religious idealists” in the Social Gospel movement who did not accept “the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective.” He derided “the romantic overestimate of human virtue and moral capacity,” which characterized the Enlightenment, and railed against “the illusions and sentimentalities of the Age of Reason” in regard to historic progress.⁴⁴ Mankind’s redemption, in Niebuhr’s view, is not possible in an immoral society, let alone in history.

As Niebuhr saw it, the source of the naïve belief held by liberals both secular and religious, that the development of human consciousness would lead to an immediate annulment of injustice, derived from the Age of Reason. “The belief that the growth of humane intelligence would automatically eliminate social injustice really dates from the eighteenth century of the Enlightenment.” This tenet of the “Age of Reason” became also the credo of modern liberal idealists.⁴⁵ Accordingly, only a practical political theory that takes into account human capacities and weaknesses, in particular the inability to live within an organized social framework, may hold the potential to solve social and political problems.

The religious strain in Niebuhr’s philosophy is most prominent here. The vision of eternal peace and brotherhood in human society will never be realized in history, because human society is constantly in a state of war. Adopting Hobbes’ perpetual “war of each against all,” Niebuhr argued that coercion is the only means of bringing about social cohesion. Love can not work together with force. Toward this end, each of these domains must be understood in its own terms, and there can be no compromise between them: “It would therefore seem better to accept a frank dualism in morals than to attempt a harmony between the two methods which threatens the effectiveness of both.”⁴⁶ He therefore consistently emphasized that “society must always remain something of the jungle, which indeed it is, something of the world of nature.”⁴⁷

To achieve redemption human beings must “substitute some new illusions for the abandoned ones,” adding that the “most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice.” This illusion is very dangerous because “it encourages terrible fanaticism,” such as Communism or Fascism. “It must therefore be brought under the control of reason,”⁴⁸ writes Niebuhr, concluding the book on this pessimistic note.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xx, xxv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19, 21, 270-71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

Moral Man and Immoral Society, which first appeared in 1932, positioned Niebuhr as the sternest critic of certain key American traditions. Instead of the harmony between man and society proposed by early twentieth-century political and social philosophy, Niebuhr offered a new sort of Christian radicalism. "The Christian radical" is a "human maverick" unwilling to surrender to cynicism and despair, who resolutely seeks to affirm the power of love within the social framework.⁴⁹ Niebuhr accepted the position of St. Augustine and other Christian theologians that "the Kingdom of God is not of this world; yet its light illumines our tasks in this world, and its hope saves us from despair."⁵⁰ In another place he wrote: "The only kingdom which can defy and conquer the world is one which is not of this world."⁵¹ The religious dimension in Niebuhr's criticism thus appears in his pessimistic optimism. Human history lies forever within the realm of corrupted nature, and in opposition to the divine and holy. The greatest sin of all is to equate absolute good, or God, with the course of history.

This tragic view of human life and existence is evident also in *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), a collection of essays concerning the Christian interpretation of history. There Niebuhr says that the "biblical view of life is dialectical because it affirms the meaning of history and of man's natural existence on the one hand, and on the other insists that the centre, source and fulfillment of history lie beyond history." The collection is so named because of Niebuhr's conception of history as a tragedy. "Christianity's view of history is tragic insofar as it recognizes evil as an inevitable concomitant of even the highest spiritual enterprises. It is beyond tragedy in as far as it does not regard evil as inherent in existence itself but as finally under the dominion of a good God."⁵²

As in his earlier books, here too Niebuhr rejected the modern view that does not see life as tragic and believes "that history is the record of the progressive triumph of good over evil." Yet only Christ's gospel of redemption can liberate us from the tragedy inherent in our earthly life, whose full and ultimate solution lies beyond the scope of history. For the "God of Christian faith is not only creator but redeemer. He does not allow human existence to end tragically," but promises that future eternal redemption and salvation will take place and be fulfilled beyond history.⁵³

⁴⁹ Fox, *Biography*, 102.

⁵⁰ R. Niebuhr, "The Hitler-Stalin Pact," *Radical Religion* (Fall 1939).

⁵¹ R. Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essay on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London, 1944 [1937]), 284.

⁵² *Ibid.*, ix-xi.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

One of the central terms in Niebuhr's philosophy is "crisis"; hence the appellation "crisis theology" applied to his ideas.⁵⁴ He believed that God judges human civilization in the course of history, but that beyond God's judgment may always be found the gospel of grace and redemption for humanity. The ordeal of the Second World War led him to found the journal *Christianity and Crisis* (1941). He supported American involvement in the war to liberate Europe from Nazi and Fascist regimes. A *New Yorker* cartoon that Niebuhr would have enjoyed depicted Adam and Eve being chased out of the Garden of Eden by an angel wielding a flaming sword. In this hour of crisis, Adam turns to Eve and says: "My dear, we live in an age of transition."⁵⁵ The Second World War reinforced Niebuhr's pessimism. Nonetheless, he called for the pursuit of an active role in history and, as noted, supported American involvement in the war.

In his essay collection *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940), Niebuhr continued his attacks on secular and religious liberal doctrines, but also called for a resolute stand against Fascism and Nazism and denounced every attempt by the United States to avoid taking part in the struggle against tyranny. He condemned the "liberal culture of modern bourgeois civilization" which has "simply and sentimentally transmuted the supra-historical ideals of perfection of the gospel into simple historical possibilities." In the face of the tendency toward non-involvement in the war, Niebuhr argued that the great paradox is that "the foe may always threaten us with violent reaction to our non-violent forms of pressure, in which case we must desist from pressing our cause or cease to be 'good.'"⁵⁶

Faithful to his pessimistic view of human nature and of the immoral nature of society, he condemned modern liberalism's aspiration to perfection, saying that its adherents did not understand that the "effort to make the peace of the Kingdom of God into a simple historical possibility must inevitably result in placing a premium upon surrender to evil," and were not prepared to fight against it.⁵⁷

In another book from the same period, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), which won praise from secular intellectuals, Niebuhr surveyed the history of classical and modern attitudes regarding human nature in order to argue that the religious aspect is the most apt for understanding human existence. History "does not solve the basic problems of human existence," he wrote, yet "history is not meaningless

⁵⁴ Brown, "Introduction," *The Essential Niebuhr*, xix.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁵⁶ R. Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, 1940), x-xi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

because it cannot complete itself; though it cannot be denied that it is tragic because men always seek prematurely to complete it.”⁵⁸

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the conception of the inherent sin that is part of man’s nature became an impetus for social action. The simplistic dichotomy between the individual and society that was presented in the previous book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, underwent an important change after Niebuhr discovered Søren Kierkegaard’s concept of “angst,” “anxiety” – the existential fear of human beings who are faced with their nothingness and are conscious of their lack of moral capacity.⁵⁹ In broad terms, for Kierkegaard, “angst” is something primeval, a source from which sin and creative capacity derive, while for Niebuhr it means that human beings are free to be agents of morality, despite the constraints whose source lies in their sins. Inspired by the dichotomy that Luther presented in his treatise *Concerning Christian Liberty* (1520) – “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one” – Niebuhr wrote: “Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free.”⁶⁰ Only those who are aware of the depth of their sins can be truly free, for they alone can act with an appreciation of their limitations, and thus fight against the sort of dangerous fanaticism that presumes to bring about redemption in history, such as the nationalist movements of the 1930s.

Another book, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1945), sharpened Niebuhr’s criticism of the presumption of secular movements, such as Western democracy and Marxism, of their ability to bring about humanity’s redemption. “The excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated are a source of peril to democratic society; for contemporary experience [World War II] is refuting this optimism and there is danger that it will seem to refute the democratic ideal as well.” Here, too, pessimism about the sinful nature of human beings and the limits of their actions and ability is apparent: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”⁶¹ In this sense, there is a similarity between the destructive individualism of bourgeois democracy and the collectivism of Marxism – both believe in a simple solution to the tension between the person and the general interest.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Destiny of Man*, II, 331-2.

⁵⁹ For the influence of Kierkegaard’s term ‘angst’ on Niebuhr, see Niebuhr, *Destiny of Man*, I, 194-8.

⁶⁰ Fox, *Biography*, 203.

⁶¹ R. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (London, 1944), x-xi.

In this book, Niebuhr continued his critique of the optimism of the liberal worldview. As an alternative, he proposed the Christian outlook as a necessary condition for the development of the democratic idea after the Second World War: "a Christian view of human nature is more adequate for the development of a democratic society than either the optimism with which democracy has become historically associated or the moral cynicism which inclines human communities to tyrannical political strategies." Following Augustine's distinction between the "City of God" and the "earthly, terrestrial city," Niebuhr described the two basic forces at work in society: the "'children of this world,' or the 'children of darkness,'" who think there is "no law beyond their will and interest;" and the "'children of light'" who believe that "self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law."⁶²

The two terms reflect the idea that people (the "children of light") may subordinate their self-interest to a higher law, or resist doing so (the "children of darkness"). In Niebuhr's view, Christianity offers a suitable response to the tension between the private and the public, between the individual and society: "The Christian faith finds the final clue to the meaning of life and history in the Christ whose goodness is at once the virtue which man ought, but does not, achieve in history, and the revelation of a divine mercy which understands and resolves the perpetual contradictions in which history is involved." Without this understanding, Niebuhr warned, "we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities."⁶³

After the end of the war, Niebuhr began to develop a systematic theology of history in his book *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (1949). He had addressed this subject many times before, but now he sought to formulate a systematic theology with the main objective of refuting the "idea of human redemption through progress." For the chronicles of the twentieth century attest that the march of history is not one of progress and redemption but precisely the contrary: a "century which was meant to achieve a democratic society of world-scope finds itself at its half-way mark uncertain about the possibility of avoiding a new conflict of such proportions [nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union] as to leave the survival of mankind, or at least the survival of civilization, in doubt."⁶⁴ In contrast, the Christian Church "claims to be itself the end of history," thus

⁶² *Ibid.*, xiii, 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 188-9.

⁶⁴ R. Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York, 1949), 8.

symbolizing “the fulfillment of history’s meaning,”⁶⁵ for it points the way to a refuge from the temporary and ephemeral to the eternal redemption inherent in Christ’s gospel of salvation.

In 1952, at the height of the Cold War, Niebuhr published *The Irony of American History*, which examined the standing of the United States in the world. The book was a serious attack on Communism, as might be expected in the age of the Cold War, but its overall purpose was to denounce the self-satisfaction that prevailed in America at that time. It can be seen as a continuation of the criticism of American society in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. But here Niebuhr extended the discussion to America’s place in contemporary world history.

The irony of American history derives from the fact that the United States is no longer a beacon of light and goodness in the world, but rather a concrete example of the annulment of its fundamental dreams and historical innocence: “Our modern liberal culture, of which American civilization is such an unalloyed exemplar, is involved in many ironic refutations of its original pretensions of virtue, wisdom and power.” Niebuhr writes:

[...] so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history. Our dreams of a pure virtue are dissolved in a situation in which it is possible to exercise the virtue of responsibility toward a community of nations only by courting the prospective guilt of the atomic bomb [...] Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice.⁶⁶

America, “though confident of its virtue [...] must yet hold atomic bombs ready for use so as to prevent a possible world conflagration.”⁶⁷ The atom bomb, the embodiment of technological efficiency and military might, also exemplifies the destructive tension in modern life.

Niebuhr uses the term “irony” here to denote a paradox. He had previously defined this paradox in *Nature and Human Destiny*; human beings are responsible for their actions even though the evils they perpetrate derive fundamentally from their corrupt nature. The American experience, especially, constitutes a very great paradox: alongside all the material and economic progress there is also much suffering and poverty. Hence, history does not signify progress encountering temporary obstacles, but rather a drama fueled by man’s weaknesses and strengths.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, VIII, 2-3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

Contrary to the tendency prevalent among some intellectuals of his time – people like Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin and Perry Miller⁶⁸ – to see a uniqueness in American history, Niebuhr presented a pessimistic view of the course of history, and rejected the premise that American history held a “unique” message of redemption for the world.

In *The Irony of American History* Niebuhr’s criticism reached a peak. The great paradox of American history, as he sought to show, is that it is not an inspiring tale of steady progress and development but rather a drama reflecting the intrinsic irresolution of mankind. Human history demonstrates man’s ability to do good and bad simultaneously, and above all, it demonstrates the drama of human existence. This drama may be described in theological terms of man’s inconsequentiality versus the hope of Divine salvation, of innate sin versus the gospel of eternal redemption.

One can see that were it not for its theological dimension, Niebuhr’s social and political philosophy would seem quite weak and unsupported. His criticism of the capitalist system and the culture of consumption, his support for the Socialist movement, his advocacy for civil rights and human rights for African American, and in particular his attack on the liberal belief that human life is fulfilled within the bounds of history – in all of these matters, he was guided by the deep faith that historical reality was only one aspect of the grand scheme of Redemption.

Niebuhr’s philosophy, with its ironic view of American history, is paradoxical, both in the degree of influence it achieved and in its corollary of the tension between moral man and immoral society. He imparted a religious perspective to the American experience and to human experience as a whole. The “theological signature” of his views was quite evident in American intellectual life for over thirty years. For a certain period many in the United States clearly tended to adopt a pessimistic theological perspective on man’s sins, the tragedy of human existence and the corruption of human society – rather than the optimistic tenets of the Enlightenment movement and the liberal tradition.

The pessimistic views of the conservative theologian found a receptive audience among a secular public that felt helpless in the face of the brutality of human relations. Many embraced Niebuhr’s view that the explanation for the horrors of history was to be found in man’s sinning and corrupt nature. The inference to be drawn from his pessimistic theology, according to which God is not found in history, was that

⁶⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955); Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought* (New York, 1960), and *The Americans; The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956).

history is really the battlefield of man's egoism. It is ironical that the religious philosopher who sought to examine earthly life in light of the gospel of salvation and redemption, eventually concluded that there is an absolute division between Divine compassion and human nature, and maintained that man's salvation is only possible outside the bounds of time and history.

On the other hand, the concept of an immoral society had the effect of reinforcing the individualist tendencies that Niebuhr criticized. If human society is not the arena in which redemption is possible, but derives instead from man's corrupt nature, then all that matters in history, in this view, is that which concerns the action of the individual - the "moral man" - constantly confronted by immoral society. In this pessimistic outlook, Christ's doctrine of love and compassion cannot be achieved within the domain of society and state.

In the end, however, Niebuhr knew that there is a limit to the "ironic moment," or the description of the human condition in exclusive ironic, paradoxical terms, once the true, existential nature of human beings is concerned. He came to express the essential chasm between the dimensions of grace and nature, between holiness and sin, and between God and man, not in ironic or paradoxical terms but rather in the form of a prayer - "The Serenity Prayer" - uttered during the Second World War, the famous plea which many are unaware that he wrote:

God, grant us 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.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Brown, *The Essential Niebuhr*, xxiv. Regarding the origins of this prayer, see Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York, 2003), "The Serenity Prayer," *Yale Review* 86 (1998), 16-65, and Fox, *Biography*, 290-291.