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Author(s): Peter Viereck

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# Niebuhr in the Conformists' Den

PETER VIERECK

"We live in a paradise of comfort and prosperity, but this paradise is suspended in a hell of global insecurity. This . . . is a parable of the entire human situation: Suffering from ultimate insecurity, whatever its immediate securities . . ."

Reinhold Niebuhr



LET US HERE CONFINE OURSELVES to two aspects of Reinhold Niebuhr: first, his blend of religious conservatism with New Deal social reform; second, the way in which his independent-minded philosophy is threatened by the insidious mass-adulteration of our mechanized age, in which every valid and exciting new insight gets mass-produced, popularized, philistinized from tragic archetype into complacent stereotype. Thus every new anti-conformist victory gets commercialized into one more conformity, not because it gets attacked by the slick spokesmen of mass culture but because it gets embraced by them.

One of the best sources for Niebuhr's ideas are his two series of the Gifford lectures of 1939 at Edinburgh, later published together in 1951 in a convenient one-volume edition, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Also important are *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 1944; *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 1953; *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 1955.

Compare two photographs: Charles Baudelaire and this angular, harsh-faced professor at the Union Theological Seminary, who for years was pastor of a congregation of automobile workers in Detroit. The eyes of both have the same intensity, the same bitter integrity. Like Kierkegaard, Niebuhr is not merely "painfully sincere" but downright cadaverously sincere. The spiritual demands of his outspoken sermons indict not only the dead rotteness behind a Godless hedonism but also the self-deception behind a facile, overconfident idealism:

The error of our tradition had been to forget that man is a creature as well as creator. . . . Virtue becomes vice through some defect in the virtue. . . . The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving. . . . America's moral and spiritual success in relating itself creatively to a world community requires, not so much a guard against the gross vices, about which the idealists warn us, as a re-orientation of the whole structure of our idealism.

(Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 1952)

We may define the characteristic Niebuhr synthesis as an attempt to unite material social improvements with a return to a traditional dogmatic Protestantism. This same man, on the same day, can address a socially optimistic rally of "Americans for Democratic Action" and deliver a theologically pessimistic sermon on the innate depravity of all mortal "action," whether American democratic or otherwise.

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Peter Viereck is Professor of Modern European History at Holyoke College and author, as an historian, of *Metapolitics: from the Romantics to Hitler, Conservatism Revisited*, and others. The present paper was given as a lecture while Mr. Viereck occupied the Elliston Poetry Chair at the University of Cincinnati.

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Consequently Niebuhrism has its left and right deviationists. At the point where both invite sarcasm by racing beyond their master's gospel, the former may be labeled the Extroverted Progressors, the latter the Introspective Brooders. Both neglect one or the other of Niebuhr's two wars: the inner war against evil, the outer one against social wrongs.

His *Irony of American History*, 1952, attempted, among other things, to bridge the left-right split. The book exhorted Americans to resist "both the enemy's demonry and our vanities"; that is, to "preserve our civilization" both from our Soviet foe and from our own "human frailities." For, "if we perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause. The primary cause would be . . . eyes too blind." Christian spiritual love is Niebuhr's solution for bridging social conscience and other-worldly conscience within ourselves. By loving God and neighbour simultaneously, a return to the original Christian spirit is to end the schizophrenia between the mystical and social parts of human nature.

In politics and economics Niebuhr's viewpoint is more New Deal liberal than Adam Smith liberal. But really his viewpoint implies a third alternative, hard to label. Though supporting most of the economic program of the New Dealers, his motive for supporting their program is more religious, less economic than theirs. His motive is closer to a pre-Marxist Christian socialism than to the materialist pragmatism characterizing many (not all) New Dealers and ADA liberals.

Yet the term "Christian socialist" is likewise misleading for his elusive position. The term suggests a naive optimism about the capacity of mortal bureaucrats to implement Christian social ideals. He is more suspicious of statism than any socialist, Christian or otherwise. And he is more seriously concerned with Protestant theology and spiritual inwardness than was the external and shallow "muscular Christianity" of much of the nineteenth century. Because he carries his humane ideals neither to a this-worldly statist socialism nor to an other-worldly escapist promise of pie in the sky, his pessimism avoids respectively the optimist materialism of the nineteenth century and that century's pseudo-religious, optimist sentimentality.

The gap between Niebuhr's religious, non-statist social democracy (writ small) and the usual materialist, statist Social Democracy (writ large) is the gap between Kierkegaard and Marx. Niebuhr reminds both socialists and businessmen that power is power and hence corrupts, whether labeled "welfare state" or "free enterprise." His synthesis of liberalism and conservatism, like that of Adlai Stevenson, distrusts equally a regimented public statism and what Niebuhr calls the "sometimes quite inordinate powers and privileges" of private wealth. By distrusting both kinds of power equally, these liberal-conservatives, Stevenson and Niebuhr, are in the tradition of the liberal Lord Acton, whose most-quoted remark needs no repetition here, and in the tradition of the conservative Federalist John Adams, who wrote: "Absolute power intoxicates alike despots, monarchs, aristocrats, and democrats."

The closing sections of *The Irony* emphasize foreign policy. Even today, the

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book remains one of the best guides for American thinking on that subject. His aim is peace; not despite that aim but because of it, he warns America against succumbing to fraudulent Soviet "peace" drives. The subsequent "Geneva peace spirit" of 1955 made that warning even more pertinent than when it was first written.

Though his title puts *The Irony* in the singular, five different ironies about America emerge from the book. First, America denounces Marxist materialism, yet America's technical skill is the world's most successful example of materialism. Second, America loves peace, yet has no choice but to protect it with the most militarily destructive weapon in history. Third, America loves Jefferson's ideal of as little political power as possible, yet has had to increase political power hugely in order to limit the huge private economic powers that Jefferson could not foresee. Fourth, our world role has grown so complex and sophisticated that it conflicts with our natural impulse to flee back into the naive isolationism of what Niebuhr calls "American innocence." Fifth, other nations are nobler in theory than in practice; the reverse is true of America, whose proclaimed theories still sound like the selfish profit-materialism of the days of Sumner and McKinley but whose practice today is more often a generous humaneness, both in its social security for the needy at home and in its economic aid abroad. It might not hurt the more indiscriminate distrusters of America in Europe and Asia to study this fifth irony of the book. It is regrettable that Niebuhr did not develop still further the psychological implications of the amazing contrast between the social theories that Americans articulate consciously to explain their behavior and what they unconsciously play-by-ear. Consider only the kind of figures who imagine they are "conservatives"!

Will Herberg, one of America's ablest exponents of Burke, writes in the *New Republic* (May 16, 1955): "Reinhold Niebuhr, for all his involvement in liberal politics—or perhaps precisely *because* of his involvement — is to be counted among the 'neo-conservatives' of our time, who own kinship with Edmund Burke, rather than among the liberals, who draw their inspiration from Tom Paine and the French Enlightenment." The phrase "precisely because" gets at the heart of the Niebuhr synthesis. Most ADA liberals err in giving too little weight to his conservative philosophy. Many new conservatives err in giving too little weight to his cooperation with liberal politics; in their eagerness to propagandise for conservatism and annex names bigger than themselves as converts, they forget that a conservatism overinflated by misleading half-truths degenerates into mere success-hunting and thereby into the most transient of fads. The new conservatism will not establish its many valid insights and important rediscoveries in America until it learns from Niebuhr how to assimilate rather than bait the freedom-sustaining aspects of political liberalism. For liberalism, too, is an essential part (though not, as many liberals think, the only part) of that great, central, liberal-conservative heritage of the American tradition (Locke plus Burke, Jefferson plus John Adams) which both liberals and conservatives should conserve from the totalitarians.

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A really serious philosophical conservatism is never a fashionable fad, never a movement, but a level of historical and cultural insight, a level never attained by more than a lonely few, owing to the pain, the bitterness, the unpopular anti-complacency of that insight. It is an insight, in Niebuhr's words, into "the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all human configurations of power, the mixture of good and evil in all virtue." A bitter awareness of perpetual evil in history distinguishes conservatives from liberals in philosophy. Perhaps Niebuhr's most important achievement has been to re-establish this awareness, this "deep sadness of history," in terms of our own day. Thereby he is educating his liberal-intellectual readers and followers out of whatever faith in rationalist-progressive utopias may have survived in them from the illusions of the 1930's. In his many books on this theme, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 1955, gives one of his best brief definitions:

The universal inclination of the self to be more concerned with itself than to be embarrassed by its undue claims may be defined as "original sin." The universality of the inclination is something of a mystery. . . . This bondage of the will to the interests of the self is what is meant by "the bondage of the will" in Christian theory.

Three predictions. Before the end of the decade, Niebuhr will be our most influential social thinker. He will deserve this status because of his insight and integrity. Yet he will have this status thrust upon him not because of his deserts but in spite of them, and because of the accidental confluence of three fads.

The three fads are progressivism, artiness, and the religiosity of a mere fad-conservatism. All three fads overadjust Niebuhr into their respective images because he does unavoidably use their favorite magic words, activating their respective conditioned responses. The magic word "social reform" automatically titillates the progressivism of their political weeklies. The magic word "irony" (title of his book of 1952), not to mention "ambiguity," sets the artiness of their literary quarterlies purring. And when the third magic word, "original sin," flatters their Eliot-steeped sophistication, then snob-ecstasies swoon into a triple consummation: Left-ishly to eat their progress-cake; artily to have it too; and neo-conservatively to spice it with the *frisson* of religious guilt.

Used rigorously and unglibly, "social reform," "irony," and "original sin" are valid terms for needed concepts. It is not Niebuhr's fault when, despite his partly effective counter-measures, these concepts become the pet toys of every intellectual playboy of the western world. The fifteenth century stopped its Niebuhr (Savonarola) by burning him. Today the forces of mere prestige — the tacit Rotarianism of the highbrows—have a more effective method than the stake. They make their victim chic. They did it already to Baudelaire, they did it to Kierkegaard, they did it to Kafka: fashionableness is the ambush endangering the wise and good message of Reinhold Niebuhr.

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