

# FAITH & SOCIAL ACTION

Nineteenth Century German philosopher and author of *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx, famously described religion as an “opiate” of the masses. For Reinhold Niebuhr, this was a fair assessment of socially disengaged religion. But Niebuhr also thought disengaged religion was “false” religion. True religion—the religion that spurred abolitionists to fight slavery and Civil Rights activists to resist oppression—is relentlessly dynamic. It exposes injustice and stirs the conscience. It unsettles the status quo and fills us with yearning for the Kingdom of God. True religion, in other words, translates personal faith into social action.

Yet practicing true religion is no simple task. For one, it is personally demanding. When we resist the status quo, we risk being ostracized. Living out true religion therefore requires courage. Furthermore, figuring out how to resist can be tricky. Human affairs are often complex and morally ambiguous. For instance: religions agree that murder is wrong. Yet when World War II broke out, many people of faith concluded that they had a moral obligation resist Nazism by any means necessary, even if that meant killing fellow human beings on the battlefield. For them, translating faith to social action meant going to war. Niebuhr had a keen sense of both the importance and the difficulty of translating faith into social action. His work offers guidance as we confront the challenges of our own day.

## Questions to consider:

What do you consider to be the most morally challenging issues in contemporary life?

How can faith help us meet these challenges?

In what ways can/should people of faith get involved in advocating for greater justice?

Are there limits to faith-based social action? If so, what are they?

## -- Politics -

### Niebuhr Quotes:

Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises. –*Moral Man, Immoral Society* (MW, 153)

To establish justice in a sinful world is the whole sad duty of the political order.  
–*Government and the Strategy of Democracy*, Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, 180.

The Kingdom of God represents a final and absolute possibility which is, in some respects, equally distant from all political programs, because all of them involve elements of coercion and resistance which are foreign to a commonwealth of pure brotherhood and love.  
–*Radical Religion*, Spring 1938 (LJ 17)

We may be too secure both in our sense of power and our sense of virtue to be ready to engage in a patient chess game with historical destiny. We could bring calamity upon ourselves and the world by forgetting that even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process. Man cannot rise to a simple triumph over historical fate. –*Irony of American History* (MW 561)

## Transcript for clip -- “Faith & Social Action: Politics” :

### Andrew Bacevich:

I think a prophet in politics is someone who sees what others are...blind to. So Niebuhr early the Cold War, for example, takes issue with this Manichean frame that communism is evil, the Soviets are evil, by contrast that we are good, we are innocent. And therefore we are justified in doing almost anything we choose to do in opposition to this evil. That was a very important thing to say in the early Cold War.

### David Brooks:

One of the things I like about Niebuhr is it's always a balance. His viewpoints are always dialectical, and so he's always a man on a grey horse: “Let's go forward, but not too fast. Let's take action, but not too aggressively. Let's have some confidence, but not too much.” And so he's always folding back in on himself. And I do think that is pretty much the way we have to act, and in our current conflict against Islamic extremism, some people disagree, I happen to think sometimes you need to use drones to take out the leaders of Al Qaeda and ISIS, sometimes you need to fund weapons to groups you really don't like to hold back Assad, and you don't feel great doing that. But in every personal relationship I've had and in every public thing I've ever covered, sometimes you have to tolerate some dirty hands. That doesn't mean you excuse it, that doesn't mean you don't judge it. And one of the nice things about Niebuhr is you've got a guy like Machiavelli, who for, to whom dirty hands he did it with relish yeah, let's throw into the mud. Niebuhr is, he'll go into the mud when he needs to, for good purposes, but not with any relish, with a lot of self-suspicion.

### Healan Gaston:

Reinhold Niebuhr was living at a time when there massive changes in American society. From the 1920's, when capitalism was robust and the industrial revolution was humming along, to the Great Depression, then to World War II and the post-war world. And he as a result had to kind of tack constantly with those changes, in part because as we know about him, he was looking in the world around him for evidence about human nature, human history, human destiny, about God's work in the world. Those were the things that animated him as he looked around him. And so his understanding of what was happening depended very much on the political context in which he was living and working. As a result, there are many Niebuhrs. Left liberals tend to like the Niebuhr of the 1920s and 30s. More centrist liberals, or folks who want to think about Niebuhr's primary contribution to the liberal tradition tend to think about *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* as the moment where he struck the right balance. Folks who maybe move in a potentially more neo-conservative direction or who are interested particularly about this question of the exercise of power tend to love *The Irony of American History* because in part, the statesman's dilemma is laid bare there. And it's one he has become deeply familiar with as he's made his own way into the hallways of power. So Niebuhr is saying, look evil is real in the world but we have to counterbalance our understanding of that and our need to respond to that with action with a degree of humility and introspection. He even says at some point, “The evil in the foe is the evil in the self.” And so you can imagine then, how that premise is what sets up all of those sort of ironic things that he sees going on around him. That in this process of arguing with a foe, we have to, we are constantly thrown back on ourselves.

## -- International Relations --

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 processes 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 or culture or civilization which does not have its foundations in a particular and dated locus.

### Niebuhr Quotes:

The world community, standing thus as the final possibility and impossibility of human life, will be in actuality the perpetual problem as well as constant fulfillment of human hopes.  
-*Children of Light, Children of Darkness* (MW 457)

If we're going to be the Rome of the modern era we ought at least to apply ourselves more assiduously to the art of dominion, and learn that grand strategy without tactical skill is worth nothing. -*New Leader*, Feb. 4, 1957

National and imperial communities all have ethnic, linguistic, geographic, historical, and other forces of social unity. The universal community, however, no common language or common culture—nothing to create the consciousness of “we”...

The world community does, indeed, have some compelling forces toward unity. Technical civilization has created economic interdependence which generates insufferable frictions if it is not politically managed. There is in the culture of every nation, moreover, a religious and philosophical sense of world community waiting to be actualized, and the moral obligations extending beyond the national community. There is, finally, the fear of mutual destruction. It is the thesis of the proponents of world government that the atomic bomb has so intensified the fear of mutual destruction that hitherto impossible constitutional goals have now become possible.

Undoubtedly fear may be a creative force. The scared man can run faster from the pursuing bull than he ever thought possible. But the creative power of fear does not increase in proportion to its intensity. Fear finally becomes paralyzing. Furthermore, fear of mutual destruction easily degenerates into fear of a particular foe.... These are tragic facts, and one could wish that they were not true; but it is hardly mature to deny what is so obvious. The world community lacks, in short, the potent elements of “togetherness” which national communities boast.  
- “The Myth of World Government,” March 16, 1946 (MW 663-64)

### Transcript for clip -- *“Faith & Social Action: International Relations”* :

#### Andrew Bacevich:

Well, of course Obama, President Obama, has openly expressed his admiration for Niebuhr. That said, when the president first entered office, with expectations about the implications of his presidency enormously high, everything was going to change. I think that those expectations turned Obama's head a little bit. And that perhaps back in 2009, when he was being given the Nobel Peace Prize for showing up to work, that he...Obama had perhaps had read his own press clipping. Remember the Cairo speech the president gave, which promised a new beginning in relations

between the United States and Muslims around the world. Speeches promising new relations with Russia, with Iran, speeches in which Obama made specific reference to the trajectory of history. And by implication that he understood what that trajectory was. I think if we look where Obama is today, now that he's coming to the end of his presidency, he's actually become, or perhaps returned to, his Niebuhrian temperament. That what he says these days suggests a far more modest appreciation for what American power can do. And... a greater appreciation for how stubborn the world is, in terms of its, you know, openness to change. I don't know if you read the Jeffrey Goldberg article in *The Atlantic*, came out about three or four weeks ago. It's very interesting. It's a 19,000 word essay based on multiple interviews with the president, in which the president is reflecting on mostly issues related to foreign policy. And the president who I think really began his term in office as a foreign policy novice, not particularly well instructed in the way the world works, has come to acquire a very sophisticated understanding of the way the world works. And that that has then tempered his expectations of how changeable it is. And I think that's Niebuhrian.

### **David Brooks:**

So I started with *The Irony of American History*, I was a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in Europe in the middle of a lot of historic events—the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the creating of the Maastricht Treaty, to attempt to unify Europe, and so there was these big historic events. Some of them were tremendously idealistic and there was a sense that history was coming to an end, that there was going to be a reign of goodness and peace and unification...and somehow something struck me awry about that, that human history was probably not coming to an end, that human nature probably hadn't changed. And here was Niebuhr, a book that I just came across because I had seen reference to him, saying, you know, the nature of man is such that we can't expect an end to conflict, we can't expect an end to egotism and to pride. And some of these illusions that we can create a peaceful, unified Europe are nice illusions, but it may not work out that way...And the other thing about Niebuhr is that, you know, I work for a newspaper and so much of what we do is emphasize the economic and political basis for what happens in the world. But here was a man emphasizing the theological, the spiritual, the moral, and the deeper drivers of what actually moves history. And so he was seeing politics through a moral lens. And there was a lot more of that in the 1950s, and '40s, and '60s, than there is today. But I found that deeper and more profound lens much more explanatory of what's actually happening.

### **Healan Gaston:**

America is in a position in the aftermath of the Second World War where it has really in a sense taking over the helm of the western civilization project because Europe is in ruins. And so, Americans are left with incredibly consequential questions about the future of the world. And they are being thrust into positions of responsibility, and power, and leadership in that world that they've never experienced before. And so Niebuhr becomes the figure that most helps Americans think through the demands of that position through the question of what that might entail. And like what it would take in the way of an ability to think around problems and to deal with realities of your own power, but then deal with power in the world and evil in the world and like, try to imagine how to reconstruct the world with all of those things firmly in mind.

## -- The Church --

### Niebuhr Quotes:

The Christian gospel which transcends all particular and contemporary social situations can be preached with power only by a church which bears its share of the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved, burdens of establishing peace, of achieving justice, and of perfecting justice in the spirit of love. Thus the Kingdom of God which is not of this world is made relevant to every problem of the world.

– “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937 (MW 737).

If we preach repentance, it must be repentance for those who accept the Lord as well as for those who pretend to deny Him. If we preach the judgment of God upon a sinful world, it must be judgment upon us as well as those who do not acknowledge His judgments. If we preach the mercy of God, it must be with a humble recognition that we are in need of it as much as those who do not know God’s mercy in Christ. If we preach the obligation of the love commandment, it must be the preacher who must know that he violates that commandment as well as those who do not consciously accept its obligation.

– “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937, (MW 742)

The gospel cannot be preached with truth and power if it does not challenge the pretensions and pride, not only of individuals, but of nations, cultures, civilizations, economic and political systems. The good fortune of America and its power place it under the most grievous temptations to self-adulation. If there is no power and grace in the Christian church "to bring down every high thing which exalteth itself against the knowledge of God," the church becomes not merely useless but dangerous.

– “The Idolatry of America,” C&S, Spring 1950 (LJ 97)

The church is much like Noah’s ark. One could not bear the stench within if not for the storm without. (Attributed to Niebuhr by various sources. Biographer June Bingham depicts it as Niebuhr recasting the saying of an unspecified medieval cleric).

### Transcript for clip -- “*Faith & Social Action: The Church*” :

#### Robin Lovin:

To set it in context, another theologian who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine was Karl Barth. These two people represented really opposing ways of thinking about Christianity and the relationship to democracy and society. Barth, because he was worried about the way that Christianity and Germany had been taken over by the Nazi movement, always wanted to distinguish the church from society. Niebuhr's realism led him to be worried about the way the church was embedded in the life of society and to think about how we could use that for purposes of achieving a greater justice. One result was that Niebuhr and Barth had regular confrontations after the Second World War, notably at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. They were verbal sparring partners at various international meetings leading up to that. At one of those meetings, a woman from Japan named Kiyoko (Name?), who'd been a student of Niebuhr's at Union before the second world war, sort of dressed both of them down and took them into a room by themselves and told them to work this out so that they could together provide better leadership for the future. I am not sure how successful she was in achieving reconciliation between Niebuhrian and Barthian theology at that point, but she represents a real Niebuhrian approach to the conflict between these two gigantic figures of 20th century theology.

**Stanley Hauerwas:**

What is missing in Niebuhr is any account of the church. Then Christian account of the way things are is always going to rely on the fact that there is an alternative to the way things are, called the church. Niebuhr had no account of that. You can read Niebuhr in some ways as trying to provide something like Augustan's "Two Cities" in the *City of God*. But there was just one city and that's the world in which Christianity provides an interpretation for why it is you're going to participate in the direction of history. But there's no alternative to that, called church.

— Does society and church anywhere overlap? — No. Niebuhr, my way of expressing it, Niebuhr was a Constantinian. He assumed that Christianity and the progressive forces of history were in alliance. So you expected from political leaders a kind of commitment that wouldn't necessarily be explicitly Christian but was what Christianity made possible as part of the progressive forces. That's a kind of Constantinian view that I am in dissent from.

**Gary Dorrien:**

He (Reinhold Niebuhr) came up and through The Social Gospel in its hay-day. So The Social Gospel is this tremendous movement in mostly mainline American Protestantism, although there is a Catholic version of it that develops a bit later, which says that the Christian church has an ethical responsibility to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice. Now you can't have either part of that sentence before about the 1880s because first you have to have the idea that there is such a thing as social structure, that then would be transformed by something else as social justice, so none of these terms even existed before the Gilded Age, and the rise of sociology as a discipline, and at the same time the rise of social ethics as a field, which Niebuhr is. I mean he...Niebuhr ends up, when he comes to Union, he's teaching in a field, Social Ethics, that has no history and no basis whatsoever, apart from the social gospel. And he takes all of that for granted. The idea that the church has needs...If the church is going to be true to itself and to the ethical witness of the gospels then the church needs to be involved in indeed, in social justice, whatever that means in a given time. And that's the work even, of Social Ethics as a field. I mean, the idea...of it, of this is the field which you shouldn't have to steer through Jeremiah, or get the Cappadocian father straight, or whatever else is going on in a seminary curriculum, before you finally get to these issues about what we should be saying about a progressive income tax or getting involved in the First World War, or Temperance or the like, that there should be a field where you just go straight for the social/ethical, social/justice questions. So Niebuhr cut his teeth on that, you know, as it were. That's what he is in his young, in his career as a pastor. Uh, so all of that he takes for granted. And people who don't get that in Niebuhr, don't get him. Because there are misreadings of Niebuhr whereby you don't even see this Social Gospel passion that is in him till the end of his days.