

# RACE & JUSTICE

Reinhold Niebuhr exhibited a lifelong concern for social justice. Improving race relations was central to his vision for how to build a more just society.

Niebuhr first immersed himself in race issues while serving as a pastor in Detroit in the 1920s. His vocal opposition to the Ku Klux Klan garnered the attention of Detroit's Catholic mayor, who asked Niebuhr to chair the city's Interracial Committee in 1925. In collaboration with African American and Jewish leaders, Niebuhr confronted the intractable character race issues both in Detroit and in the nation as a whole. This work shaped his subsequent activism. In the 1930s, he helped found the Delta Farm Cooperative, an integrated farming community in Mississippi; supported the creation of the Highlander Folk School, which would go on to become a training center for civil rights activists; and advocated on behalf of the Jews as fascism took hold in Europe. During World War II Niebuhr spoke out against Japanese Internment and was among the first religious leaders to make a case of the formation of the state of Israel. He would also weigh in on race issues at various critical junctures of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

For all its complexities, Niebuhr's approach to social justice was based on a straightforward insight: to obtain justice, we need to strive for love. Love requires us to place the needs of others before our own. Racism, however, is the product of one social group asserting its own needs and desires at the expense of another social group—a pattern of behavior that Niebuhr described as group egoism. This contradicted love at such a basic level that Niebuhr considered racism "one form of original sin." But precisely because it springs from such deep place of sin, racism is extraordinarily difficult to uproot. In the American context in particular the work of exposing, confronting, and overcoming racism would be arduous indeed, yet absolutely necessary to building a just society.

Some believe Niebuhr's legacy on race is mixed. On the one hand, he advocated more strongly and consistently on behalf of minority groups than virtually any other prominent white leader of his day, especially in the early part of his career. On the other hand, like the great majority of white leaders, he urged moderation at pivotal junctures during which the Civil Rights Movement required decisive support. This is partly because, while Niebuhr was able to perceive the group dynamics of racism, he didn't quite grasp its structural dimensions. Thus he wasn't able to fully appreciate the dire need for the sorts of structural interventions that the Civil Rights Movement sought. Despite these shortcomings, he remains one of our most incisive voices on issues of race and justice.

## Questions to consider:

In what ways do we continue to see racism at work in American society?

Why are racial tensions so difficult to resolve?

What steps do we need to take as a society for the dream of racial justice to become reality?

## Consider the following quote:

*"Minority groups are thought 'bad' only because they diverge from the dominant type and affront that type by their divergence." – Jews After the War, Part II (Feb 28, 1942) MW, 646.*

***Do you agree? Why or why not?***

## -- African Americans --

### Niebuhr Quotes

Race bigotry is, in short, one form of original sin... We do not finally come to terms with race pride until the soul knows itself to be under final judgment, ceases to veil its hidden fears and prides, honestly prays, "Search me, O God, and know my faults; try me and know my thoughts – see if there is any wicked way in me and lead me to the way everlasting." Race bigotry, in other words, must be broken by repentance and not merely by enlightenment.  
–"Christian faith and the race problem," C&S, Spring, 1945 (LJ 126)

Increasing race tensions is due, however, not merely to increasing resentment among Negroes but also to increasing fear among proponents of "white supremacy" who feel their privileged position in a caste society imperiled... We must expect this tension to heighten until it reaches its climax after the war. The frightened reactionaries regard the returning Negro soldier as a particular threat to peace, and not without reason. For it is undoubtedly a fact that the Negro soldier in America has conceived a profound resolve to claim some of the democratic justice for which they have been fighting a foreign foe. –"The Negro Issue in America," C&S Summer 1944 (LJ 143)

It is not possible to travel in the South and mix in the complex race relations of a Northern municipality without noticing that the most brazen forms of injustice are partly due to the effort of men of disquiet conscience to hide the uneasiness of their inner life. Even the worst sinners against God's law of brotherhood have some testimony in their inner life to the wrong that they do. Such uneasiness may prompt repentance; but it may also prompt despair; and despair may express itself in frantic professions of righteousness and unjust attacks on the minority... Cain protests the more loudly that he is not his brother's keeper because he knows in the secrets of his heart that he is. –"The Negro Issue in America," C&S Summer 1944 (LJ 144)

We cannot deal with our injustices to either the Negroes or the Japanese adequately because we dare not confess to ourselves how great our sins are. If we made such a confession, the whole temple of our illusions would fall. –"*The Race Problem*," C&S, Summer, 1942 (LJ 131)

A favorite counsel of the social scientists is that of accommodation. If two parties are in a conflict, let them, by conferring together, arrive at a modus vivendi... But will a disinherited group, such as the Negroes for instance, ever win full justice in society in this fashion? Will not even its most minimum demands seem exorbitant to the dominant whites, among whom only a very small minority will regard the inter-racial problem from the perspective of objective justice? –*Moral Man Immoral Society* (MW 143)

### Transcript for clip -- "*Race & Justice: African Americans*" :

**Healan Gaston:** — Well he was appointed as the head of the interracial council in Detroit, and that was one of the roles that I think probably most defined his engagement with the black community at that time, but part of what he was doing in exposing Ford was to say, you know, here's Ford claiming that he's progressive by having creative positions for black workers, but look at the power dynamics still at work. And so his ability then to kind of read behind those benevolent expressions was a really crucial contribution, and made the black community feel supported. The other piece of the puzzle is that that Niebuhr throughout this period really is most concerned about labor and labor relations and class questions. Race is always in this period to a certain extent a somewhat secondary concern for him—which has been a reason for a fair amount of criticism for the things that he did not do. But I think it's incredibly important to realize that race was very much on his radar screen, that the

plight of black workers was very much on his radar screen in this period, that he was concerned about the housing situation that was unfolding in Detroit, and that he did try as much as he could in that context to address some of those issues. Did he do enough? Many people would say no. Did he do more than most people in his position at the same time in history? Absolutely. There we're left with a sort of paradox in terms of his legacy on racial questions. But I do think that there's a strong element of concern about these issues in there with his questions about the labor struggle.

**Cornel West:**

I think when you talk about race in relation to Reinhold Niebuhr, you have to separate the early Niebuhr from the later Niebuhr. The early Niebuhr, shaped by his Detroit experiences, writing the classic *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), it remains the most important text in Christian ethics to this day. And in that text he explicitly, not just talks about racism, but he talks about the need for there to be a leader and a movement that builds on Gandhi and uses nonviolent strategies in order to try to break the back of racist institutional practices. Now that's 1932. Martin Luther King Jr. sitting there at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, later on sitting at Boston University as a Ph.D. student, he reads *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he has some notion of what Gandhi was up to in the struggle against British colonialism and says, "My God. We've got something indigenous here. We've got something organic here. We've got an American intellectual who is acknowledging a degree to which certain kinds of spiritual gifts that black people have honed out over time can contribute to a struggle for justice by using nonviolent strategies." There is a direct connection—that's the early Niebuhr. Now as we know, March 1948, Whittaker Chambers, Reinhold Niebuhr is the official establishment theologian, mainstream incorporating our dear brother. 1932 he's a revolutionary Christian and a democratic socialist; he's just run on the socialist ticket headed by Norman Thomas: at the presidential level—also a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, class of 1911. 1948 Niebuhr, mainstream Cold War liberal. Now as you know, James Cone, in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, you know he's got this very powerful critique and in some ways subtle condemnation of Niebuhr being too quietest on the race issue. Because by the time you get to the later Niebuhr, he has been reading Edmund Burke. And Edmund Burke, one of the great founding fathers of modern conservatism, subtle, sophisticated, but calling for what? Slow, organic change given the manners and moirés of any region and the society. You don't wanna unsettle them too much. You don't want to trouble them too much, because it can lead toward chaos. And Niebuhr is becoming closer to Burke in the latter part in his career, as opposed to that early Niebuhr, in the '30s and early '40s. So you do need to acknowledge the shift that takes place. Unfortunately, a lot of people only encounter the later Niebuhr. And he does sound more Burkean, about *Brown v. Board* (1954), don't wanna move too quick. With all deliberate speed. No, no the south has to adjust on its own terms and so forth. And black folk are catching hell. You see. Hmm, Niebuhr. That doesn't sound like the early Niebuhr. Not in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, not in *Reflections on the End of an Era* 1934 and other such texts. So there's a fascinating tension. I would argue he never loses his prophetic sensibility in the end. And I say that, because even as he moves toward Edmund Burke's organic sensibilities, he still has an ironic consciousness, his great text of course, *The Irony of American History*—you get very powerful critiques of American power, of American arrogance and so on. But it doesn't call for the need for change now, that Martin Luther King Jr. was trying to push forward in the face of American apartheid in the late '50s, early '60s.

**Interviewer:** So tell me, there's two Niebuhr's. In the wider black movements in America in the 21st Century -- is he considered friend, foe, useless, of no help at all?

Well you know, you never look at a great figure through a Manichean lens. It's never either or, it's not just black or white, it's true that you want them to take a stand. And I believe that he was always an anti-racist and that's very important.

**Gary Dorrien:** Reinhold Niebuhr wrote twelve, about a dozen articles, about race and racial injustice in the course of his career. And what he always says about it is Racism is a distinct evil...it is human egotism of a certain kind writ large and it is...it is distinctly evil, and demeaning in refusing to see the God given dignity in the lives and being of certain human beings. That that's what racism is and there's something distinctly evil, a violation, of the very Christian doctrine of creation. So he always says that kind of thing when he talks about it. And he said that more often and more...with greater passion, I would say, than any North American white theologian of his time. However, that is never given highest priority in his activism and what you see him writing about in his books. You have to kind of dig it out of his wider essays. If you go into essays he wrote and often obscure publications, yes, you can dig it out of all of these articles. But it's never a main theme. It's never really thematized in any of his great books. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932, near the end, he has a section where black Americans should try the boycott method. So that is in there. But it's never the focal point or highest priority of his activism. And so, and there are many people who have read the standard Reinhold Niebuhr books. If you read...you read *Reflections of the End of an Era*, or *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, or *Nature and Destiny*, or even *Irony of American History*, that's your understanding of Niebuhr, that sort of canonical Niebuhr, well it's hard to even see him talking about racial justice. So it's hard to even know the immense passion that he does have invested in this subject. And just the fact that he is the white American theologian that cares about this, really more than any of his peers, it's easy to miss. And many people have. And I think the next most important thing to be said about this is that for all of his passionate argument about the evil of racism, Niebuhr himself doesn't think of racism in terms of what we would say structural terms, cultural terms. He doesn't think about white supremacy itself as a structure of power that is based on privilege, that presumes to define what's normal. So the way he talks about racism, is instead of being systemic or cultural in that sense, he talks about it in terms of racism as personal bias. It's egotism of a particularly evil kind at writ large. And so therefore -- it's truncated, and what use, in sort of getting to the fuller, more full orb'd dimensions of racism. And so the theme of cultural superiority and inferiority, it's still there. And Niebuhr, Niebuhr will talk about black Americans in the same kind of language that Gunnar Myrdal in his great book, *An American Dilemma*. Those Myrdal books were tremendous in the work that they did in helping to even create or renew movements for racial justice in this country. But...Myrdal does even talk about black Americans as being culturally inferior, so, on occasion, does Reinhold Niebuhr. And so that's part of the legacy. With Niebuhr it's always complicated and it's always dialectical, even in regard to this issue.

**Ron Stone:** The Delta Cooperative Farm originated with experiences that William Scarlett -- the bishop of St. Louis -- had when he and a colleague were harassed by police in the South b/c of their work with farmers. Niebuhr had been supportive and I think was one of the founders of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union -- which was an attempt to get some rights for the tenant farmers -- both black and white -- who lived on the plantations and had a little bit of their own land or they rented some land to farm for themselves as well as doing the plantation's work and so Niebuhr and Scarlett and some union students were deeply involved in the support of the Tenants Farmers Union. And Scarlett was the one who raised the money -- Bishop Scarlett -- for the Delta Cooperative Farm which was a farm in the Mississippi Valley which brought together black workers, white workers and they were educated in the same local school, worshipped in the same church, I think they may have some separate worship services too but I know they did worship together and they worked out their governing arrangements in an integrated fashion. A student from Union became the executive of the delta farm and Niebuhr would go to the farm for board meetings and he was particularly complimented for being the one who could arrange the compromises that were needed to keep the farm together. It was always on shaky financial ground -- Mrs. Roosevelt visited the farm -- there are some who think that some of the Roosevelt administrative efforts on behalf of the farmers were influenced by what was going on at the Delta Farm but I've never traced that story out. It maintained itself into the 50's -- after which a african

american young man was accused of whistling at a white woman at a bus stop and the White Citizens Council organized against the farm -- accused it of being communist where it was cooperative and demanded it be closed and the threats of violence were so outrageous that the farm was closed. In the process the farm had developed another farm called The Providence Farm and that one continued for another dozen, maybe longer years so the integrated experiments in Miss. went on for a considerable amount of time and one of the few places that you would've found these sort of cooperative / integrated communities worshipping and educating together. It's an interesting part of the story that Niebuhr believed in cooperative movements and energetically worked with them but he knew that wasn't where the rubber hit the road. That if you were going to reform that agricultural system or racial relations system you need to enlist the power of govt. Cooperative movements he thought were good as demonstrative models but not where the real action was, so the critics who say of Niebuhr that say he's govt or state-oriented are correct -- he believed to cause real social change you have power, money, possibilities of institutional dependency which you can count on.

## -- Jews --

### Niebuhr Quotes

The problem of what is to become of the Jews in the postwar world ought to engage all of us, not only because a suffering people has a claim upon our compassion but because the very quality of our civilization is involved in our solution. It is, in fact, a scandal that the Jews have had so little effective aid from the rest of us in a situation in which they are only the chief victims. The Nazis intend to decimate the Poles and to reduce other peoples to the status of helots; but they are bent on the extermination of the Jews.

-"Jews After the War," Feb 21, 1942 (MW, 639)

The poorer Jews understand, out of their experience, what is frequently withheld from the more privileged—namely, that the bigotry of majority groups toward minority groups that affront the majority by diverging from the dominant type is a perennial aspect of man's collective life. The force of it may be mitigated, but it cannot be wholly eliminated. These Jews, therefore, long for a place on the earth where they are not "tolerated," where they are neither "understood" nor misunderstood, neither appreciated nor condemned, but where they can be what they are, preserving their own unique identity without asking "by your leave" of anyone else. -(MW, 643)

One reason why Jews suffer more than any other minority is that they bear the brunt of two divergences from type, religious and racial, and it is idle for the Jews or Gentiles to speculate about which is the primary source of prejudice. Either would suffice, but the prejudice is compounded when both divergences are involved. -JAW II, 648.

Zionist leaders are unrealistic in insisting that their demands entail no "injustice" to the Arab population since Jewish immigration has brought new economic strength to Palestine. It is absurd to expect any people to regard the restriction of their sovereignty over a traditional possession as "just," no matter how many other benefits accrue from that abridgement. What is demanded in this instance is a policy that offers a just solution of an intricate problem face by a whole civilization. -JAW II, 648-9

## Transcript for clip -- *"Race & Justice: Jews"* :

### **Susannah Heschel:**

Well you know it was during one of their walks on Riverside drive a few years earlier that Reinhold Niebuhr asked my father to deliver the eulogy at his funeral. My father told me and I was we were all taken aback. Cause here was a great Christian theologian who must know Christian pastors to ask. Why a Jew? And I think asking my father, in itself, is something of great historical moment. Think about that: what does that mean? In 2000 years did Christian theologians ask a Jew to deliver the eulogy for the greatest Christian theologian of America, of the 20th century. A Jew gives the eulogy.

### **Healan Gaston:**

Well, I mean I think one thing that is certainly true about Niebuhr is that he cared a great deal about the plight of the powerless and the question of the way that they thought about who God was and what their responsibilities might be in society. And also about the challenge that powerlessness in general put forward to Christians who themselves were not powerless. It's like this question of what do we do about injustice in the world? And I think that on that score he was really in the process of trying to architect a kind of prophetic faith in the '30s that is very strongly influenced by a pretty sophisticated set of thoughts about workers, about black Americans, about Catholics, about Jews, about people who are different from himself. In that sense he is coming of age at this crucial moment at a time when there is a lot of discussion about brotherhood. The national organization, the major brotherhood movement organization in the '20s was the National Conference of Christians and Jews founded in 1929 and that spirit of brotherhood, that question of what brotherhood requires, like how we're going to live together in a pluralistic democracy. He cared very deeply about those things and he was thinking about them as he was pulling resources here and there, trying to cobble together his own understanding of what prophetic faith was, and how it might impact the nation's future.

### **Susannah Heschel:**

Niebuhr seems to have been very, very aware that after the end of World War II and with the murder of 6 million Jews and the thousands and thousands of Jewish refugees who were being held in displaced persons camps all over Europe, it the effort to create a state out of the Jewish homeland that that had to happen... that it was the right thing to do. And I think that was very much in accord with the mood of most people in Europe and the United states at that point. These were refugees who needed a place. It was time. this is enough already. And I think Niebuhr was also well aware of the history of Christian attitudes towards Jews and realized that has to change. So he supported the creation of the state of Israel and supported Israel throughout the years. And understood I think understood the complexities that faced Jews...trying to establish a state out of nothing. Trying to teach themselves a language that would unite them because they were coming from Europe speaking different languages from North Africa, from Iraq, from Egypt from around the world, from India. Jews coming from Africa. What would be their common language. Hebrew. 10:30:08 Well Hebrew didn't exist as a spoken language and had to be created and then people had to learn it. and it was a very difficult. But Niebuhr supported those efforts. And he also I think Niebuhr was someone who understood the complexities of society and of life. It's very clear in his writings. He understands people are complex. And states are complex and politics is complex and there are no simple answers.

## -- Law of Love --

### Niebuhr Quotes

I find it impossible to envisage a society of pure love as long as man is man.  
-D.B. Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, 13).

The Christian conception of the relation of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. -NDM II, 246 (LJ, 16)

Insofar as justice admits the claims of the self, it is something less than love. Yet it cannot exist without love and remain justice. For without the "grace" of love, justice always degenerates into something less than justice. -"Justice and Love," C&S, Fall 1950 (LJ 26)

The realization of our general involvement in the evils of racial prejudice must not prompt us to inaction when particularly flagrant forms of the sins we all commit challenge our conscience. The fact that we all violate the law of love in some way or other ought not to obscure to our conscience the force of that law.  
-"What resources can the Christian church offer to meet crisis in race relations?" *The Messenger*, April 3, 1956

From the standpoint of biblical faith we do not have to despair because life is so brief, but we must not pretend to be more because we are so great. Because we are both small and great, we have discerned a mystery and a meaning beyond our own smallness and greatness, and a justice and a love which completes our incompletions, which corrects our judgments, and which brings the whole story to a fulfillment beyond our power to fulfill any story.  
-"The Wheat and the Tares (MW 886)

### Questions to consider:

What does Niebuhr mean when he says above that Justice  
"cannot exist without *love* and remain justice?"

Do you agree? Why or why not?

### Transcript for clip -- "*Race & Justice: Law of Love*" :

#### Lisa Cahill:

So "structures of brotherhood" is his way of talking about social institutions in their capacity to be bearers of justice and encouragers of just behavior. So on the one hand social institutions frequently and maybe even more often serve the interests of the powerful who constructed them and who want to perpetuate the status quo. So those are the structures of injustice. That's the immoral society that he speaks of in a book that is partly by that, you know uses that phrase in the title. But the structures of brotherhood is where we see the positive potential of grace in history. We see the kingdom of God which is not a universal human category or a, a national political

category in the United States but it's the Christian way of expressing the social presence of grace. And the kingdom of god in political and social terms is structures of brotherhood. That it is possible to enact better laws. It is possible to demonstrate on behalf of civil rights as did Martin Luther King. It is possible to affirm the equality of women. Surely it's not immediately realized, but have we made progress, yes we have. So the, the structures of justice are social patterns of behavior through which we protect and encourage more just relationships in society. And you know one of his basic categories of course would be love and justice, two categories I guess together. And he always says that, that justice needs to be encouraged by love. And mutual love is the highest possibility of history but that needs to be stimulated by some element of self-sacrificial love. So the, the Christian contribution in his view is to keep offering that and stimulating that, putting that into the mix, and creating more fellow feeling, more sense of solidarity among human beings more broadly. And then finally more justice in society and that would be the structures of justice or the structures of brotherhood. Sisterhood of course today we would also say.

**Gary Dorrien:** Jimmy Carter has said on more than one occasion that one of the great regrets of his life is that he never met Reinhold Niebuhr. And that symbolizes something, that Carter himself, like other people who have held office, who are sincerely Christian, who have a sort of Christian background, or are...for whom Christianity is important, but also exercise power and sometimes need to do bad things in exercising power, Niebuhr is the symbol, if nothing else, even if you haven't read a great deal of Niebuhr. What you tend to know is that he is the person who symbolizes this very problem you are sitting with, if you are someone like Jimmy Carter or Barack Obama, who is thinking about What does it mean for me to exercise this power in a morally responsible way? Because he is always dealing with that question, that there's this Christianity, the love ethic of Jesus does provide, that Niebuhr himself says a kind of ethic of love perfectionism that's very difficult to say what that means in the hardball world of politics. And Niebuhr is so concerned to say Politics is a hard-ball realm. It's the realm of power and interest. And yet somehow these two things have to be held together, at least that's the project, that's the work of Christian social ethics. And so even if you haven't read a great deal of Niebuhr, you do know that that struggling with both sides of that dialectic are on every page of Niebuhr. And then of course it becomes existential if you are literally sitting in power.

**Robin Lovin:**

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a movement of realism, or what was sometimes called real-politik that was very common in the European and American world, and the whole idea behind that kind of realism was to be serious about self interest and ignore moral ideals. Niebuhr's idea of Christian realism was you have to be serious about self-interest, you have to be especially interested in your own self-interest, but you can't ignore the power of ideals like love and justice. So, Christian realism is not about ignoring moral, spiritual ideas, it's about being realistic about their impact on particular situations.

In a passage in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr really shows how deeply his whole world of thought is shaped by Biblical models and so that he turns to faith, hope, and love, the traditional theological virtues from 1st Cor 13, and basically says that we can't give meaning to the things that we do in his history without these 3 things that really transcend history. We have to have trust in a judgment that lies beyond our own judgment. We have to have hope beyond the results of our actions that we can see and finally we have to have love that keeps us from just being locked into our own self-interest. Those things taken by themselves won't give you a political program, but without faith, hope, and love, you'll never have the motivation and the broad understanding of the human situation to invest your life in changing realities for the people who share this society with you.