

# 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.