

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 he...he...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.