

## 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?

### -- 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 Jeffery 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.