

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?

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. 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.