

REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S 'REVOLUTION'

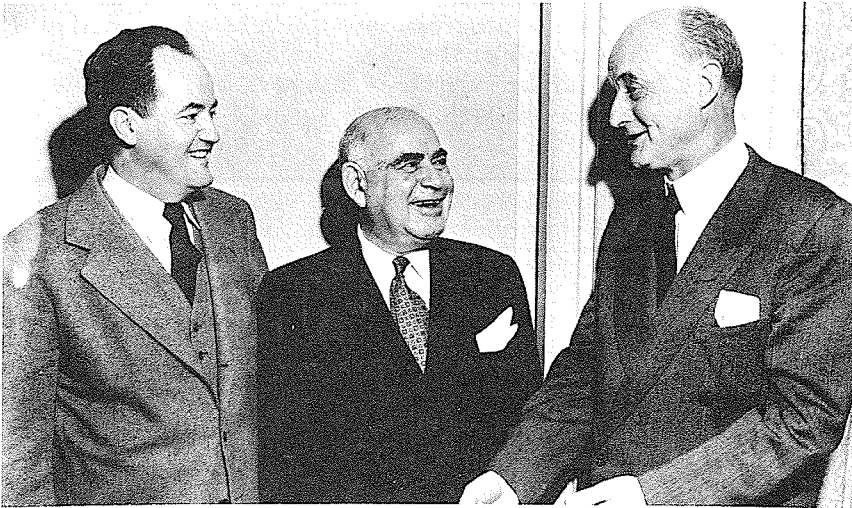
Ever since the 18th century, Western intellectuals have been tempted by what might be described as the "Enlightenment heresy"—a simple faith in the perfectibility of man and human society. Fortunately for the survival of the liberal tradition, there have been thinkers within the fold, John Stuart Mill among them, who have discerned and pointed out the excesses of the reformist creed. Another such thinker was the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). Historian Richard Fox here recounts how Niebuhr, reminding his contemporaries of the Christian notion of Original Sin, helped to steer American academics and policy-makers away from utopian schemes and toward greater recognition of the ethical dilemmas that loom up in everyday political life.

by Richard Wightman Fox

When *Esquire* magazine turned 50 last year, it released a much-ballyhooed golden anniversary number devoted to "50 Who Made the Difference" over the past half century. Celebrity writers such as Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe were enlisted to profile "American Originals" as diverse as Dwight D. Eisenhower and Muhammad Ali. Despite their differences, nearly all of *Esquire's* elect had one thing in common: They were themselves celebrities, household names.

One exception—a choice bound to confuse the magazine's up-scale readers—was philosopher-theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He was not the only preacher. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were there. But Niebuhr was the only full-time professor and the only social, political, or religious thinker in the group. Why had Niebuhr been chosen and not, say, Lewis Mumford, Talcott Parsons, or Margaret Mead?

The answer is simple: Niebuhr had influence in places



Preacher among politicians: Senator Hubert Humphrey (D.-Minn.) and Senator Herbert Lehman (D.-N.Y.) converse with Reinhold Niebuhr at a 1950 dinner sponsored by Americans for Democratic Action.

where the others did not. Like them, he had a following among academic and general readers; unlike them, he had caught the attention of such luminaries as Henry Luce (who had put him on *Time's* anniversary cover in 1948), as well as Felix Frankfurter, Isaiah Berlin, George Kennan, Walter Reuther, Adlai Stevenson, Hubert Humphrey, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., himself the author of the *Esquire* profile.

In the years after World War II, Niebuhr was, as journalist Richard Rovere once put it, "theologian of the establishment." Occasionally, the theologian mused that it might have been nice to be a man of power himself. But he contented himself with a career as a preacher, writer, and teacher—one in which he, nevertheless, exercised substantial influence. "Singlehandedly," writes Schlesinger, "Niebuhr accomplished a revolution in American liberal thought." That, of course, is the hyperbole of a disciple, but it raises the central question: What, precisely, did Niebuhr contribute to American liberalism?

To the generation of liberals who came of age between the two world wars, Niebuhr was, first of all, a powerful personal presence. Born between the early years of the century and the end of World War I, that group was too young to have been demoralized by the disillusionment that followed the Treaty of

Versailles. Many kept their hopeful assumptions about man and history—their belief in progress through science, education, good will—until the end of the '30s. The rise of fascism, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the carnage of World War II led to their own rendezvous with disillusionment. A good number of liberals faced the '40s with deep self-doubt. Niebuhr shepherded them at that critical moment, offering them both a firm commitment to liberal politics and a skeptical view of man's nature.

Liberalism could survive, he insisted, only if it embraced what he termed a "realistic" perspective on human nature and community. Liberals would have to reacquaint themselves with the Biblical notion of sin: Human beings always did some evil in the course of doing good. Niebuhr often quoted Saint Paul, saying, "There is a law in our members that wars against the law in our mind." No human actions were purely altruistic; even the most disinterested harbored seeds of selfishness. Every act of justice carried at least a measure of injustice with it. That paradox was not a justification for inaction, but a warning against inflated hopes. There were no utopias. Preaching that message day after day in print and in person, Niebuhr attracted a zealous corps of admirers. Schlesinger was not the only one to recollect that the encounter with Niebuhr changed his life.



Those who knew Niebuhr are unanimous about one thing: None of them ever knew another person remotely like him. Words such as "charismatic," "intense," and "energetic" fall repeatedly from their lips. "Reinie," they say, immediately dominated any group, large or small. Legendary fast-talkers such as Felix Frankfurter and Isaiah Berlin were captivated because they had met their match. Niebuhr outtalked, outdebated, and outquipped the quickest tongues in the English-speaking world. The agnostic Frankfurter once filed out of church after a riveting Niebuhr sermon and shook the preacher's hand as he went by. "I liked what you said, Reinie," the Supreme Court Justice remarked, "and I speak as a believing unbeliever." That was fitting, Niebuhr replied, since he had spoken as "an unbelieving believer."

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The impact of Niebuhr's person was reinforced by the example of his daily devotion to the tasks of liberal politics. He was a founder of the Union for Democratic Action (UDA) in 1940 and composed its prolabor, anticommunist policy statements. After the war, he was also an active leader in its successor, Americans for Democratic Action, and a dominant figure in New York State's Liberal Party. All the while, he managed to teach full-time at Union Theological Seminary, publish books every couple of years and articles every couple of days, edit two journals of Christian opinion—*Christianity and Crisis* and *Christianity and Society*—and travel to speak at colleges and meetings across the East and Midwest. Niebuhr persuaded not just by personal charisma but by working harder than anyone else. Bruce Bliven, editor of the *New Republic*, remembered him laboring into the night at the UDA office, "struggling on, like a man walking in thick sand."



But there is another reason for Niebuhr's extraordinary influence during the postwar period. His tough-minded theology gave moral sanction to the policies pursued by the generation of liberals who came to power during the 1960s. Simplifying Niebuhrian ideas about using "power," not just "reason" and "good will," in international affairs helped to buttress a New Frontier regime pledged to "support any friend, oppose any foe."

"John F. Kennedy," Schlesinger reports, "valued not only his philosophical slant but also his practical wisdom." In 1963, McGeorge Bundy, a prominent New Frontiersman, noted that Niebuhr was "probably the most influential single mind in the development of American attitudes which combine moral purpose with a sense of political reality."

Niebuhr, for his part, was never at home with the hard-bitten elegance of the Kennedy forces. He was better suited to the ruffled, hole-in-the-sole-of-the-shoe philosophizing of fellow Midwesterner Adlai Stevenson. Nor was he pleased to have his "realism" reduced to "realpolitik." New Frontiersmen spoke of the "necessary amorality of foreign affairs," in Schlesinger's phrase, a position quite at odds with Niebuhr's stress on the "ambiguous morality" of foreign affairs.

Niebuhr was always ready to challenge American pretensions in the world, even as he castigated the Soviets, whom he regarded in the post-1945 period as the primary evildoers on the international scene. He could never be comfortable as house theologian for a party in power. Yet there is no doubt that his name

and his image became supports for the interventionist foreign policy of the liberal Democrats in the 1960s—when he was too old and too incapacitated (from a series of strokes that began in 1952) to enter the fray in person.

The extent of Niebuhr's help to American liberals at mid-century is clear. But what about Schlesinger's claim that Niebuhr effected a revolution in American liberal thought? To judge it fairly, we have to go back to Niebuhr's origins—and those of modern American liberalism itself—in the late 19th century.



Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1892, the son of a German immigrant minister in the Evangelical Synod of North America, a Protestant denomination whose hybrid theology contained both Lutheran and Calvinist elements. His father, Gustav, had the same irrepressible energy as Reinhold. When he moved his family to Lincoln, Illinois, in 1902, in order to take a larger church, Gustav's star was ascending in the Synod. Powerful clerics and laymen passed through the house in a steady stream; young Reinhold decided, at age 10, that this was the life for him. The bond between father and son was intense. Gustav doubtless caught his own reflection in his dynamic boy and encouraged him to follow in his path.

At age 15, Niebuhr left public school and entered the seminary, emerging at age 20 an ordained minister. His academic training was spotty—he later complained bitterly that the Synod had cheated him out of a college education—but he had acquired a strong interest in social issues and political movements. Although an immigrant church, the Evangelical Synod promoted the liberal Protestant view that the gospel was social, not just individual. The Christian preacher had to address cultural and political matters, not just moral and religious issues.

When he arrived at Yale Divinity School for two years of further study in 1913, Niebuhr faced a challenge both emotional and intellectual. He was quickly made to feel inferior to the school's genteel New Englanders. He tried in vain to camouflage his Midwestern accent and struggled to untangle his densely Teutonic prose. But he could not help feeling, as he wrote to a friend, "like a mongrel among thoroughbreds."

At the same time, he was confronted with a much more militant liberalism than he had experienced in the Bible-centered Synod. The liberals at Yale tended to reduce theology to ethics, to transform the transcendent creator into the sympathetic spirit, to strip Jesus of his divinity and make him instead a model individual.

The early 20th-century social gospel was the legacy of the 19th-century Protestant effort to re-create a society of brotherly reasonableness, to combat the marketplace values of industrial capitalism, and to restore the “organic” community presumed to have existed a century earlier. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Protestant quest for “community” was, in fact, the major force in reform movements both explicitly religious and ostensibly secular—from Edward Bellamy’s nationalism and the northern populist movement to Eugene Debs’s socialism and Woodrow Wilson’s progressivism.

In the wake of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and of the perceived debacle of Wilsonian ideals, Niebuhr joined the legion of liberal Protestants who turned gradually leftward. He teamed up with Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page of the Young Men’s Christian Associations (YMCA) in a national campaign for a radical Christian pacifism: not just for the elimination of war, but for the reform of the capitalist society that, they believed, inevitably spawned war.



At a time when many secular liberals were abandoning politics altogether, religious liberals were radicalized in large numbers. It would not be too far-fetched to say that American radicalism could flourish only in the churches in the wake of the politically repressive measures that followed the war, including the notorious 1920 “Palmer raids” directed by Woodrow Wilson’s Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, against Communists and other leftists. *Religious* radicals were relatively safe from attack by vigilantes on the right, who proclaimed themselves Christians. By the mid-1920s, Niebuhr—who also served Detroit’s Bethel Church as pastor—had become the star speaker on Eddy’s payroll, which funded a touring band of left-leaning evangelists. That group helped create the powerful student Christian movement of the 1920s—a decade mistakenly labeled by most historians as one of uncontested youthful hedonism.

Niebuhr was by far the most influential figure on the student Christian circuit. Several times a year, he addressed student assemblies that packed the largest municipal halls and armories in the East and Midwest. While their elders had mobilized for overseas missionary efforts during the 1890s, the youthful idealists of the ‘20s focused on the “industrial question”—how to “Christianize” the relations between labor and capital. Reinhold Niebuhr was their leader. It was beside the point, he thundered, to convert foreigners to Christianity when Americans, despite their religious

pretensions, failed to heed the Gospel.

Niebuhr's position on the industrial question, like that of his colleagues in the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (founded in 1921), was well to the left of the prewar social gospel. Where the social gospelers had usually seen the church as a moral referee between labor and capital, Niebuhr proclaimed that it was time for the church to take the side of labor. If industrial strife were to be abolished, he wrote in 1922, "the whole motive power of our modern industry" would have to be transformed. Niebuhr could not condone striking, since coercion contravened the Christian law of love. But if strikes were "antisocial," he insisted, "the organization of modern industry, which the strike disturbs and challenges, is as antisocial as the strike itself." Niebuhr was stuck; he realized that it was too late to try coaxing capitalists into voluntary redistribution of their wealth.



Through the first half of the decade, Niebuhr remained mired in his dilemma, though he cheered for labor from the sidelines. In 1926, still preaching at Bethel Church, he made a decisive turn. Detroit auto manufacturers, fearful that their open-shop metropolis might fall to the forces of unionization, began to put pressure on prolabor churchmen. Ford Motor Company officials approached wealthy laymen and suggested that they conduct frank discussions with their pastors. When one of his parishioners reported the Ford initiative to him, Niebuhr became furious. He decided to take on no less a figure than Henry Ford himself, who for years had been posing as a proud Christian philanthropist.

In 1926, Ford had proclaimed a new era in cooperative labor-capital relations. To the earlier five dollars-a-day wage that he paid his laborers, he would now add the beneficent five-day week, which, he claimed, would give each worker an extra holiday each week since wages would not decline. But Niebuhr, who, as chairman of the Detroit mayor's Inter-racial Committee, had privileged access to unpublished data on wages in Ford plants, publicly denounced Ford. He demonstrated that during the previous year "the average Ford man has lost between \$200 and \$300 through the Ford method" of shortening the work week and accelerating the speed of the assembly line. In 1925, the company manufactured the same number of cars in five days as it had the previous year in six.

Niebuhr had thought Ford a fool for a long time—ever since the quixotic journey of the Ford "peace ship" during World War I,

a short-lived effort to persuade the Europeans to lay down their arms. But only now did Niebuhr realize that Ford's apparent foolishness and his vaunted Christian piety were far less innocent than he had imagined. They were the means by which Ford extended his power over labor.

Moreover, Ford's pious posturing, and the admiring reception that it received in much of the Protestant press, made Niebuhr realize that his own repeated calls for industrial justice were themselves so much pious rhetoric. Ford's rhetoric was a cover for power; his own, for weakness. He had been vainly trying to marshal public opinion in support of labor's cause. But rational persuasion, Ford made him see, was unavailing in the industrial sphere. Until now, he had refused to embrace the notion of industrial struggle. For him, as for other radical Protestants, that smacked of what he termed the "Marxian strategy of hate." But the encounter with Ford altered his thinking.

It was another five years before Niebuhr was able to reconcile the idea of group conflict with the Christian law of love. No doubt, it was difficult to cast off the ethical views he had acquired in childhood and preached with enthusiasm for over a decade. It is also clear that he was reluctant to antagonize the liberal Protestants in the YMCA college department, upon whom he depended for much of his income. He was already persuaded that the idealism of Eddy and Page was a head-in-the-sand delusion, but he was not prepared to break with them.

Only in the summer of 1932, after his future at Union Theological Seminary (to which he had moved in 1928 and where he remained until retirement in 1960) was assured, did he decide to write the book that he knew would outrage his liberal colleagues. It took him only 10 weeks in his isolated cottage in Heath, Massachusetts, to produce *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. When it appeared in December of the same year, his friends did not hesitate to brand him as a heretic, a traitor to the cause. He had "unequivocally" deserted the Christian fellowship, wrote one former friend in a review.



The importance of the book lay not in its militant support of the proletarian movement that Niebuhr believed would spread inexorably from Europe to the United States, leaving justice in its wake. Many other Protestant ministers had joined the same cause. In some cases, they viewed the workers' revolt as a manifestation of the coming Kingdom. Like Niebuhr, most of them were supporters of Norman Thomas's Socialist Party, which, in

their view, was far preferable to the Communist Party because it was free of foreign control. The real originality of *Moral Man* lay in its repudiation, in the name of Protestantism itself, of the liberal Protestant quest for community—the main driving force in American radicalism since the 1830s.

Protestant liberals long had contended that Christianity was a social program as well as an individual faith, that the law of love applied equally to both spheres. Niebuhr rejected that view. The law of love applied to the individual sphere, but not to the social arena. Human society was not a potential Kingdom of God. It was not love that Christians should try to establish in the social sphere but justice. Individual morality and group morality were radically different. The former might be a haven of charity, but the latter was an arena of perpetual conflict of interest. “The dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society,” he announced in the first chapter of *Moral Man*, “is one which will never be fully realized.”

Moral Man was a repudiation not just of liberal Protestantism but of much of late 19th- and early 20th-century secular American liberalism as well. Most American thinkers between 1880 and 1930 had Protestant roots even if they lacked explicit Protestant convictions. Whether placing their hopes on the spread of scientific expertise (Edward Bellamy, Lester Ward, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Thorstein Veblen) or on the renaissance of aesthetic sensibility (Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank), most liberal thinkers believed that the fragmented world of the marketplace could be restructured or spiritually revived. “It is a new life I would aim at, not a new balance of power,” wrote Lewis Mumford, in 1930, with a utopian flourish typical of liberal reformers.



Niebuhr delivered a powerful blow to this still prevalent dream—prevalent, he pointed out, both in liberal and in Marxist circles. He insisted that the Christian life demanded political commitment, but in his view, there would be no breaking through to a new form of society. Indeed, Christians would have to accept the fact that in the social struggle for justice they might have to bloody their hands, to accept not only coercion and force but also violence.

Most Christian liberals had granted the propriety of nonviolent coercion ever since Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931: They supported economic penalties against the Japanese. Now, however, Niebuhr argued that there could be no absolute dis-

inction between violent and nonviolent coercion. He could imagine some situations in which violent force would be preferable to nonviolent action—if, for example, an elected leftist government were defending itself against counter-revolutionary attacks. In other cases, nonviolence was better. “The emancipation of the Negro race in America,” he suggested, depended upon the strategy of nonviolent coercion. Violent upheaval would be suicidal. The moral acceptability of violence depended on the circumstances.

To Niebuhr’s former allies on the Christian Left, this smacked of resignation to the brutal ways of the world. Many of them correctly noted the influence of Martin Luther’s political attitudes upon Niebuhr’s new position. Like the 16th-century reformer, Niebuhr tended to consign politics to the realm of necessity and strife. Yet, the remarkable thing about Niebuhr is that, despite his skeptical view of man’s ability to create an ideal society, despite his commitment to a “worldly” realism, he refused to rest content with the status quo—even after the ardent fires of the ’30s had cooled.



During the decade after *Moral Man*, Niebuhr put the finishing touches on his exposition of Christian realism. His two-volume *Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943) was its classic expression. Every social order, he insisted, stood subject to God’s judgment. From God’s standpoint, every society was in drastic need of reformation. The tragic reality, however, was that no group of human beings was so disinterested that it could create a reform movement free of debilitating pretensions, much less a future society free of deceit and injustice. Only deluded liberals and Marxists thought it could be done.

Though Niebuhr was not tempted by the Freudian outlook, which he felt reduced the self to its hidden sexual impulses, he did believe that Freud had glimpsed a truth that liberals usually missed: The self was not a unified, simple, rational entity that an individual possessed and controlled. It was, instead, a cauldron of conflicting impulses, some rational, some irrational, some power-seeking, some self-sacrificial. People were poor judges of their own motives; no one could be sure whether he were a sinner or a saint.

Yet Christians, Niebuhr argued day after day, were still called to ethical and political action—despite the evil that they were bound to commit in the course of trying to do good. The genius of the Judeo-Christian conception of man was that it

comprehended man as both determined and free, both creature and creator, both bumbling sinner and image of God. Liberal Protestants had tended to reduce God to the status of a spirit of reason and love, to the same kind of rational person of good will that they imagined themselves to be.

Niebuhr countered that the orthodox "myth" of God as creator, judge, and redeemer was a superior notion in several respects. Only a distant creator could spark a never-ending quest for justice: If all men were creatures of the same creator, they all deserved equal treatment. Only an exacting judge could serve as an ultimate vantage point from which that quest for justice could be held under constant criticism. Only a forgiving redeemer could supply the grace to persevere in moments of despair.



Niebuhr's experience in the political debates of the 1930s had persuaded him that political faiths such as communism tended inexorably to make absolutes of themselves, to identify themselves with God's will or the laws of history. Christian realism, by contrast, taught people to commit themselves to political struggle while reconciling themselves to the futility of trying to perfect the world. Christian realism was "true" not because it was supernaturally revealed but because it was validated by experience. It was the only faith that did justice both to man's weakness and to his strength, and it was the only faith that could spark a nonfanatical movement for democratic change.

Did Christian realism amount, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., claimed, to a "revolution" in American liberal thought—a revolution that Niebuhr conducted "singlehandedly"? Schlesinger is too exuberant. Niebuhr was only one of many thinkers in mid-century who picked up the task begun in the previous generation by thinkers such as Walter Lippmann. Man was not simply a rational being, they argued, but also a creature of impulse.

Niebuhr continued to plow the ground that they had broken, as did such men as Richard Chase and Lionel Trilling in literature, Richard Hofstadter in history, David Riesman and Daniel Bell in sociology, Dwight MacDonal in cultural criticism, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden in poetry, and George Kennan in international politics.

They, and many others, sought to transcend the essential liberal view that history was a Manichaeian conflict between the forces of popular enlightenment and the powers of inherited privilege. Instead of seeing history as the progressive development of the consciousness of "the people," the midcentury

thinkers viewed it as ironic, cyclical, and full of contradictions. Niebuhr was just one voice among many in the creation of a postprogressive mentality.

Yet, there is still a kernel of truth in Schlesinger's grandiose claim. If Niebuhr did not conduct a one-man revolt in American liberal thought, he did carry out a one-man assault against the dominant liberal Protestantism. He was the guiding voice, the thundering polemicist who tore down the liberals' temple. He was so devastating in the religious arena precisely because he spoke with the robed authority of the Christian preacher.

It is unlikely that any other man could have persuaded so many Christians in the 1920s and 1930s to embrace the labor movement and even to sanction the use of force in labor disputes. No other man could have swung so many previously pacifistic Protestants to the support of American assistance to the Allies in Europe in 1940. No other preacher could have persuaded so many young people to reassess their secular values and embrace not the liberal Protestant God of love and brotherhood but the orthodox Christian notions of sin, judgment, and a hidden God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways.

Niebuhr has been dead for over a decade now, and his influence has noticeably waned. That, perhaps, was to be expected, since his impact was so intimately linked to specific historical events—the growth of the labor movement, the Second World War, and the Cold War. He was a more topical writer than his friend Paul Tillich or his brother Richard Niebuhr, both of whom have larger followings among theology students today.

Yet one still finds loyal Niebuhrians among the older generation, including neoconservative writer Michael Novak, liberation theologian Robert McAfee Brown, author-psychiatrist Robert Coles, and, of course, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Though fewer in number, disciples of Niebuhr appear on every point of the political spectrum, unified by their adherence to the cardinal Niebuhrian premise that while there is no ultimate fulfillment in politics, there can be no salvation outside it.

Niebuhr probably would not have minded his own posthumous eclipse. In fact, he would have taken it as a sign of how deeply engaged he was in the moral and political struggles of his own day. The moral man—or moral human being, as he would surely put it today—was a person of one time, not of all times.

