

**Discerning a Christian Realism for Today, with Special
Reference to the Attitudes of Humility in Niebuhr's Incidental
Writing, 1941-1952**

by

Dennis Edson Lambert

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Edinburgh

2004

Declaration

October 11, 2004

I, Dennis Edson Lambert, hereby declare that I have written this thesis and that the work done here is entirely my own.

Dennis Edson Lambert

Acknowledgements

Words are inadequate to express my gratitude to Professors Duncan B. Forrester and William E. Storrar for their patience, wisdom and consideration in shepherding me throughout this project. Their guidance and encouragement have sustained me through the entire process, including those inevitable seasons of self-doubt. Their suggestions were always constructive and left me with a renewed sense of direction and purpose. I am deeply grateful for the seamless manner in which they managed their joint supervision of my work and for Professor Forrester's willingness to assume the primary supervisory role while Professor Storrar was on sabbatical at Princeton. It was Professor Forrester who introduced me to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr during my MTh studies and in this respect, as in others, he has changed my life. Thank you Duncan and Will for all you have done for me.

The late Dr. J.I.H. McDonald was my first contact with the University and served as my tutor and faculty supervisor during the MTh program. His gentle and scholarly encouragement continued as I returned to undertake this project. I miss his kindly presence in New College and will always remember his help and encouragement. I am grateful also to Dr. Marcella Althaus-Reid who marked my first essay in the MTh program and did not put me on the first plane home.

This project could not have been completed without the thoughtful assistance of many New College staff and faculty members: Bronwen Currie, head of the New College computing staff, has been an attending angel; the New College and University library staffs whose assistance was essential in procuring much of the incidental writing at the heart of this dissertation; Mrs. Anne Fernon and Lynn Robertson of the New College office for their assistance with administrative and tutorial responsibilities; and Dr. Andrew Ross who astounded me with the gift of a coveted edition of Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. A special word of appreciation goes to Margaret Acton and Liz Leitch who proof-read this work. Thank you all.

Finally, I am profoundly grateful to family and friends who have sustained me during the often lonely travails of research and writing: my sister Donna Murney, CRNA and brother Dr. Daniel Lambert; the Drs. Kenneth and Ann Hughes who adopted me one Sunday at Greyfriars Kirk; the Rev. Russell Fountain in whose home I and countless aspiring divines have been fed so often; and my fellow students, past and present, who have received me in friendship. All have occasioned God's grace in my life.

Dedication

To the memory of my parents

Abstract

Humility is a defining attitude of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism. His formal writing asserts humility as a divine grace that transforms the Christian's personal life and as a political virtue essential to meeting Christian social responsibilities. If the formal work develops the theological framework of humility his prolific incidental work illumines its operation within the exigencies of political life. Over his lifetime Niebuhr penned thousands of essays, articles and editorials on the issues of the day. For many American Christians and public intellectuals this body of his work provided insights of faith through which they read the signs of the times.

This dissertation examines the incidental writing from 1941-1952 to discern the relevance of humility in guiding American power during the 20th Century's most tumultuous era. From the incidental writing of this period four case studies are drawn in which we examine the operation of humility and its attitudes upon Niebuhr's insights into American power and international responsibility. In the first study humility is examined for its insights into Christian responsibility and the conduct of war. In the second we examine insights of humility that informed Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship between US power and the United Nations. The third case study examines the operation of humility in his account of the development and implementation of the Marshall Plan. And in the fourth the lens of humility is applied to the relationship between democratic self-criticism and the just use of power. The purpose of the case studies is not to claim that humility provides Christian realism a theological formula or policy blueprint for political action. Rather the cases demonstrate the operation of humility and its attitudes in Niebuhr's understanding of the facts, circumstances and foreseeable consequences necessary to discern a just use of American power in particular contexts.

The discernments of humility reflected in the case studies are then applied to issues of contemporary America power. Here humility and its attitudes provide a lens through which we examine elements of the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, a document that embodies the Bush Administration's vision for the international role of American power today. Elements examined include the document's assertion of a distinctly American internationalism and its embrace of a preventative war doctrine. The conflict in Iraq provides the immediate context in which the lens of humility is applied to the *National Security Strategy*.

The dissertation concludes that Niebuhr's insights regarding the operation of Christian humility upon Christian responsibility inform a relevant Christian realism and enable it to speak truths of faith to American power today.

Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Table of Contents	v

Part I: The Origins and Operation of Humility in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Introduction	i
--------------	---

Chapter One: Niebuhr and the Augustinian Tradition in Christian Humility

Introduction	10
Encounter with Augustine	11
Humility as a Gift of Grace	13
Pride: An Antithetical Approach to Defining Humility	19
Christology of Augustine's Humility	22
Humility and Loving Service: Discerning True Peace	25
Attitudes of Humility in Augustine	30
Contemporary Perspectives on Augustine and Coercion	34
Conclusion	43

Chapter Two: The Origins of Humility in Niebuhr's Prophetic Faith

Introduction	48
Niebuhr's Prophetic Faith	49
The Atonement and Christian Humility in Niebuhr's Prophetic Faith	54
The Challenge of Prophetic Faith	59
Paradox of Strength Perfected in Weakness	60
The Grace of Humility	63
Social Dimensions of the Atonement	64
Pride Revisited: Niebuhr's Antithetical Approach to Understanding Christian Humility	68
Origins of Pride in Human Nature	69
Expressions of Pride in Niebuhr's Theology	72
Attitudes of Humility for the Social Task	76
Conclusion	78

Chapter Three: Humility in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Introduction	84
Significance of Humility in Christian Realism	85
Pride and the Inadequacy of Liberal Idealism	87
Pride and the Marxist Alternative: Having and Not Having the Truth	92
Quandary of American Power and Responsibility	94
A Deficit of Clarity	98
Christian Realism's Constituent Realisms	100
Stance of Niebuhr's Christian Realism	106
Principles of Political Realism in International Affairs	110
Political Realism in Practice	114
Niebuhr's Critique of a Political Realism of the National Interest	119
Attitudes of Humility and the National Interest	123
Pride and America's Sense of National Particularity	125
Conclusion	127

Part II: Case Studies in Niebuhr's Incidental Writing, 1941-1952

Chapter Four: Introducing the Case Studies on Humility in Niebuhr's Incidental Writings, 1941-1952

Introduction	129
Pride and Irresponsible Power	130
Prologue to Tragedy: The Chaos of Irresponsible Power	136
Humility and Responsible Power	142
Humility and Case Studies in the Incidental Writing	148

Chapter Five: Humility and International Responsibility: The Conduct of War

Introduction	151
Taint of Racial Pride	153
The Humble Spirit in Waging War	155
Humility and Discerning a Victor's Justice	160
Conclusion	165

Chapter Six: Humility and International Responsibility: The US and the United Nations

Introduction	167
Approaches to Post-war World Organization	168
The Requirements of World Organization	175
Recognizing "The Limits Set by Man's Recalcitrance"	181
The UN and the Cold War: Old Realities and New Responsibilities	187
Conclusion	192

Chapter Seven: Humility and International Responsibility:
The Marshall Plan

Introduction	195
The Post-WWI World: Lessons in Economic Irresponsibility	196
Responsibility and Impatient Humility	199
A Prophetic Prologue	203
Discerning a Positive Defense	206
Limits of a Military Solution	210
The Marshall Plan: A Nation "Conscious of Our Responsibilities"	212
Conclusion	218

Chapter Eight: Humility and International Responsibility: Democratic
Self-Criticism

Introduction	221
A Prophetic Vocation in the New Jerusalem	222
Humility and Discerning the Requirements of Justice	228
Self-Criticism and the Moral Authority of American Power	234
Conclusion	237

Part III: Reading Niebuhr For Today

Chapter Nine: American Power and Iraq: A Brief Retrospective

Introduction	240
The First Gulf War	241
The Post-Gulf War "Peace"	245
America and Iraq Post-9/11	249
Prelude to War	254

Chapter Ten: The *National Security Strategy* and Iraq: Reflecting on the
Relevance of Humility to American Power in Context

Introduction	256
Overview of the <i>National Security Strategy</i>	257
The Assertion of American Power: Commensurate Responsibility or Hegemony?	260
<i>National Security Strategy</i> and the Nature of a Secure Peace	263
A Distinctly American Peace	265
A Distinctly American Internationalism	266
<i>National Security Strategy</i> and the United Nations	269
A Question of UN Relevance or American Pride of Power?	269

Affirming the Relevance of the UN	274
American Responsibility and Loyalty to the UN	277
<i>National Security Strategy</i> and “Preemptive” War	280
A Distinctly American Interpretation	282
Niebuhr on Preventative War	286
Preventative War and Responsibility in Context	289
<i>National Security Strategy</i> and the Failure of Intelligence	293
A Catalogue of Misjudgements	294
Contrition and the Lessons of Failure	297
<i>National Security Strategy</i> and the Abuse of Human Rights in a War for Human Dignity	299
The Guantánamo Bay Internees	301
Abuse in Abu Ghraib Prison	304
Conclusion	306
Conclusion: The Attitudes of Humility and a Christian Realism for America Today	
Introduction	310
Reading Niebuhr for Today	312
The Iraqi Conflict and Lessons in Humility for American Power	317
Addressing Resentment of American Power	317
Recognizing the Limits of Military Power and Technology	319
Relevance of the United Nations	323
Christian Realism and Christian Patriotism in a Time of Terror	326
Epilogue	329
Bibliography	337

Part I

The Origins of Humility in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Aware of our own infirmity we are moved to compassion to help the indigent, assisting them in the same way as we would wish to be helped if we were in the same distress—and not only in easy ways, like “the grass bearing seed”, but with the protection and aid given with a resolute determination like “the tree bearing fruit” (Gen. 1: 11). This means such kindness as rescuing a person suffering from injustice from the hand of the powerful and providing the shelter of protection by the mighty force of just judgement.¹

St. Augustine

¹ *Confessions* 13.17.21

Introduction

"He being dead, yet speaketh"¹

Reinhold Niebuhr believed that relevance to the human condition is the true test of any theological or philosophical system. Finding idealistic expressions of his inherited liberal Christian tradition inadequate, he sought an expression of faith that could give both meaning and guidance to the exigencies of 20th Century life. Niebuhr's expression of faith came to be called Christian realism, a perspective on Christian social responsibility shaped by a dialectic of Biblical faith and human experience. His prophetic vocation was to speak the truths of this faith to several generations of Americans. He applied these truths to the crises of his own time in the voluminous body of his incidental work. Appearing in the journals, periodicals and newspapers of the day, these writings made Niebuhr the most prominent theologian in mid-20th Century American intellectual life. He was at the height of his intellectual powers and influence during the crisis-ridden era, 1941-1952.

The Theological Grounding of Humility in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

It was during these years of crises and the growth of American power that Niebuhr's incidental work frequently, if often obliquely, posits the essential relevance of Christian humility to the responsibilities of Christian realism. Initially, depending upon one's understanding of humility, Niebuhr's insistence on its relevance to political responsibilities may appear somewhat paradoxical. Those who associate humility with subservience, a lack of commitment and confidence, or even obsequiousness are unlikely to appreciate its relevance to making hard political choices. Although Niebuhr, like Augustine, never specifically defines the word, he always views humility and its attitudes positively, as essential gifts of divine grace that illumine Christian responsibility. In this light humility provides a lens through which Niebuhr's work is most richly discerned.

¹ Hebrews 11:4

Humility provides such a lens because it emanates from the heart of Niebuhr's theology. The grounding of humility and its attitudes in Niebuhr's theology is largely developed in his formal writing. An analysis of the origins of humility and its operation in Niebuhr's Christian realism is the task of Part One of this dissertation. Niebuhr himself traces much of his mature theological development to his study of Augustine who he called the West's first great realist. Accordingly Chapter One examines Augustine's influence on Niebuhr's understanding of humility even as it presents Niebuhr's critique of Augustine, particularly his doctrine of grace. In this regard, some attention is given to recent debates over Augustine's justification and use of coercion against religious dissent.

Although Augustine provides no specific definition of humility Niebuhr follows his insight that it is a gift of grace. In Augustine humility is seen as the ground of human *wisdom* because it opens human beings to the wisdom of God. As this wisdom illumines our true relationship with God it becomes the self-knowledge in which we know ourselves as sinner, confess this fact, accept our finitude, experience forgiveness and learn our worth as God's beloved and redeemed creatures. Thus acknowledgement becomes *knowledge* that issues in confidence even as awareness of the sinful self militates against sinful pride that transforms confidence into self-righteousness. While Augustine assigns an essential role to reason in human understanding, he remains aware that reason can be corrupted by pride and always requires humility's correction. The fruits or attitudes discerned in the grace of humility include patience, toleration, contrition, forgiveness, compassion and Christian responsibility itself.

While his critical study of Augustine provides a reliable foundation for assessing the significance of humility in Niebuhr's Christian realism, a deeper understanding is provided as the elements of what he calls his Biblical or prophetic faith are analyzed in Chapter Two. Perhaps the heart of Niebuhr's theology is revealed in his interpretation of the "myth" of Atonement, an understanding that provides the lens through which he discerns all Christian truth. Here we gain his deeper insights into his theological understanding of sinful human nature, grace, and Christian humility.

These discussions provide the context in which Niebuhr understands pride in its various guises and its antithesis in the attitudes of humility.

Chapter Three explores the operation of humility within the development of Niebuhr's mature Christian realism. The underlying purpose is to establish the relevance of humility and its attitudes to responsible Christian action, a motif that can be traced to Niebuhr's earliest published works. An examination of Niebuhr's Christian realism necessarily entails some discussion of his rejection of the religious and liberal idealism of early 20th Century America. Having found idealistic expressions of faith irrelevant or even harmful to social justice, he sought a Christian faith that accepted Christian responsibility for justice and understood the implications of sinful human nature in meeting that responsibility. Here Niebuhr looked to the truths that political realism offered to such an expression of faith. Through his continuous dialogue with political realists such as Hans J. Morgenthau and George F. Kennan, Niebuhr critically adopted a political realism that was always in a dialectic relationship with his prophetic faith. While like these realists he accepted the reality of the national interest in international relations, Niebuhr always discerned the national interests through the lens of humility.

As Chapter Three attests, Niebuhr's mature Christian realism developed in relation to the international crises that culminated in WWII. Throughout the two decades preceding the war he had prophetically attacked America and the Western democracies for the unjust peace following WWI. Although Niebuhr had no doubts regarding the greater evil represented by Nazism, he reminded the Western democracies of their own complicity in that evil. Though always suspicious of America's power he came to insist that it accept responsibility commensurate with its wealth and power. He did not retreat from his insistence that all power is morally ambiguous. But he also reminded his fellow Christians that there is no escape from guilt, whether incurred by action or by inaction on behalf of justice. As America's wealth and power became determinate factors in global life Niebuhr's Christian realism and prophetic vocation sought to make the truths of faith relevant to the realities of American power. At the heart of these truths we find humility and its attitudes.

The Case Studies in Humility

The purpose of the case studies in Part II is to examine the political relevance of humility in the understanding and use of American power. The case studies in humility are largely taken from Niebuhr's voluminous incidental writing from 1941-1952, though several significant earlier pieces are cited. While Niebuhr published well over a thousand articles, editorials and "editorial notes" during this period, the case studies focus upon those that treat with American power and its international responsibilities. However, reading the material on the many issues Niebuhr addressed during this period underscores the pervasiveness of humility in this body of his work. Although humility glints throughout the incidental work it often appears obliquely as one of its attitudes.

Preceding the case studies is a brief contextual analysis presented in Chapter 4. The intent here is not to provide a comprehensive history of American power in the post-WWI era. Rather, I examine the issues and events that appear most significant in the development of Niebuhr's own understanding of power and America's international responsibilities. He was bitter at America's complicity in the unjust peace imposed upon Germany following WWI, a war he supported. A radical socialist throughout the 1930s, he was convinced that the nation was in thrall to its commercial interests.

These factors created an abiding suspicion of American power on the international scene and led to his wavering counsels regarding American international responsibilities. He variously embraced a peculiar form of pacifism and called for an "aloofness" from international conflict—even as he scorned the nation's post-WWI isolationism. As late as 1938 he opposed, somewhat hysterically, Roosevelt's modest proposal to strengthen America's decaying military capabilities. Only after Munich and the 1939 Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact was Niebuhr convinced that American power, despite its moral ambiguities, was essential to the more just cause of the Western democracies. In something of a Damascus road experience, Niebuhr shifts

from seeking ways to avoid the use of American power to discerning the resources of faith that illumine its responsible use in the cause of justice. Chief among these resources is the grace of humility.

The case studies in Chapters Five through Eight are central to the purposes of this dissertation. They examine the role of humility and its attitudes in guiding American responsibility during WWII and the early years of the Cold War. The purpose of the studies is not to argue that humility presents a blueprint for Christian action. Niebuhr's Christian realism rejected moral absolutes and rigid formulae in meeting Christian responsibility. Rather, the case studies attest to the practical and political relevance of humility in guiding the responsible use of power within particular contexts. The four topics addressed in the case studies—the conduct of war, the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, and democratic self-criticism—were selected in part because they are prominent and recurring issues in Niebuhr's incidental writing. In part, I selected these topics with issues of contemporary American power in mind. Rather than an historical analysis of the issues themselves, the studies undertake to demonstrate the combination of political and theological insights that characterize Niebuhr's approach to discerning the responsible use of American power.

The cases reflect Niebuhr's insistence that Christian responsibility requires an understanding of facts and context. Beyond that they demonstrate the practical relevance that Niebuhr ascribes to the grace of humility in discerning both the responsibilities and limits of great power.

Applying the Lens of Humility: The *National Security Strategy*

In Part III the insights of humility discerned in the case studies are applied to the Bush Administration's *National Security Strategy*, an audacious piece of public diplomacy that purports to guide American power and interests in the age of terror. While an overview of the strategy is provided no comprehensive analysis is undertaken. Rather the insights of humility provide the lens through which I examine selected elements of the strategy. Particular interest is given to the strategy's

proclamation of a “distinctly American internationalism,” the assertion of a doctrine of preventative war, and the role it appears to envision for the United Nations in American international responsibility.

Initiated shortly after the Bush Administration promulgated its *National Security Strategy*, the Iraqi conflict offers itself as a test of the strategy’s effectiveness in guiding global American power. This necessarily entails an examination of issues, events and human errors not anticipated by the strategy but that have deeply affected its practical and political operation. These notably include the failure of US and Western intelligence regarding Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, issues surrounding the Guantánamo Bay internees and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison.

Because Niebuhr’s Christian realism insists that theological insights be informed by political understanding, the analysis in Chapter 10 draws upon a range of contemporary political and diplomatic thinkers.

Reading Niebuhr for Today: Lessons in Humility and the Iraqi Conflict

My analysis of the significance of humility in Niebuhr’s Christian realism began a year prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC. To say, as some do, that the attacks “changed everything” is hyperbolic because they certainly did not change human nature. Nor did those attacks fundamentally change the lives of those who have lived with the reality of terrorism since long before 9/11. But the events of that day did change America’s view of the world and the role of its power within the international community. That America is the world’s lone superpower doesn’t change everything, but it does change a great deal.

A recurring motif in Niebuhr’s appeal to humility is that America’s power often appears to exceed its wisdom. He believed that humility and its attitudes provide the insights that enable a wiser and more just use of American power. Pride, on the other hand, mistakes power for wisdom and thereby obscures the limits of all human

power. Although he accepted the necessity of power to establish a just order, he was its watchful, insightful and at times impassioned critic. In this prophetic role he insisted that the grace of humility offered lessons to the powerful willing to humble themselves sufficiently to learn them.

The concluding section of this dissertation draws upon Niebuhr's insights to examine the lessons we may learn even now from the on-going conflict in Iraq. If that conflict demonstrates the global reach of American power it also demonstrates its limits. Certainly the failure to find weapons of mass destruction demonstrated the limits of our Intelligence Community. The Iraqi experience confirms that America's military power and technology can destroy a detestable regime: the Bush Administration's prideful error was its apparent belief that this power would carry all before it in the more important task of rebuilding a ruined state. The inadequacy of post-war planning, particularly the failure to secure the Iraqi people, has deeply eroded American moral authority there and within the international community. This error was in part due to the Administration's initial refusal of any role for the UN in rebuilding Iraq's political institutions. The critical role that UN intervention played in establishing the interim Iraqi government offers a salutary lesson for a notably unilateralist Administration. Reflecting Niebuhr, we need not idealize the UN to recognize that it can provide wisdom and forms of power beyond our own.

My conclusions reflect on Niebuhr's incidental writing to underscore the great importance of humility in times of national crisis. His insight is particularly critical here because it brings humility to bear upon the use of power that national crisis often entails. Humility offers wisdom to avoid mistakes and allows us to learn from those we inevitably make. And as times of crisis inspire American patriotism the grace of humility illumines a properly ordered love of country. This is a self-critical patriotism that understands that spiritual pride leads to the sin of national idolatry and the unjust use of power. It understands that pride betrays strength into weakness and error. Christian patriotism can never confuse its ultimate loyalty to God and the things of God with the duties owed to a beloved nation.

A brief epilogue highlights current scholarship on Niebuhr and the continuing debate over the theological grounding of his public theology. Here recent work by Robin Lovin also provides a thoughtful look into the future of Christian realism.

An Autobiographical Note

Having come late to the study of theology and Niebuhr's Christian realism, my analytical perspective necessarily reflects a first career in politics and public service, including service as a commissioned officer in the US Air Force. Most of my first career was devoted to service as a senior professional staff member in the US House of Representatives. This experience has both helped and hindered my study of Niebuhr. On the one hand, my experience on Capitol Hill provides a practical measure for critiquing his Christian realism as a political strategy for the just use of power. On the other hand, years of involvement in the highly partisan atmosphere of the House inevitably instilled political perspectives and partisan loyalties. On a political level, at least, Niebuhr's early radical socialism and later close affiliation with radical elements of the Democratic Party discouraged my study of his work. My late immersion in his work was possible only after I left the daily exigencies of political life.

The opportunity to live and study in a nation other than my own has helped me see myself and my country as others see us. Given the controversies surrounding US actions following 9/11 this has not always been a pleasant experience. But viewed through the lens of humility it has nearly always been good.

Ironically, in view of my earlier concerns, my immersion in Niebuhr has underscored the significance of politics in meeting Christian responsibility. I now see that I created too great a distance between the demands of faith and political responsibilities. This was in part due to an innate wariness of inflicting my religious views on others; it was due as well to a lack of conviction regarding those views. I had not anticipated that my research in Niebuhr would lead to a spiritual conversion that has renewed my life and deeply influenced my understanding of his work. At the

heart of this experience is the profound encounter with God and a faith perspective that must transcend political and partisan loyalties. Here we may discern a God's eye view of faith's responsibilities while avoiding prideful and destructive self-righteousness.

It is this perspective that Niebuhr's Christian realism demands we seek but never claim to achieve.

One of the mysteries of evil is that men who worship the true God still have one further possibility of covert idolatry when they too simply identify their interest and their cause with God's will instead of allowing the encounter with the Divine to break the pride and pretension of man.²

² "Editorial Notes," *Christianity and Crisis* 12, no. 11 (June 23, 1952): 82.

Chapter One

Niebuhr and the Augustinian Tradition in Christian Humility

I know how great is the effort needed to convince the proud of the power and excellence of humility, an excellence which makes it soar above all the summits of this world, which sway in their temporal instability, overtopping them all with an eminence not arrogated by human pride, but granted by divine grace.¹

Augustine

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is four-fold. The first is to place Niebuhr's understanding of humility within the ancient tradition of Christian humility developed within the work of Augustine of Hippo.² The second is to examine Niebuhr's critique of Augustine's understanding of humility and its theological origins. This will entail a brief discussion of Augustine's doctrines of grace and of sin. The third, because Augustine himself does not offer any precise definition of humility, is to tease out the attitudes of Christian humility that emerge from Niebuhr's analysis of Augustine. The fourth purpose, given Niebuhr's designation of Augustine as the West's "first great realist," is to discern the relevance of Augustine's understanding of humility within the Christian's social task.

¹ Augustine *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Pelican Books, 1972; London: Penguin Classics, 1984), preface to Book I. Unless otherwise noted all references to *City of God* in this dissertation are to the Bettenson translation.

² In the original planning of this chapter I examined the attitudes of humility reflected in the *Rule of St. Benedict* and in the work of Simone Weil, principally her book "The Need for Roots." While my examination of the *Rule* proved a rich source of knowledge in the wider Christian traditions in humility (e.g., Cassian) it provided no significant insights to the understanding of humility that Niebuhr draws from Augustine. As a young contemporary of Niebuhr's, Weil offers insights on humility from the perspective of defeated and dispirited France. Most intriguing are her thoughts on humility and the possibilities of a Christian patriotism in post-war France. Because of the limits imposed by the scope and focus of this dissertation, however, I decided that an analysis of Weil's work on humility would have to await another day.

Encounter with Augustine

Niebuhr's understanding of the significance of humility in Christian life and responsibility developed substantially with his rediscovery of Augustine's work. In his 1956 "Intellectual Autobiography" Niebuhr wrote that only after his appointment to the Union faculty was he introduced to the "main outlines of Biblical faith and to the classical texts of Christian theology." His embarrassment was particularly acute regarding his earlier failure to have studied carefully Augustine's work.

The matter is surprising because the thought of this theologian was to answer so many of my unanswered questions and to emancipate me finally from the notion that the Christian faith was in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century.³

This critical encounter with Augustine occurred as Niebuhr was completing his break with the liberal worldview and Christian idealism that he had found inadequate to the realities of 20th Century social life.⁴ Augustine thus re-entered Niebuhr's life as he was struggling to articulate a faith perspective relevant to what he considered the contemporary Christian's social task. This perspective came to be called Niebuhr's Christian realism. In Augustine Niebuhr believed that he had encountered the West's first great realist: "His picture of social reality in his *civitas dei*," Niebuhr wrote, "gives an adequate account of the social factions, tensions, and competitions which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community."⁵ The reader

³ "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961), 9.

⁴ Niebuhr, preface to *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1929; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1980), 1. Arthur Schlesinger, historian, New Deal intellectual and Niebuhr's friendly critic provided a succinct if somewhat polemical characterization of Niebuhr's Social Gospel heritage: "The laws of the Kingdom were identical with human nature and society; the Christian ethic and the commandment of love were directly applicable to social and political questions; and that Christian policies offered practical alternatives to secular policies in specific situations. Charles M. Sheldon's question—"What would Jesus do?"—was considered the key which would unlock social and political perplexity." "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," in Kegley and Bretall, 128.

⁵ *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 120-21.

familiar with certain recurring motifs in Niebuhr's work will readily recognize their antecedents in Augustine's rejection of mind-body dualism, the Neo-Platonist idea of human autonomy and freedom as rationally determined, and the ideal of perfectibility in human affairs.⁶

A significant element in Niebuhr's search for a Christian realism was Augustine's linkage of Christian humility with Christian social life. Just as Augustine was for Niebuhr the West's first great realist, the Bishop of Hippo had also discerned "with greater depth than any of the Fathers before him how uniquely important humility is for the Christian life."⁷ In Augustine humility is the disposition of grace through which the love of God is encountered. It is the attitude wherein man "acknowledges his creaturely status and dependence upon his creator, so that he receives God's illumination and enlightenment."⁸ Augustine discerned that the true love of God encountered in humility is the supreme virtue, or good for humankind from which all other virtues are derived: "The perfect love of God" is "to love Virtue, to love Wisdom, to love Truth."⁹ Humility is that essential marker on the path to true faith:

This way is first humility, second humility, third humility....If humility does not precede and accompany and follow every good work we do, and if it is not set before us to look upon, and beside us to lean upon, and behind us to fence us in, pride will wrest from our hand any good deed we do while we are in the very act of taking pleasure in it.¹⁰

⁶ Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the conflicts that Niebuhr discerned between "Augustinian and Thomistic" thought but they require acknowledgment: "It is in fact something of a mystery how the Christian insights into human nature and history, expressed by Augustine, could have been subordinated to classical thought with so little sense of the conflict between them in the formulations of Thomas Aquinas; and how they should have become so authoritative in Roman Catholicism without more debate between Augustinian and Thomistic emphases." *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 133-34.

⁷ Adolar Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 238.

⁸ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 83.

⁹ Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church and the Morals of the Manichees*, 13.22; 25.47, in Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 83.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Letters* 118, in Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 35.

When Niebuhr speaks of the “grace of humility” he reflects the intricate relationship between Augustine’s understanding of humility and divine grace in the Christian life. Here his “teaching on man’s total dependence on the grace of God plays an important part in his account of humility and its effect.”¹¹ A brief examination of Augustine’s doctrine of grace is thus necessary to any consideration of his understanding of Christian humility.

Humility as a Gift of Grace

Thanks to Augustine’s *Confessions* we know more of his tortuous journey to faith than any other major figure in the history of Christian thought. Written near the height of his theological and ecclesial career, the *Confessions* reveal in detail the struggles of a remarkably sensitive man against his own highly sensual nature and prideful ambition. Yet the work is not simply a confession of faults. It is also one of Christianity’s great confessions of faith. It is, in Chadwick’s estimate, “a prose-poem addressed to God, intended to be overheard by anxious and critical fellow Christians.”¹² Moreover, only after Augustine came to understand the role of God’s grace in his conversion of 386 was he able to write his *Confessions*.¹³ There as elsewhere in his writing Augustine discerned that human beings are unable themselves to assume and sustain *caritas*-enabling humility; only through God’s grace as revealed in Christ is such humility a possibility. “You wanted to show me how you ‘resist the proud and give grace to the humble’ (1 Pet. 5: 5), and with what mercy you have shown humanity the way of humility in that your ‘Word was made flesh and dwelt among men.’”¹⁴ In *City of God*, Augustine wrote that while God’s grace had always been manifest among humankind it was made “fully plain and wholly

¹¹ Zumkeller, 235.

¹² Henry Chadwick, introduction to *Augustine’s Confessions*, Henry Chadwick trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press World’s Classics paperback, 1992; Oxford World’s Classic paperback, 1998), ix. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Confessions* are to the Chadwick translation.

¹³ Joseph Lienhard, “Augustine on Grace: The Early Years,” in *Saint Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays*, ed. Fannie LeMoine and Christopher Kleinhenz (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 19.

¹⁴ Augustine *Confessions* 7.9.13.

effectual” in history when Christ the Son of God appeared in the form of a humiliated servant.¹⁵

Only His love in taking on humanity and in dying for us can our true caritas be evoked. Caritas does not come by man striving but by God relating man to Himself. Charity toward God is produced by *gratia*, God's free gift of Himself to man through the charity of Christ.¹⁶

It was through Christ's humility and sacrifice that the fountain of God's grace was opened to all humanity.¹⁷ Here the image of a free-flowing and continuous fountain fits perfectly with Augustine's concept of divine grace:

God creates, sustains, redeems, and consummates, not of necessity or because of human merit, but out of spontaneous love and goodness. Man's very being is a work of grace and his salvation is God's gracious gift. Augustine thus interprets the whole range of human existence in the light of this inclusive conception of the identity of God's action and His grace.¹⁸

Grace is essential; first to man's love of God and then to all human progress toward the good. Just as the robber's half-dead victim needed “the initial intervention and the continuing providence of the gracious Good Samaritan,” humankind requires God's grace first to be rescued from pride and then sustained in the Christian life of humility.¹⁹ Augustine insists that Christians understand that moral effort alone is insufficient, that salvation depends on divine grace. Yet he discusses grace in ways that may lead to some confusion over its role. From the perspective of man's joyous gratitude to God for his reconciliation and salvation, “grace is wholly God's gift.” But attendant to the subtle ways in which pride infects and corrodes humility, Augustine reminded the faithful that God's gracious gift is a mercy they have neither earned nor

¹⁵ Albert Outler, “The Person and Work of Christ,” in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy Battenhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955): 349.

¹⁶ Thomas Bigham and Albert Mollegen, “The Christian Ethic,” in Battenhouse, 375.

¹⁷ Mary Clark, *Augustine*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 64.

¹⁸ Outler, “The Person and Work of Christ,” in Battenhouse, 359.

¹⁹ Roy Battenhouse, “The Life of St. Augustine,” in Battenhouse, 48.

merited.²⁰ As Wolf observed of Niebuhr's analysis of human nature, pride's most insidious (and ironical) guise is the disease of self-righteousness that infects a theology or "the very channels of grace in a religion which seeks to redeem man from pride."²¹

Yet Niebuhr strongly critiqued aspects of Augustine's doctrine of grace because it "blunts and obscures the complex relation between grace as power and grace as pardon."²² Niebuhr believed Augustine's doctrine had merged "the self esteem of classical man" with the biblical understanding of sinful human nature. In the merger self-esteem predictably seized more readily upon grace as power than as forgiveness and mercy; the consequence was the medieval church's subordination of man's justification to his sanctification.²³ This reflected an error in which Augustine did not see that human beings "may be redeemed in the sense that they consciously turn from self to Christ as their end, and yet they are not redeemed from the corruption of egotism." In the two loves that distinguish Augustine's two commingled cities, love of God and love of self, he did not recognize that "the commingling is due, not to the fact that two types of people dwell together but because the conflict between love and self love is in every soul," even the redeemed soul. It is at this point, in Niebuhr's thinking, that Augustine's doctrine does not adequately resolve the problem that sinful human nature presents to his understanding of the transforming power of

²⁰ Outler, "The Person and Work of Christ," in Battenhouse, 359.

²¹ William Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," in Kegley and Bretall, 239.

²² *Destiny*, 139. Niebuhr also rejected what he considered Augustine's "literalist" interpretation of the Fall and the idea that Adam and Eve's original sin passed to succeeding generations through sexual intercourse. "Adam and Eve are now for him *symbols* of the human condition, not any longer *causes* of that situation. The Fall thus has ceased to point to a historical event in the past and has become a *symbol*, a description of our perennially disrupted state, and one that discloses to us the deepest levels of that state.... [The] literalistic conversion from a representative symbol into a historical cause was for Niebuhr fatal. It made our proness for sin into a necessity of our birth, and it moved all the involvement of freedom in sin and the responsibility for it on to the shoulders of Adam and Eve...The paradox of freedom and necessity involved in the experience of sin has thus in the tradition been split asunder: freedom has gone to Adam and Eve, necessity to us (see *Nature*, 262-263). Hence, Niebuhr argues, the only way to proceed is to recognize the paradox and explore it as a symbolic and paradoxical disclosure of our own deepest experience." Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 134-135.

²³ Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy*, new edition (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 83.

grace; that, in the words of Luther, even saints may be “righteous and sinners at once.”²⁴

The essence of Augustine's error, Niebuhr wrote, is the belief that through grace sin is overcome “in principle”; that the sin residual in the redeemed person was incidental, or “venial.” While Augustine insisted that forgiveness of venial sin was always to be sought, such “expressions of self-love, after redemption,” were not to be seen “as the expression of a basic attitude.”²⁵ Such a person, in Augustine's view, may be said “to walk blamelessly ... free from damnable sins and at the same time not neglecting to cleanse by almsgiving such sins as are venial.”²⁶ Though aware of the Church's important distinction between mortal and venial sins, Niebuhr finds here that the Augustinian idea of sin being overcome “‘in principle’ actually asserts that the power of inordinate self-love is broken ‘in fact.’” Niebuhr found this idea contradicted by the more than incidental expressions of pride and self-will among blameless and redeemed bishops, theologians, and businessmen; indeed, by the spiritual arrogance of the Church itself. “These are not mere defects,” Niebuhr wrote, “They represent the basic drive of self-love operating upon whatever new level grace has pitched the new life.”²⁷

Predictably, Niebuhr's reformed hackles were also raised by Augustine's appeal to almsgiving. “The idea that almsgiving can cleanse the soul of venial sins is the camel's nose of ‘righteousness by works’ entering into the tent of grace.”²⁸ The beast itself, of course, is the belief that people can be justified by good works or saved by their own merits, so long as they recognise that their merit is an operation of God's grace. For Niebuhr this formulated the Catholic understanding of the relationship of grace and merit to salvation; an understanding in which he found Aquinas and Augustine in agreement:

²⁴ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 138.

²⁵ *Destiny*, 140.

²⁶ Augustine, “On Man's Moral Perfection in Righteousness,” Chapter 20, cited in *Destiny*, 141.

²⁷ *Destiny*, 141-142.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

Man by his own will performs works which are worthy of eternal life; but, as Augustine says, for this is it necessary that the will of man should be prepared by grace....“It is certain that eternal life is given as a reward for good works; but those works for which it is granted belong to the grace of God.”²⁹

At issue here, in Niebuhr's view, is the central question of whether humankind's prideful will “by any discipline of reason or by any merit of grace” can in its earthly existence conform essentially to the will of God.³⁰ The answer from what Niebuhr calls his Biblical perspective is an unqualified no. But in the Augustinian tradition, particularly with the Church's medieval accretions, the response is a barely qualified yes; excepting venial sin expiated through almsgiving, the redeemed are essentially sinless. In medieval doctrine Augustine's reservations were forgotten; the Church became identified with the Kingdom of God and proclaimed itself the sole dispenser of divine grace. Here the Church became mired in spiritual pride and demonstrated “in fact” the ironical pretension of a religion which claimed to have overcome pretension “in principle.”³¹ This result was inevitable, Niebuhr wrote, “because man's self-esteem resists that part of the truth of the gospel which is set against all human achievements and discovers the sinful element of self-aggrandisement in them.”³²

If he found Augustine the most reliable of Christian thinkers, Niebuhr prophetically cautions against a too “slavish” embrace of his insights.³³ He thus believes a critique of Augustine's doctrine of grace is essential to address the “qualified optimism” that had resulted from the Church's emphasis on grace as sanctification.³⁴ Herein an essential truth is obscured. Though the redeemed have had their spiritual orientation

²⁹ Aquinas *Treatise on Grace* (Quest. 109 Art. 5), cited in *Destiny*, 145.

³⁰ *Destiny*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 148. Clearly at this point Niebuhr sees Augustine as confusing the Church with the Kingdom of God. Donald Bloesch, *Reinhold Niebuhr's Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 152.

³³ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 146.

³⁴ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 83.

changed they remain subject to the incessant tensions and temptations of pride and self-righteousness. Thus Augustine's qualified optimism was, to use Niebuhr's phrase, another camel's nose probing beneath the tent, a snout of the belief that human beings can reach moral perfection through moral exhortation and education. From his prophetic perspective Niebuhr insisted that self-regard is never extinguished but accompanies the soul to each new level of spiritual achievement. This was the view of the human condition he found vindicated by experience and history. It was essential to understand this, particularly in approaching social and political analysis. "Nothing is more obvious," Niebuhr observed, "than that personal dedication is no guarantee against the involvement of the dedicated individual in some form of collective egotism."³⁵

What light does Niebuhr's criticism shed on Augustine's understanding of humility? Niebuhr's critique affirms Augustine's understanding of the pervasiveness and guile of self-regard in human nature. But Niebuhr, largely following reformed tradition, believed that sinful pride inserted itself into the very doctrines that Augustine and the Church had constructed to defeat it.³⁶ Against Augustine's belief that pride could be overcome in principle, Niebuhr insisted that the perniciousness of human self-regard remains able to corrupt the will of even the most wary. Those redeemed by God's grace remain, in this life, sinners in principle. Nor could there be any question of the Church or any human construct dispensing divine grace, a pretentious snare into which those who considered themselves redeemed in principle fell. Here is yet another attempt by human self-regard to refute its finitude and subject faith to human ordering and control. Here, in Niebuhr's view, is a failure to understand that,

The faith and grace by which we stand beyond the contradictions and ambiguities of history are no simple possession, but rather a having and not having; and that, claimed as a secure possession, they become a vehicle of the sin from which they ostensibly emancipate .³⁷

³⁵ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 138.

³⁶ Niebuhr thought Luther was "convinced that the pretension of finality and perfection in the Church was the root of spiritual pride and self-righteousness," *Destiny*, 192. For Niebuhr's critique of Reformation doctrines, see *Destiny*, Chapter 7.

³⁷ *Destiny*, 152.

Nevertheless Niebuhr may be seen as following Augustine's view that the grace of humility opens the self to the right relationship with God and illumines the Christian social task. Indeed, given Niebuhr's objections to Augustine's idea of humankind being redeemed in principle, the importance of humility to faith and action is given increased immediacy. On balance it is prudent to keep at hand his critique of Augustine's doctrine of grace but to remember as well Niebuhr's over-all regard for Augustine as the most insightful of Christian thinkers.³⁸

Pride: An Antithetical Approach to Defining Humility

While humility and attitudes associated with it are pervasive motifs in Augustine's work, he provides no detailed definition of the word. The approach here to understanding the various ways in which Augustine uses the word entails an analysis of what he saw as humility's antithesis, pride or self-regard, as humankind's basic sin.³⁹

For Niebuhr a distinguishing feature of Augustine's realism is his biblical understanding of human nature, "with the ancillary conception of the seat of evil being in the self."⁴⁰ Experience, history and biblical understanding taught that the evil in the self had profound implications for human beings as social creatures. While human beings are by nature social creatures, their sinful nature creates "the ills which abound in human society."⁴¹ In Augustine's thinking on conflicted human nature the tension was always present: "for the human race is, more than any other species, at

³⁸ His sharp critique notwithstanding, Niebuhr launches a strong defence of Augustine: "Whatever the defects of the Augustine approach may be, we must acknowledge his immense superiority both over those who preceded him and who came after him.... A generation which finds its communities imperilled and in decay from the smallest and most primordial community, the family, to the largest and most recent, the potential world community, might well take council of Augustine in solving its perplexities." *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 145-146.

³⁹ At *Confessions* 5. 9. 16 Chadwick notes Augustine's first use of the term "original sin" to "describe inherent human egotism, the inner condition contrasted with overt actions." 82, note 13.

⁴⁰ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 121.

⁴¹ *Augustine City* 19.5.

once social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion.”⁴² Any realistic assessment of social conflict required an understanding that the root cause of discordance among human beings distinguished by free will is pride or self-regard. Humanity’s prideful nature impedes the relationship with God and thereby disorders all human relationships. Human self-regard, in Augustine’s view, is the reason human beings cannot govern themselves without some sufficient force to maintain a just social order.⁴³

Augustine’s *City of God* provides an analysis of human political behaviour from his theological perspective in which there are two ultimate human communities:

One, the city of those whose wills are submissive to God; the other, the city of those who will to rival him. The first consults the common welfare for the sake of celestial fellowship; the other grasps at selfish control for the sake of arrogant dominance. By their loves men distinguish and declare their separate destinies. Those who love the good of neighbour as much as the good of the self and therefore love according to God will grow in peace and at last reign eternally with him; while the city of those who love self above the neighbour and love according to man will be self-divided by wars and suffer eternal punishment with the devil.⁴⁴

Where, as here, Augustine speaks of the loves that determine humanity’s ultimate destiny he is speaking of the will. As Harrison observed of Augustine, human love and will are identified. For human beings to will is not simply a matter of rational consideration and choice: “rather it is to love something and to be moved to act on the basis of that love.” This willing love is not incidental but lies at the heart of human existence. The will is ever active and eventually leads us to one of the two of Augustine’s cities. Those whose love is oriented toward God and neighbour are persons of good will who love charitably. Love oriented toward the self, toward things, and toward other persons as they may serve the self, is described by

⁴² Ibid. 12.28.

⁴³ Elaine Pagels, “Augustine on Nature and Human Nature” in LeMoine and Kleinhenz, 96.

⁴⁴ Cited in Battenhouse, 52-53.

Augustine as cupidity, concupiscence, or lust.⁴⁵ These attitudes of ill will are all expressions of sin that, for Augustine, “is nothing but the evil assent of free will, when we incline to those things which justice forbids and from which we are free to abstain.”⁴⁶

The sensual direction of these loves of ill will point to Augustine's understanding that as love is misdirected toward creatures and the created, the love and awareness of the Creator declines; our love of God is diminished in proportion to our inclination toward the things of the senses. Yet the body, as part of the creation that God pronounced good, is not in and of itself morally bad. Rather, it is man's ill will that corrupts the body.⁴⁷ Thus “fleshly desire” is understood as a symptomatic manifestation of the deeper and central disorder that can “baffle, confound, and defeat our best attempts to defeat them.”⁴⁸

The immoderate love of the things of the sense is derivative, however, and rests upon a foundational defection, namely, self-love or pride. It is through pride that man consents to the affections of the sense. “Pride is the beginning of all sin; and the beginning of man's sin is a falling away from God.”⁴⁹

In falling away from the love of God prideful humans further compound their sin in the idolatrous embrace of “inferior things.” Here man becomes ever more embroiled in confusion of his own making: “thinking that he possesses the same nature of his Creator, he turns to himself, cuts himself off from the truth and becomes blind.”⁵⁰ Augustine thus observes that sinful humankind prefers “imitating God to serving

⁴⁵ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 94-95.

⁴⁶ Augustine *Literal Interpretation of Genesis 1.3*, in *Saint Augustine on Genesis*, trans. Roland Teske (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 148.

⁴⁷ Battenhouse, in Battenhouse, 53. Somewhat ironically Niebuhr's rejection of any literal interpretation of the Fall and the idea that “original” sin is passed through intercourse appear to support Augustine's view of the created body as good. See Gilkey (2001), 134-35.

⁴⁸ Pagels, in LeMoine and Kleinhentz, 8.

⁴⁹ Robert Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” in Battenhouse, 304. Quotation from Augustine *Homilies from St. John's Gospel* 25.15.

⁵⁰ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 83, on Augustine's *Morals of the Catholic Church* 12.20.

God.”⁵¹ Pretension that impedes the right relationship with God blinds human beings to their limited perspective and finitude. In their narcissistic concentration on self they become spiritually isolated from others.⁵² Harrison notes that Augustine likens the finite perspective of man to a statue fixed in the corner of a building: “He can only see what lies in his immediate vicinity, he can see parts but not the whole.”⁵³ Seeking to overcome their finite perspectives human beings construct false eternalisms out of inferior things and convince themselves that they comprehend the whole and not the part.

Opposed to the disorder of prideful self-love is the love of God above all things finite and perishable. Only in the love of God can humanity find the truth that properly orders all other loves and relationships. In Augustine's view, truly ordered love “is founded upon man's humility and subjection to God, whereby he acknowledges his creaturely status and dependence upon his creator, so that he receives God's illumination and enlightenment.”⁵⁴ The perfect love of God is man's supreme virtue, the ultimate human good from which all other goods are derived. To love God is “to love Virtue, to love Wisdom, to love Truth, to love with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”⁵⁵ Prideful self-love is the disease of sin that impedes this love; the grace of humility is its cure. “Cure pride and there will be no more iniquity,” Augustine wrote, “for this is the commendation of humility, whereas pride doeth its own will, humility doeth the will of God.”⁵⁶

Christology of Augustine's Humility

While the significance of humility in Augustine's writing is explicit he provides no

⁵¹ Augustine *On Music* 6.13.40, in Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 26

⁵² Donald Burt, *Friendship & Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 3-4.

⁵³ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 26, on Augustine *On Order*, 1. 1 -2; 2.15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83, on Augustine *Morals of the Catholic Church* 12.2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, on *Morals* 13.22; 25 47.

⁵⁶ Augustine *On the Gospel of John, Tract 25.16*, in Battenhouse, 375.

precise definition of the word. We know humility as a gift of grace that opens human beings to the love of God. It orients sinful man toward the divine relationship that properly orders all human loves. It is the essential attitude from which all human goods flow. In Augustine humility is best understood through its characteristics and attitudes, most importantly as he finds them exemplified in the life of Christ. Indeed, the defining characteristic of Augustine's humility is "above all, Christocentric. Its core is the figure of the 'humiliated Christ.'"⁵⁷ In his sermon *On the Gospel of John* Augustine speaks in the words of Christ:

I came not to do my own will but the will of Him that sent me. I came humble, I came to teach humility, I came a master of humility; he that cometh to me is made one body with me; he that cometh to me becomes humble; he who adhereth to me will be humble, because he doeth not his own will, but the will of God, and therefore he shall not be cast out for when he was proud he was cast out.⁵⁸

Although he found the essential characteristics of humility in the life of Christ, Augustine of course saw Christ as much more than a teacher and exemplar of humility. Using Augustine's image, Christ is "the hand of God" extended to sinful man. This image vastly enlarges Augustine's understanding of the grace of humility as God's "redeeming act of divine self-abnegation." In the life and death of Christ, the character of the "humble" God is most fully revealed.⁵⁹ Using another of the medical allusions of which he was fond Augustine reflects that the nature of man's pride is so disordering that it "brought down the almighty physician from heaven and humbled Him." So virulent a disorder, he observed, required "so strong a medicine."⁶⁰ Augustine understood that the disease of human pride was curable only through the humility of Christ who, "although He was the high exalted, He

⁵⁷ Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 233.

⁵⁸ Augustine *Tract 25.16*, in Battenhouse, 375.

⁵⁹ Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 234.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 18*, 2.15, in Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 234.

descended into abjection.”⁶¹ The humble spirit and its attitudes are the gift of God's grace through Christ.

If humility in imitation of Christ is for Augustine the defining pattern for Christian living, it necessarily accepts the possibilities of suffering, shame and humiliation. But humble acceptance of such possibilities is not to be identified simply with abject self-abasement. The attitudes of humility in Augustine reflect both “abasement and exaltation: abasement as opposed to an overweening pride, yet exaltation, for humility bestows on man true worth and wisdom.”⁶² To be emphasised here is that Augustine's idea of abasement is understood within the entirely positive orientation that Augustine assigns to humility. Self-abasement in sin may be seen as a punishment that fits the crime. But through grace abasement before God leads human beings to Him and through Him to their highest and best potential as His beloved creatures. For this reason abasement before God does not require a denial of whatever goodness or gifts we may possess. Indeed, Augustine observes that, “the man who loves God is not wrong in loving himself,”⁶³; but the humble spirit militates against gifts becoming a source of pride and acknowledges them as an operation of God's grace.⁶⁴

For Augustine Christian humility is the ground of wisdom because as human beings confess their sinful inadequacies they come to know their true worth as God's beloved creatures. In humility before God they recognize that wisdom and self-knowledge flow not from the meretricious vanities of self-will but from divine grace imparted to the humbled spirit.⁶⁵ Whereas intellectual pride, in its selfish desire to dominate and exploit, is an expression of ingratitude, the humble spirit accepts its intellectual gifts with gratitude and directs them toward the things of

⁶¹ Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 31*, 2.18, in Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 234.

⁶² Schaffner, *O Christliche Demut: Des heiligen Augustinus Lehre von der Humilitas* (Wurzburg, 1959), in Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 235.

⁶³ Augustine *City* 19.14.

⁶⁴ Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 238.

⁶⁵ Battenhouse, “Life of St. Augustine,” in Battenhouse, 16.

God.⁶⁶ Through the grace of humility human beings are opened to the wisdom of God through which they gain true knowledge of Him and themselves. Here knowledge issues in *acknowledgement*: the essential role of reason in human knowledge, always hostage to the temptations of intellectual pride, finds correction in humility.⁶⁷

Humility and Loving Service: Discerning True Peace

Humility received through grace and patterned after Christ also shapes and illumines our relationship with others. It is manifest in what Augustine called “love that serves.” The willingness to serve others as Christ did in washing the feet of the disciples, exemplifies humility of the heart. For Augustine humility’s willingness to render loving service reaches far beyond monastic life to distinguish Christian life in all human collectives.⁶⁸ Other-directed service indicates the good will of those who belong to God’s kingdom. While those in the earthly city “lust for domination,” in the city of God,

Those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, I will love you, my lord, my strength.⁶⁹

Augustine's idea of loving service evolved from his understanding of humankind's social nature and its highest good. This “final good,” Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, “is that for which other things are to be desired, while it is itself to be desired for its own sake.”⁷⁰ For Christians the final good is the love of God. In the *City of God* Augustine followed philosophy’s insistence that any society's daily existence

⁶⁶ Cushman, “Faith and Reason,” in Battenhouse, 301.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁶⁸ Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 236.

⁶⁹ *Augustine City* 14.28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.1.

reflected the ultimate good to which it devoted its aspirations and vitalities. But whereas Augustine believed God to be the ultimate human good not achievable in history, philosophers variously taught that peace or justice were the highest human goods achievable in this life and by human effort. Here Augustine held that philosophy was refuted by both history and contemporary experience. Neither peace nor justice as idealised by philosophy had been realised in any human society.⁷¹ In this regard, Augustine's understanding of peace and justice enriches his idea of loving Christian service.

In *City* 19.12 Augustine wrote, "there is no man who does not wish for peace." Peace, he observed, is "the instinctive aim of all creatures, and is even the ultimate cause of war." Like all creatures human beings seek that peace in which they are most secure. The problem is not that human beings do not want peace but that they desire *their* peace embracing their particular needs, their particular ambitions and their particular security. Because all human conceptions of peace are tainted with this self-interest and prideful particularity no human ideal of peace can claim to be a universal good.

For even the wicked when they go to war do so to defend the peace of their own people, and desire to make all men their own people, if they can, so that all men and all things might together be subservient to one master. And how could that happen, unless they should consent to a peace of his dictation either through love or through fear? Thus pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in place of God's rule. This means that it hates the just peace of God, and loves its own peace of injustice. And yet it cannot help loving peace of some kind or other. For no creature's perversion is so contrary to nature as to destroy the very last vestiges of its nature.⁷²

It follows that the Christians' highest good cannot be earthly peace and justice, even that of their own design, because there is no escaping the finite and prideful self-interest of human nature. As pilgrims advancing toward the city of God,

⁷¹ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 207; Augustine *City* 19. 1-5.

⁷² Augustine *City* 19.12.

Christians seek the perfect and just peace that flows from humble obedience to God's perfect will. Yet the pilgrims will find true peace only when they reach the City in which the Ultimate Good, untainted by human sin, is to be found.⁷³ From the divine perspective humanity's finite notion of peace is merely the "shadow peace" exemplified by Rome's prideful will to dominate.⁷⁴ Even so, as Christian pilgrims sojourn in the earthly city they too benefit from its partial justice and imperfect peace; they recognize with Augustine that without just order, kingdoms are simply "gangs of criminals on a large scale."⁷⁵ Accordingly, and consistent with a rightly ordered love of God, the Christian "makes use of the earthly peace and defends and seeks the compromise between human wills in respect of the provisions relevant to the mortal nature of man."⁷⁶

Augustine acknowledges that although human institutions reflect sinful pride they are nevertheless essential to any semblance of the order essential to any relatively just peace. Because Christians and the Church have an interest in these proximate goods, Christians may owe the state obedience and service, even military service and the use of force, consistent with their first and highest allegiance to God. Thus Augustine leads Niebuhr in realising that the Christian's obligation to achieve proximate goods may entail having to do bad things.⁷⁷ While responsible Christians recognise this necessity they nevertheless hate what it may require of them and cry to God for forgiveness.⁷⁸ All such service should be patterned after the just and humble man's household, wherein those who give orders are the servants of those they command: "For they do not give orders because of a lust for domination but from a dutiful concern for the interests of others, not in pride in taking precedence over others, but with compassion in taking care of others."⁷⁹ The conduct of all Christian

⁷³ Ibid., 19.11.

⁷⁴ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 207-208; *Augustine City* 19.12.

⁷⁵ *Augustine City* 4.4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.17.

⁷⁷ Bingham and Mollegen, "The Christian Ethic," in Battenhouse, 393.

⁷⁸ *Augustine City* 19.16.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 19.14.

responsibility, even that of the emperor, is to be characterised by humility and contrition.⁸⁰

We may say that Augustine's idea of loving service is expressed as humility in action. Niebuhr followed Augustine in understanding the love commandment the truest Christian definition of justice: that rendering others their due is perfectly expressed in loving God and in loving the neighbour as oneself. For Augustine, "Love in its beginning is justice in its beginnings; love progressing is justice progressing; great love is great justice; love perfected is justice perfected."⁸¹ Thus love's requirements transcend the partial and socially relative requirements of justice. The law of love is ever "the defining factor and lowest common denominator for all Christian conduct in every age and every society."⁸²

Augustine's understanding of prideful human nature nevertheless disallowed the notion that the law of love negated the need for social structures that impose a relative just order. While he saw monastic life as a vent for those seeking individual perfection, Augustine emphasised the wider Christian duty "to perfect the peace of the city of this world."⁸³ Love might require the use of coercion and force, e.g., the loving father punishing the wayward son or the nurse restraining a delirious patient.⁸⁴ As we noted, Niebuhr followed Augustine in understanding the necessity of coercion and force in the pursuit of social justice. Niebuhr affirmed Augustine's acceptance that peace and justice in conformance with the law of love cannot be achieved in human history. If, according to Harrison, this is the perspective that determines "what

⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.24.

⁸¹ Augustine *Nature and Grace*, in Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal*, 104.

⁸² Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 211. For Niebuhr the law of love provides the transcendent norm, the "impossible possibility", by which Christians measure all attempts at justice. "Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated." *Nature*, 313.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 131.

⁸⁴ Battenhouse, "Life of St. Augustine," in Battenhouse, 46.

Augustine has to say about life of the Christian within the world,” the same may be said of Niebuhr.⁸⁵

There *are* nevertheless distinctions between Augustine and Niebuhr regarding the appropriate Christian attitude toward social goods such as peace and justice. Augustine’s pilgrims benefit from the imperfect peace of the earthly city and may rightly have an obligation to preserve it. For Augustine, however, the end of such service is not to achieve secular peace and justice but to safeguard the Church. The pilgrims are not passionately interested in secular peace and justice as social goods *per se*. In Augustine social responsibility “never achieves the absoluteness of a command from the God whose Kingdom breaks into and transforms history.”⁸⁶ Here Niebuhr follows not Augustine but reformed tradition. As Bingham and Mollegen note this tradition recognizes that while perfect peace is beyond human possibilities it must be pursued “through the earthly order ... [that] *the City of God comes upon the City of Earth to judge it and to transform it, as well as to uplift it to God.*”⁸⁷

For Niebuhr the love commandment requires the Christian's passionate responsibility for justice however imperfectly it can be achieved in history. It is in seeking justice that the love commandment of Christ is fulfilled in Christian life and made relevant to the whole of human society.⁸⁸ The attitudes of humility characterise Christian responsibility because they militate against the misuse of the power essential to any earthly approximation of a just peace. These attitudes point always to the perfect love of God in which all human endeavours are judged and found wanting.

⁸⁵ Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 211. While believing Augustine had too sharply presented a “perfect antithesis” between the distinguishing loves of the two cities, Niebuhr finds Augustine’s understanding of the “dynamic” and anarchic” elements in political life far superior to “classical political theories.” *Destiny*, 283-84.

⁸⁶ Bingham and Mollegen, “The Christian Ethic,” in Battenhouse, 393.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 394 (Emphasis mine).

⁸⁸ Niebuhr’s most sustained treatment of the relationship between love and justice is found in Chapter Four, “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal,” in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Harper & Row, 1935; New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 62-83.

Attitudes of Humility in Augustine

We have seen that the attitudes of humility are pervasive within Augustine's understanding of Christian life. The grace of humility opens human beings to divine love. It is the ground of the ultimate human good, the true love of God, from which all other human goods flow. The love of God orders all human relationships and illumines the proper value of the lesser goods that are constituents of humankind's finite existence. In addition to opening us to divine love, the grace of humility discerns the obligations of faith and characterises loving service. Through grace, humility illumines and safeguards the path to God along which pride and self-regard are incessant, seductive and potentially mortal snares.

If Augustine was the West's first great realist, as Niebuhr believed, his insights regarding humility hold particular relevance to Christian social responsibility. Perhaps these insights also may be called the fruits of humility. Augustine's humility is the ground of human *wisdom* because it opens us to the wisdom of God. Through divine wisdom we began to see as God sees; we gain *self-knowledge* of our true relationship with God and with others. In self-knowledge we confess our sinful selves before God and accept our finitude even as we learn our worth as His loved and redeemed children. Thus acknowledgment becomes *knowledge*. Knowledge of God's redemptive love and grace through Christ is the ground of Christian *confidence* while knowledge of the sinful self militates against pride that transforms confidence into self-righteousness. And though knowledge gained in the right relationship with God values the essential role of *reason* in human understanding it knows as well that reason can be corrupted by intellectual pride and always requires humility's correction.⁸⁹

Humbly accepting the finite nature of all human knowledge opens our minds to other perspectives and strengthens the bonds of our common humanity. Thus in Augustine *patience* is another attitude of Christian humility. In his monastic vocation he placed a premium on patience "as a duty of mutual toleration" among those sharing the

⁸⁹ Cushman, "Faith and Reason," in Battenhouse, 310.

monastic life. Such patience is a significant sign of one's love for Christ and its absence indicates an absence of humility in the self. "Do you not have something about you that someone else has to bear with? I exhort you all-- no, it is God's voice exhorting you all--bear with one another."⁹⁰ Patience is especially required of the powerful who in fulfilling their responsibilities "must be ready to wield discipline and impose fear."⁹¹

While the relationship of patience to *toleration* appears evident, particularly as Augustine characterised monastic patience as forbearance, his understanding of toleration is to be viewed in the wider social and political context. When he wrote in *City* 19.7 that Christian social responsibility entails a circumscribed compromise with the views of others and respectful obedience to secular authority Augustine reflects a distinctly Roman understanding of toleration.⁹² Augustine's toleration thus links the idea of patience with discipline and force. His understanding was further shaped in his protracted and increasingly bitter confrontation with the militant perfectionism of Donatism. In the early stages of the confrontation with the Donatists Augustine used personal relations, writings and public debate to persuade them of their errors.⁹³ In the end, however, Augustine called for their suppression by state intervention (which the Donatists themselves had sought unsuccessfully *against* the Church). His position, according to Limirande, was grounded in Augustine's regard for "the irreplaceable character of truth":

This conviction about truth entails for him that, since the Catholic Church is the one dwelling place of truth on earth, actual membership

⁹⁰ Augustine *Exposition on Psalm 99. 9*, in Zumkeller, 158.

⁹¹ Augustine *Rule* 7.34.

⁹² Harrison notes that Roman toleration entailed a "toleration of the customs, laws, and institutions" of a conquered peoples "so long as they did not threaten allegiance to Rome and its Gods." Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 208.

⁹³ Emilien Lamirande, "Church, State and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine," *The Saint Augustine Lecture 1974* (Villanova University Press, 1975), 12. In *Sermon 15.6* Augustine admonished his flock to "Tolerate the bad outside and inside. Outside tolerate the heretic, tolerate the Jew, tolerate the pagan. Tolerate also the bad Christian inside." Later, as Lamirande notes, Augustine supported measures (some enforced by the death penalty) suppressing certain pagan practices. Though not altogether sympathetic to the Jews, he was nevertheless tolerant of their worship. Lamirande, 30-35.

is necessary for salvation. Among all religious institutions, she is the only subject of right, and she is bound to protect all her children against error. It was no paradox for Augustine to affirm that correction and coercion were an imperative of charity.⁹⁴

Having rejected Augustine's doctrine of the Church as earthly dispenser of divine grace, Niebuhr finds in its further claim to possess absolute truth the powerful engine of spiritual self-righteousness. The Church's pretension to possess what cannot be humanly possessed reflects the prideful foundation of all religious intolerance. That this claim was used to justify the crusades and the Inquisition demonstrates the evil potential inherent in all such pretension.⁹⁵ Its pretension to absolute truth was the basis for Niebuhr's description of the Catholic Church as "collectively and officially intolerant," despite the unquestioned humility and contrition he personally found among its members.⁹⁶ Niebuhr quickly observes, however, that the Roman Church has no franchise on prideful pretension. Some in the Reformation ironically fell into the evils of religious self-righteousness. Niebuhr notes that because some reformers were barren of "the humility which betrays the 'broken spirit and the contrite heart,'" the fanaticism that tainted aspects of the Reformation "disturbed the peace of both the church and civil society no less than did Catholic intolerance."⁹⁷ Thus in both Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions Niebuhr finds the seductive power of self-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72-73. In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* Niebuhr cites Leo XIII's encyclical *Immortale Dei*: "'It is a sin in the state not to have care of religion ... or out of the many forms of religion to adopt that one which chimes with the fancy, for we are bound absolutely to worship God in that way in which He hath shown to be His will.' According to the Catholic doctrine 'no state is justified in supporting error or in according error the same recognition as truth'; the truth, of course, being embodied in the Catholic faith.'" 88-89.

⁹⁵ *Destiny*, 229-230. "In this claim in the realm of culture [the Church] obviously destroys the Biblical paradox of grace. It pretends to have as a simple possession, what cannot be so possessed. It may vary in its attitude slightly towards other versions of the Christian faith from time to time, but it is completely consistent and unyielding in its conviction that it alone possesses the truth and the whole truth." *Destiny*, 229. It will be remembered that this was written in 1939, decades before the ecumenical reforms of Vatican II.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 234. Writing in the 1940s, Niebuhr observed that Catholicism "accepts religious diversity in a national community only under the compulsion of history" and that this revealed "the chasm between the presuppositions of a free society and the inflexible authoritarianism of the Catholic religion." *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 88-89.

righteousness sufficient to pervert even a faith based in God's absolute love and forgiveness into "furious religion."⁹⁸

What of *forgiveness*, the attitude of humility that Niebuhr posits the "crown of Christian ethics"?⁹⁹ If the significance of forgiveness in Augustine's thought is not as explicit as in Niebuhr's it is sufficiently implicit to be identified as an essential attitude of humility. In Augustine the grace of humility brings sinful humanity into its proper relationship with God that properly orders all human relationships. Here, in Niebuhr's view Augustine had "restored the biblical understanding of the divine-human encounter."¹⁰⁰

The biblical message is of forgiveness by God toward man and the corresponding forgiveness which men must practice toward one another and will practice the more successfully if they realize the fragmentary character of their own virtues and achievements.¹⁰¹

The attitude of forgiveness appears inextricably related to each of the attitudes of humility discerned in Augustine's work. Despite their official designation as heretics, Augustine's attitude toward the Manicheans approaches a degree of toleration akin to our contemporary understanding: they should be corrected "not by contention, and strife, and persecution, but by kindly consolation, by friendly exhortation, by quiet discussion."¹⁰² Much of his attitude toward them was the result of Augustine's reflection upon his own struggle with their faith:

⁹⁸ *The Desecularization of the World*, ed. Peter Berger (London: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

⁹⁹ "The crown of Christian Ethics is the doctrine of forgiveness. In it the whole genius of prophetic faith is expressed. Love as forgiveness is the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements. Yet it is a possibility if the impossibility of love is recognized and the sin in the self is acknowledged. Therefore an ethic culminating in an impossible possibility produces the choicest fruit in terms of the doctrine of forgiveness, the demand that the evil in the other shall be borne without vindictiveness because the evil in the self is known." *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 137.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 199.

¹⁰¹ *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 99.

¹⁰² Augustine *Against the Basic Letter of the Manichees* 1, in Lamirande, *Church, State and Toleration*, 36.

I can no account treat you angrily; for I must bear with you now as formerly I had to bear with myself; and I must be as patient towards you as my associates were with me, when I went madly about and blindly astray in your beliefs.¹⁰³

Finally, in Augustine *compassion* and *responsibility* emerge as attitudes of Christian humility. This follows in part from what has been said regarding the relational dimensions of humility that have their origin in the right human-divine relationship. Through the grace of humility Christians discern humanity's true condition before God as both sinners and His beloved and forgiven creatures. The new life characterized by love and gratitude to God issues in the desire for loving service to God and to others.

Aware of our own infirmities we are moved to compassion to help the indigent, assisting them in the same way as we would wish to be helped if we were in the same distress—and not only in easy ways, like “the grass bearing seed”, but with the protection and aid given with a resolute determination like “the tree bearing fruit” (Gen. 1:11). This means such kindness as rescuing a person suffering injustice from the hand of the powerful and providing the shelter of protection by the mighty force of good judgement.¹⁰⁴

Contemporary Perspectives on Augustine and Coercion

Recent scholarship has struggled with Augustine's justification and use of coercion against religious dissenters. Given all that has been said about the importance of humility (and toleration as one of its constituent attitudes) in Augustine's work, the debate assumes additional significance for this dissertation. While Niebuhr broadly addresses this issue in his critique of Augustine's doctrine of the church and grace he

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3, in Lamirande, *Church, State and Toleration*, 37.

¹⁰⁴ *Confessions* 13.17.21. Augustine frequently exhorted the faithful to succor and protect the suffering and the oppressed; Chadwick notes on page 285 of his translation that such activities were “a substantial part of a bishop's duties.” McKeogh appears to suggest some distinction in Augustine between the more politically passive social responsibility of the “ordinary Christian” and that of the bishops. Colm McKeogh, *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), 46-47.

offers no systematic analysis of the apparent paradox between Augustine's emphasis on humility and his readiness to use coercion. In his 1997 essay "Augustine on Justifying Coercion," John Bowlin does not address the motif of humility but does offer perspectives that help clarify Augustine's treatment of the just and unjust uses of coercion.¹⁰⁵

Noting that most contemporary writers are uniformly critical of Augustine's use and justification of coercion, Bowlin insists that a fuller understanding begins by placing Augustine in context. There we find the use of coercion by magistrates and bishops a fact of life, a "morally unproblematic" given in the proper ordering of all human social relationships. "In business and in family life, and eventually in the relationship between a bishop and his flock, coercion was an ordinary feature of the North African moral landscape."¹⁰⁶ Moreover, as Augustine's protracted and increasingly desperate struggle with the Donatists attests, intolerance characterized nearly all religious traditions in conflict. Indeed, in his dealings with the Donatists Augustine demonstrates a growing intolerance for their dissenting views and disruptive behaviour and willingness to use state coercion in their suppression.¹⁰⁷ Bowlin finds that Augustine's contemporaries would be less surprised by his actual use of state power to suppress dissent than by his persistent attempts to justify it. For some of Augustine's friendly critics among scholars today his use of coercion and the justification he offers for its employment provoke their "modern indignation." Two such scholars are Robert Markus and John Milbank.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997), 49-70.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁷ As noted, Emilien Lamirande presents a more moderate view of Augustine's toleration and use of coercion, at least in his early years as bishop. "Church, State and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine," 30-35. Bowlin does note that the young Bishop of Hippo called for "gentle" means of suppression with "threats and severity" being the last resort. "Here is a refined intolerance if ever there was one," but, it must be said, one that became less refined as the struggle with the Donatists became more embittered, 51-52.

¹⁰⁸ Bowlin's references to Markus are taken from his *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); references to Milbank are to his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

Markus, while finding much to admire in Augustine's "liberal" understanding of a secular, pluralist and autonomous politics of the state, is troubled by his unapologetic use of state coercion to suppress religious dissent. Markus is troubled, Bowlin observes, because Augustine's "theologically neutral account" of political life, concerned only with the penultimate goods such as reasonable order and earthly peace, should afford all persons who stand to benefit from these goods a voice in politics. Given Markus' account of Augustine's understanding of politics, "no human beings, no human communities, should be permitted to direct the apparatus of political authority to the service of the goods they consider ultimate."¹⁰⁹ For critics such as Markus Augustine's desecralization of politics should have allowed a plurality of opinion in the political view. That it did not creates a troublesome inconsistency ("unresolved tension") in Augustine's mature social thought. Markus struggles to explain how so "liberal" a view of the political role can be made consistent with Augustine's "illiberal" use of state coercion against religious dissent. Bowlin finds Markus' discovery of an Augustinian liberalism probably anachronistic and perhaps false.¹¹⁰

When Augustine resists every effort to sacralize political life he is not providing a prescriptive account of politics, liberal or otherwise. He is not telling us what the limits of political community look like. He is not telling us what the limits of political authority should be. Rather, his intentions are strictly negative. God's salvific purposes do not depend upon the fate of any earthly society, and therefore the goods that can be achieved within any political association outside the city of God cannot be regarded as ultimate. They cannot be regarded as ends in themselves, at least not simply. Rather, the goods of political life and the mechanisms of political authority are mixed goods, neither strictly final ends nor merely instrumental means. They are proximate ends that are pursued and achieved, at least in part, so that they might be put to use for the sake of achieving to ends that are in fact regarded as final. Whether this or that final end is pursued with the assistance of the mixed goods of this or that political community largely depends upon the vicissitudes of political fortune. Indeed, it is *this* initial neutrality with respect to final ends, transformed as princes come and go, that is the consequence of Augustine's desecralization of politics, not nascent liberalism.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Bowlin, 56.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 56-57.

Thus the use of state coercion to suppress Donatist dissent is to transform politics by directing it to ultimate ends. It is true that the early Church could not avail itself of politics but when circumstances allowed it to do so its use of state coercion was to use politics in the service of God, humanity's ultimate end. In short, writes Bowlin, "Augustine resists secular limitations upon the use of the temporal goods of political association."¹¹² To infer, as Markus apparently does, that Augustine's idea of political autonomy points to some modern notion of liberal politics is to infer, falsely in Bowlin's view, that politics are in fact ultimate in their own sphere. Such a view reflects the sort of error into which Augustine believed the Donatists had fallen.

The Donatists infer an eschatological distinction from sociological realities. Markus infers sociological distinctions from eschatological realities. Both inferences assume a necessary connection between sociological and eschatological treatments of the two cities. Both should be resisted. If sociological treatments of the two cities have no necessary eschatological significance, then why should we think that eschatological distinctions yield sociological prescriptions? In fact, contra Markus, it is the inference to autonomy in politics that Augustine would find odd, precisely because it implies that the ends of politics are in principle ultimate in their own sphere.¹¹³

Augustine encourages prudence, leniency and mercy on the part of coercing magistrates. Nevertheless he insists that if grace does not transform politics for good "it will be transformed by vice." A city that fails to obey the commands of God can "neither expect justice to obtain among its citizens nor enjoy those temporal advantages that are the fruit of just political action."¹¹⁴ Just here it appears that Bowlin finds Augustine's use of coercion justified by what the Bishop of Hippo discerned as the "irreplaceable character of truth."¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., 58.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹¹⁵ Lamirande, 72.

Milbank's critique of the justification of coercion follows from what he finds as coercion's inconsistency with Augustine's supernaturalism. Milbank rejects Markus' view that Augustine's social theology prescribes something like the political autonomy of contemporary liberalism. To the contrary, Milbank takes the view that Augustine's desacralization of politics affirms the autonomy of the church not the state, and that the church may rightfully make use of proximate political goods. Milbank's objection to Augustine's justification of coercion, rather, is that coercion of religious dissent is "inconsistent with the ontological priority of peace over conflict." that Augustine himself holds for both the church and Christian virtue.¹¹⁶ Thus for Milbank coercion by the Church is inconsistent with the supernaturalism that characterizes all other facets of Augustine's social thought. Indeed, it is Augustine's refusal to acknowledge that goods of the "natural sphere" are any more than illusions that Milbank finds so appealing. The citizens of the heavenly city will apply its standards to their sojourn through the city of the earth. In forgiveness, care for others, the rejection of vengeance and in charity they act as the earthly city does not even as they refuse to compromise with its notions of virtue and peace that are enmeshed in "violence and conflict." Just here Milbank believes he discerns Augustine's error:

In his willingness to use force against religious dissent and to justify coercion, Augustine ignores the moral consequences of his own ontology. When he recommends peace pursued through the subordination of rivals and justice secured in a context of conflict, he forgoes his uniform supernaturalism and finds real value in the peace and justice of the world. Similarly, when he imagines God willing discipline and punishment for the sake of the good, he gives worldly violence real presence among the saints and angels in the heavenly city.¹¹⁷

Bowlin asserts that Milbank's conclusion regarding Augustine's inconsistency may be "more apparent than real." Yet in this regard Bowlin's objection to Milbank's assertions is no mere cavil: if we are to apply the heavenly standards to peace and virtue, as Milbank does, then they must apply to all moral practices, including those that distinguish the church. If it is true that coercion cannot be imagined as necessary

¹¹⁶ Milbank, 363, in Bowlin, 60.

¹¹⁷ Bowlin, 61-62.

in the heavenly kingdom then neither can it be imagined that forgiveness, restitution, reconciliation—all marks or virtues of the church—will be found in the city of God.

If resort to coercion by the church must be refused precisely because the conditions that make it imaginable in this life are absent in the house of the blessed, then the forgiveness and refuge the church offers in this life must also be refused, for they are equally unimaginable in that heavenly form of life.¹¹⁸

Augustine's justification of coercion against religious dissent reflects regret over the necessary use of force for relative justice in the earthly kingdom, not remorse for an inability to meet the perfectionist standards of the heavenly kingdom. In this regard, Bowlin rejects Milbank's assertion that Augustine's defense may be characterized as a "lamentable kind of political consequentialism."¹¹⁹ We can conclude that Augustine believes in the possibility of just coercion without finding that his justification is in fact this sort of consequentialist calculation. Here, rather, Augustine asserts that justice provides a standard in the use coercion against religious dissent that must not be transgressed even as he knows that temporal justice remains an "awful necessity." Through grace we do the best we can in this "wretched business," knowing that misery accompanies even success.¹²⁰

Bowlin concludes that if there is room for the necessity of forgiveness in the church there may also be a place for coercion. Nevertheless, while we cannot imagine the church without forgiveness the case for coercion is certainly less clear, most particularly as it touches upon the matter of human freedom. It is just here that many

¹¹⁸ Bowlin, 62. In a related footnote Bowlin suggests that Milbank fails to consider the possibility that Augustine's supernaturalism rejects "the incompatible not the unimaginable." Human notions of justice and compassion are perhaps unimaginable in heaven but are not incompatible with its "reign of charity." Coercion may well be unimaginable in heaven but Bowlin discerns no evidence that Augustine finds coercion incompatible with charity. "How," Bowlin asks, "can we get from, 'there will be no coercion there' to 'there should be none here' without sacrificing either consistency or many of the virtues and actions we cannot imagine doing without? In fact, he appears to treat just coercion like compassion: the blessed find no place for it in their lives while conceding its place in ours." Bowlin, 63.

¹¹⁹ Milbank, 491, in Bowlin, 65.

¹²⁰ Bowlin, 65.

of Augustine's critics today believe that freedom trumps any justification that he offers for the use of coercion. Yet it was in the context of the Donatist debate that Augustine most explicitly addresses the issues of coercion and freedom.

Augustine concedes that coercion constrains *liberum arbitrium*, the freedom to believe this or that, or to choose this or that course of action (*Ep.*173.3; *Ep.*185.vi.22). He also insists that in certain instances coercion's yield is "a somewhat freer sense of liberty" (*Ep.*185.vi. 17). Here he has in mind what we would no doubt call positive freedom; the liberty (*libertas*) to participate in this or that activity and secure the goods that accompany participation (*Ep.*173.3-4). Nevertheless, because he believes that negative liberty is a genuine good he refuses to conclude that every negative liberty lost can be justified by this or that positive liberty gained. Instead he assumes a rough collection of criteria that must be met for coercion to proceed justly and for negative liberty to be sacrificed for the sake of positive.¹²¹

In this précis of Augustine's justification of coercion in letters to Boniface and Donatus, Bowlin discerns three criteria in determining just coercion.¹²²

First, just coercion must be confined within specific relationships. Parents, for example, may properly restrain their own but not others' children. The physician may rightfully discipline his assistant in the practice of medicine. But coercion outside such relationships risks injustice because proper authority is lacking and because a negative liberty has been endangered by arbitrary force.

Second, coercion must follow truth and its means used to achieve goods compatible with human flourishing. Such coercion aims at a rightly ordered love of desirable good. While neither belief nor desire can be compelled through coercion, Augustine argues that habits can be challenged and the mind disciplined to discern truth. Here he reasons that when truth is known the will is properly ordered and the right action freely embraced: "it is this hope and this choice that makes the loss of negative

¹²¹ Ibid., 66.

¹²² Ibid., 66 *passim*

freedom bearable.”¹²³ Coercion that directs us to this right choice may be harmless, even praiseworthy, because it leads us to a willing participation in true human goods.

Finally, Augustine relates coercion with Christian charity. Rightly intentioned suppression of dissent must always have a care for those suppressed and, as above, the good achieved must be for their benefit. This good must always be one that they properly may come to love, a result that would not be possible without the rightly intentioned use of coercion.

For Augustine participation in the earthly city of God is humankind’s great good. Yet sinful human nature inclines the will not toward this great and more difficult good but to falsely pleasurable goods increasingly entrenched by habit. This being the case, Augustine posits “fraternal coercion” as a duty of pastoral care. Yet Bowlin finds Augustine’s sentiments in distinguishing between just and unjust coercion quite similar to ours today and that it is precisely these sentiments that are reflected in his justification of coercion against what he considers the Donatists’ confused theology. Augustine is at pains to demonstrate Donatist error because it is the truth that must distinguish between just coercion and unjust persecution.

This no doubt overstates the point. And yet, once we realize that coercion deployed in order to secure participation in a false practice cannot possibly be just, we can no longer conclude that Augustine’s anxious efforts to pointout [sic] Donatist confusions are the clever moves of a cynical debater. Quite the contrary, they are signs of moral seriousness.¹²⁴

Augustine insists that Christian magistrates, like parents, have a role-specific duty to direct the conduct of those for whom they are responsible; absent this role-specific duty, coercion would be unjust. Because coercion is part and parcel of the Christian magistrate’s duties, Augustine sees nothing extraordinary about their willingness to use power in God’s service. Guided by grace, the coercion exercised by the Christian

¹²³ Ibid., 67.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 68.

magistrate is just because its objective is the good. Moreover, Augustine avers that coercion may reflect the requirements of Christian love. When force may serve to correct dangerous error or restrain disordered conduct it seeks to direct us to the great goods of the heavenly kingdom. A failure to use just coercion in this regard is a failure of Christian love. Conversely, it is a failure of charity to coerce those who either cannot or should not participate in the goods or goods to be achieved. “Only those who know and love the good should be encouraged to do so.” These include schismatics, e.g., the Donatists, but not pagans, who may be restrained from certain practices but not compelled to Christian faith.¹²⁵

As Bowlin demonstrates, both Markus and Milbank struggle to reconcile the great truths they find in Augustine’s public theology with what Markus, at least, considers a “horrible doctrine” of church discipline. Yet it is precisely in their reluctance to grant moral seriousness to Augustine’s justification of state coercion against religious dissent that Bowlin finds them falling into error. This justification is based upon what Lamirande sees as Augustine’s insistence upon the “irreplaceable character of truth,”¹²⁶ and the responsibilities that follow from it. Here Bowlin finds little inconsistency between Augustine’s justification of coercion and his broader social thought. Moreover, he finds the moral sentiments in Augustine’s justification largely mirrored in contemporary reflections upon the moral use of force. These sentiments remain relevant to contemporary moral discourse despite the “twists and turns” of history from which modern liberal societies have emerged.¹²⁷

Despite his frequent criticism of liberal idealisms that failed to understand the necessity of coercion in achieving relative justice, Niebuhr was unquestionably a product of modern liberal social thought. His dissent from Augustine’s justification for state coercion in the matter of religion largely tracks those presented by Bowlin. But Niebuhr was particularly critical of what he perceived as Augustine’s claim of the church to possess absolute truth, a claim that is so central to his moral justification of the use of coercion against religious dissent. Niebuhr rejected the idea

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹²⁶ Lamirande, 72.

¹²⁷ Bowlin, 69-70.

that any human being or institution can lay claim to absolute truth, always insisting that our truth is not to be identified with God's truth. Clearly Niebuhr accepts the essential place of truth in determining the just use of coercion. But he was ever mindful that human finitude delimits our idea of the truth and that sinful human nature perverts our truth by lending it a finality that it cannot possess. It is just here that we succumb to the destructive temptations of self-righteousness.

Conclusion

In Augustine's work Niebuhr encountered the theologian he considered the most reliable of all Christian thinkers. In Augustine he discovered a towering Christian theologian who was as well, in Niebuhr's estimate, the West's first great realist. As he broke with the liberal Christian idealism of his youth and matured as a Christian thinker Niebuhr found in Augustine an ancient Christian tradition that illumined a faith relevant to 20th Century experience. For Niebuhr Augustine was the most reliable of Christian thinkers because he discerned in the innermost recesses of faith the spiritual resources essential to Christian life and social responsibility. It was Augustine who first "emancipated" Niebuhr from his liberal Christian idealism and then provided the foundation for his Christian realism.¹²⁸

Augustine's influence on Christian realism is pervasive but nowhere more so than in his insistence on the essential role of humility in Christian faith, life and responsibility. Humility, in Augustine, is the beginning of faith. It is the gift of grace that brings the sinful creature into conformity with the perfect Creator. Only the divine grace of humility can overcome the sinful pride in human nature that impedes the true relationship with God. Humility's work establishes and nurtures this fundamental relationship and properly orders all human relationships. In this regard humility is seen as the gift of grace that illumines Christian spiritual life and Christian social responsibility. It is the wellspring of all Christian virtues. From his faith perspective Augustine surveyed the world with a realist's eye and

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," in Kegley and Bretall, 9.

unsentimentally discerned that “The way is first humility, second humility, third humility.”¹²⁹

If he found significant error in Augustine’s belief that the grace of humility overcomes human sin “in principle”, Niebuhr’s correction lends even greater immediacy to the importance of humility and its attitudes in Christian responsibility. Here he warns against the inevitable assertion of human pride that operates of “upon whatever new level grace has pitched the new life.”¹³⁰ That there is no escape in history from the sinful assertion of pride, particularly as pride tempts all power and power is driven by the fury of political and religious expressions of self-righteousness. Through the gift of divine grace humbled man finds redemption but remains a sinner. In no human being is the power of self-love and its potential for injustice ever entirely eradicated. By “no discipline of reason or by any merit of grace” does even the justified sinner conform to the perfect will of God.¹³¹ In short, grace redeems and changes the Christian’s spiritual orientation but pride remains at the core of human nature. While following Augustine in embracing the essential role of humility in Christian tradition and responsibility, Niebuhr found that the error in Augustine’s work, institutionalised and compounded by Church dogma, lay in claims to possess and dispense absolute truth. Here Niebuhr’s prickly brief was to extricate the truths of faith illumined by Augustine from their “sinful and finite corruptions.”¹³²

This brief is central to Niebuhr’s Christian realism. In rejecting claims to religious absolutes Niebuhr attacks the foundation of self-righteous fanaticism. In rejecting all claims to hold absolute and universal religious truth, Niebuhr’s Christian realism

¹²⁹ Augustine, *Letters* 118, in Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth*, 35.

¹³⁰ *Destiny*, 141-42.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 95. In noting what he discerns as Niebuhr’s particular animus toward Catholicism, Hauerwas observes that “it is a mistake to think that Niebuhr is critical of Catholicism primarily because of its alleged failure to understand that all human institutions including the church are sinful. No doubt he assumed that that was the central issue, but more importantly, Niebuhr sensed that Catholicism rests on the claim that our knowledge of God must be mediated.” *With the Grain of the Universe: Probing Twentieth Century Theology and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 136-137, note 57.

necessarily rejects any effort to lend theological authority to any ideology's claims to absolute truth. Every age has been marked by the consequences of self-righteous fanaticism; Niebuhr's by totalitarian ideologies that sought either to incorporate religious absolutes or to destroy religion absolutely. Thus his "correction" of Augustine in this regard is not simply a fine theological point but one with vast implications for Christians devoted to social responsibility that necessarily entails the use of some form of power. Here Niebuhr's critique corrects, clarifies and intensifies Augustine's insistence that humility must ever accompany power:

I know how great is the effort needed to convince the proud of the power and excellence of humility, an excellence which makes it soar above all the summits of this world, which sway in their temporal instability, overtopping them all with an eminence not arrogated by human pride, but granted by divine grace.¹³³

My experience in public service leads me to believe that the initial task here is not to convince the proud of the power of humility but to convince the proud that they are, in the Augustian and Niebuhrian sense, proud. The word "proud" may be the most commonly used word in Congressional correspondence and in the daily train of Floor speeches. Floods of Congressional press releases express pride in good works achieved and good causes affirmed. As a nominal Christian embroiled in the daily exigencies of political life on Capitol Hill perhaps I saw the use of this morally suspect expression as simply one of Augustine's relatively harmless sins. Ironically the word "proud" is so pervasive a clue that it obscured the basic disorder.¹³⁴

Perhaps my basic disorder is a pride that imputes malevolence to the pride of others but not to my own. To a degree I attribute this presumption to my earlier failure to study critically the core doctrines of traditional Christian faith. The idea of original sin certainly appeared in the vocabulary of my childhood faith but it seemed largely irrelevant to my daily life. And despite the truths regarding sinful human nature

¹³³ Augustine *City of God*, preface to Book I.

¹³⁴ In fairness I must note that the last House Member for whom I served as chief of staff despised the word "proud" and nearly always rejected its use in correspondence and press releases. She attributed this aversion to her strict Presbyterian upbringing.

discerned in formal studies, I was able to cling to a belief in the relative innocence of my own pride. Here my experience reflects what Niebuhr and Augustine have to say about the corruptive nature of power. It is ironically comforting to think of power and corruption in their most spectacular culminations. Reflecting upon my time in public service it is far more discomfoting to contemplate the daily, seemingly insignificant ways in which power persistently obscured both the corruption of my own prideful nature and the requirements of Augustine's ideal of loving service.

In the increasingly fractious atmosphere of Congress personal humility may be admired by colleagues but it is not an attitude indicative of either party in action. The attitudes of humility may be given practical effect in the patience, toleration and reconciliation that characterize the legislative process at it best. But in that arena of national debate the political stakes are such that outcomes make or break careers, profoundly affect significant populations and vital interests, and, it is no exaggeration to say today, change the course of history. Promises on behalf of long-favoured District projects or threats regarding coveted committee assignments are starkly compelling. Personal attitudes of humility may be the battle's first casualties as they are subsumed in the compelling partisan cause and swept along by perceived necessity. Here in the embrace of power and pride we lose the God's eye perspective that is ours through the grace of humility. The "fog of war" is not reserved to the battlefield alone.

Militating against all human pride, including my own innocent pride, are the attitudes of Christian humility discerned in Niebuhr's critical study of Augustine. While these attitudes must shape all efforts at the truly Christian life, they hold particular truths for Christian responsibility in the social task. For in this task, as Niebuhr knew, the Christian is required to understand that justice requires the use of power that itself tempts pride and always entails some injustice. In underscoring the relational dimensions of humility he knew as well that there is no such thing as innocent pride; certainly there is no innocent power. It is just here that Augustine the realist led Niebuhr in discerning the essential relevance of the grace of humility to Christian responsibility.

Like Niebuhr I am embarrassed by my late encounter with Augustine and, also like Niebuhr, have found in the Bishop of Hippo an “answer to so many of my unanswered questions.” Nevertheless there remain essential elements in Niebuhr’s public theology that affirm the critical significance of humility within his Christian realism. In the following chapter Niebuhr’s understanding of humility and its development within the heart of his prophetic faith is examined. To that task I now turn.

Chapter Two

The Origins and Attitudes of Humility in Niebuhr's Prophetic Faith

Humility is not something we can wring from ourselves, that we possess within ourselves, or that we can control. It is ever a gift of grace, appropriated in faith and renewed in love and obedience. Therefore when we speak of humility as one of the resources of faith for the social task we speak not only of some virtue or other but rather the social significance of the whole tonal quality of the life of faith.¹

Gordon Harland

Introduction

We have seen that Niebuhr was profoundly influenced by Augustine's realist perspective and emphasis on the attitudes of humility in Christian life and responsibility. Niebuhr remained prophetically critical of Augustine, however, finding error in his failure to see that redeemed and "blameless" souls remain sinners; that sinful human nature continues to assert itself "upon whatever new level grace has pitched the new life."² Here Niebuhr's critique lends increased immediacy to the essential role of humility in Christian responsibility and its attendant use of power.

While his critical study of Augustine provides a reliable foundation for assessing the role of humility in Niebuhr's Christian realism, a deeper understanding of that role emerges when additional elements in Niebuhr's theology are examined. In this chapter I will consider several of those elements, beginning with a brief treatment of certain motifs in Niebuhr's prophetic calling and his role as "prophet to America in praxis."³ The heart of Niebuhr's prophetic faith is revealed in his interpretation of the

¹ *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 133.

² *Destiny*, 141.

³ Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *The Journal of Religion* 54 (October, 1974): 336.

“myth” of the Atonement that provides the lens through which he discerns Christian truth. Therein we gain a fuller insight into the theological origins of grace, sin and Christian humility in Niebuhr’s prophetic faith. These discussions provide the context in which I examine Niebuhr’s understanding of pride in its various guises and its antithesis in the attitudes of humility. Finally, I examine the attitudes of humility for the social task as they are discerned in the heart of Niebuhr’s theology.

Niebuhr’s Prophetic Faith

When *The Irony of American History* appeared in 1952, Niebuhr’s had been a familiar voice in American religious, intellectual and political circles for more than two decades. During and after WWII his writing, preaching and participation in high national councils made him a familiar figure to millions of main-street Americans. For many Niebuhr was a theologian and public intellectual who seemed to know how to make sense of their world. He was for several generations of Americans *A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*.⁴

He was regarded by many as a prophet, not in the sense of speaking with canonical authority or of forecasting the future, but because, like the Old Testament prophets from whose message he drew inspiration, Niebuhr addressed his nation and its religious communities in times of crisis and decision, and did so in accents challenging pride and complacency in the name of a God who calls for justice within and among nations.⁵

Niebuhr’s life and work reflect an intentional assumption of the prophets’ mantle. Like Israel’s prophets he often stood in that place outside “the church” where it met

⁴ *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*, ed. Harold R. Landon. (Cambridge: Seabury Press, 1961). The titles of a number of works on Niebuhr refer to his prophetic role. See Ronald Stone’s *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981) and more recently Charles C. Brown’s *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Prophetic Role and Legacy*, new ed. (Harrisburgh, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

⁵ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 8.

the world and his faith could address both.⁶ He appealed to the Hebrew prophets and, frequently using synonymous terms, what he called “prophetic faith.” In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* Niebuhr credits the prophetic monotheism of Amos with the first “religious apprehension of a universal and unlimited moral obligation.” Here, Niebuhr believed, was a “conception of a universal history, over which the God of Israel presided as sovereign but of which the history of Israel was not the centre and end.” Israel’s God has universal designs for which He might use or reject Israel according to His own purposes. The prophets of this infinite God who stands within and above history were thereby set against any nationalistic or exclusive appropriation of faith for finite human purposes.⁷ In the caustic anti-nationalistic oracles of Amos Israel’s God is the Lord of all people and His purposes will be achieved with or without the instrumentality of Israel or any other nation or people.⁸

He probes beyond Amos’ anti-nationalistic stance to identify what he describes as prophetic faith’s “more far-reaching criticism of all forms of optimistic Messianism”; a critical stance that makes “no concessions to the Messianic hope of the fulfilment of history in either nationalistic or universal terms.” Prophecy reflects God’s judgment in history: first upon Israel because it betrayed its chosen mission even as it presumed upon the divine favour, and then upon all nations. Yet Niebuhr finds that the signal contribution of Hebrew prophecy is not, as first it might appear, the “triumph of universalism in the history of ethics,” but rather “the beginning of revelation in the history of religion.”

It is the beginning of revelation because here, for the first time, in the history of culture the eternal and divine is not regarded as the extension and fulfilment of the highest human possibilities, whether

⁶ Hans Hoffman, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 245. While his chair at Union provided this place Niebuhr nevertheless remained active in the pulpit and in church affairs. Following WWII he played a prominent role in the formation of the World Council of Churches. See Heather Warren’s *Theologians of a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). But his stance toward the church was always prophetic, whether in criticism or in encouragement.

⁷ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 106.

⁸ *Destiny*, 24.

conceived in particularistic or universalistic terms. God's word is spoken *against* both his favoured nation and against all nations. This means that prophetism has the first understanding of the fact that the real problem of history is not the finiteness of all human endeavours, which must wait for their completion by divine power. The real problem of history is the proud pretension of all human endeavours, which seeks to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involves history in evil and sin.⁹

Here we see essential elements in Niebuhr's prophetic witness to America. He appealed to the attitudes of humility that ameliorate national self-righteousness and pride in times of crisis.¹⁰ Steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition and taking seriously its assumed historic particularity, America's pride and power obscured the persistent message of Israel's prophets: the instruments of God's purposes are exempt from neither the vicissitudes of history nor the divine judgment that sits upon all human endeavours. But if Niebuhr inveighed against national pride and social injustice, here as elsewhere in his life's work there is an accompanying note of prophetic hope and encouragement. The humbling sting of God's judgment remains always but in His laughter at human pretensions we also discern the patience, forbearance and forgiveness of an ultimately loving creator. "The whole drama of human history," Niebuhr wrote, "is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretension without being hostile to human aspirations."¹¹

We discern by faith the ironical laughter of the divine source and end of all things. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh" (Psalm 2.4). He laughs because "the people imagine a vain thing." The scripture assures us that God's laughter is derisive, having the sting of judgment upon our vanities in it. But if the laughter is truly ironic it must symbolize mercy as well as judgment. For whenever judgment defines the limits of human striving it creates the possibility of a humble acceptance of those limits. Within that humility mercy and peace find a lodging-place.¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25-26, (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1952), viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63-64.

Through the lens of prophetic faith Niebuhr struggled to read the signs of the times that might point America toward that lodging-place. If, as he forcefully preached, power always tempts to prideful pretension and social injustice he understood as well the mitigating, redemptive, and essential countervailing power of humility.

Certainly his understanding of the moral ambivalence of power is another defining characteristic of Niebuhr's prophetic faith. Critics, friendly and otherwise, devote considerable attention to Niebuhr's attempts to find some Christian perspective on the use of political power; to find, as Lovin observed, an expression of Christian faith "consistent with the way in which the world settles questions of truth."¹³ His fellow liberal and younger contemporary Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. believed that Niebuhr's acceptance of the inevitability of social conflict reflected the inevitability of power in human collectives. Most significantly he discerned in Niebuhr's work the paradoxical truth that power is both the cause and the antidote to social conflict.¹⁴ The mid-20th century doyen of political realism Hans Morgenthau found Niebuhr's insights regarding relationships between power and ideologies a marked contribution to political thought.¹⁵ Other critics viewed Niebuhr's perceived preoccupation with power and its uses in a far less positive light. Here we find Niebuhr characterized as an "apologist of power"¹⁶ To this Stanley Hauerwas adds the somewhat ironical note that Niebuhr's realism and its attendant focus on power too easily become "justification for perpetuating dominant ideologies."¹⁷

Niebuhr's perceived pre-occupation with power reflects his Augustinian conviction

¹³ Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 243.

¹⁴ "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role In American Political Thought and Life," in Kegley and Bretall, 145.

¹⁵ "The Influence of Reinhold Niebuhr in American Political Life and Thought," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*, ed. Harold R. Landon (Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, 1962), 109.

¹⁶ Bill Kellerman, "Apologist of Power: The Long Shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism," in *Sojourners* 16 (March 1987): 15.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 50. Hauerwas enlists Milbank's critique of the strongly Stoic influence on Niebuhr's understanding of natural law and his realist ethics. "The Stoics are obviously natural allies for those who think that 'social ethics' is the attempt to name the requirements necessary to run an empire." See note 45, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 133-34.

that pride resides at the core of human nature. His struggle to find Christian strategies for the use of power are grounded in his prophetic belief that sinful human nature is inevitably and variously expressed through power. Thus, as with Augustine, humility as the antithesis of pride could not be simply a peripheral virtue or merely one among other desirable Christian qualities. Humility is for him the gift of grace essential to discerning sinful pride and addressing its social consequences. To say only that Niebuhr is pre-occupied with power is to ignore the pervasive motif of humility and its attitudes within prophetic faith. It is to ignore, as Harland observed, that humility may be seen as a lens through which Niebuhr's prophetic faith is to be read: "No theme courses through the whole of Niebuhr's writing with greater strength or constancy than the theme of the social relevance of the humility born of faith's encounter."¹⁸

This assertion is only partially confirmed by reflecting on Niebuhr's position within the Augustinian tradition in Christian humility. The central importance of humility in his work requires the further understanding of humility developed within his theology and reflected in his incidental work. This is the understanding of humility discerned through his interpretation of the Atonement which for him illumines the central truths of prophetic faith. It is, in Niebuhr's view,

...the beginning of wisdom...it contains symbolically all that the Christian faith maintains about what man ought to do and what he cannot do, about his obligations and final incapacity to fulfil them, about the importance of decisions and achievements in history and about their final insignificance.¹⁹

If his critique of Augustine lends additional immediacy to the importance of humility, Niebuhr's understanding of the Atonement establishes the significance of humility within the heart of his theology.

¹⁸ Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 132.

¹⁹ *Destiny*, 220. Kenneth Durkin asserts that the Atonement is key to interpreting *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and, indeed, Niebuhr's understanding of "nature, life, and history." *Reinhold Niebuhr* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1989), 101.

The Atonement and Christian Humility in Niebuhr's Prophetic Faith

The significance of Niebuhr's interpretation of the Atonement requires some attention to the role of "myth" in his theology. My intent here is not to present a comprehensive analysis of Niebuhr's interpretation of myth but to establish the fundamental significance of the Atonement within his prophetic faith.²⁰ The discussion of myth in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* serves as primary source. This approach appears justified for several reasons consistent with the purpose of this dissertation. Although Niebuhr had examined the Hebrew/Christian cycle of myths in earlier works, most explicitly in *Beyond Tragedy*, his "mature" interpretation of myth, as reflected in his work during the 1940's and early 1950's, is presented in the two volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. There Niebuhr labours to show the relevance of prophetic faith, of the "Biblical view", by "demonstrating how it is capable of interpreting experience" while "refuting false interpretations of experience." In this endeavour he appropriated and applied the truths he found in Christian myth.²¹

Dennis McCann finds Niebuhr's understanding of myth central to the entire theological enterprise of prophetic faith: "Niebuhr uses the term [prophetic faith] to designate his understanding of the Christian cycle of myths, its continuity with a biblical perspective, and its relevance for effective social action...."²² Thus Christian myth provides the theological under-girding for both the personal expression of faith

²⁰ In his essay "Reinhold Niebuhr as Apologist" Alan Richardson implies that Niebuhr holds views on myth and miracles similar Bultmann's. See Kegley and Bretall, 215-228. Niebuhr replies that "I do not think that Bultmann makes a sufficient distinction between the prescientific myths and what I have elsewhere defined as the myths of permanent validity, without which it is not possible to describe the ultimate realities in conditions of the temporal world." "Intellectual Autobiography," in Kegley and Bretall, 438. Durkin finds that for Niebuhr "religious myth points to the ultimate ground and the ultimate fulfilment of existence, but because it has to express trans-historical truth in symbols and events in history it invariably falsifies history, as seen by science, to state its truth. Niebuhr adopts the Pauline expression 'As deceivers, yet true' (2 Cor. 6:8) to express this." Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 77.

²¹ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 100.

²² Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 64.

and its social implications. It is the basis for discerning Christian truth in human experience and history. Here it is important to stipulate Niebuhr's insistence that there be "constant commerce" between revelation in Christian myth and truths discerned through knowledge. As Durkin observed of Niebuhr, biblical "myths are tested by correlation with other knowledge...the truths of faith cannot be proved empirically, but they can be empirically tested."²³ This provides the point of departure for our analysis of Niebuhr's interpretation of Christian myth.

The one constant feature of Niebuhr's work is the theme that all knowledge must be situated ultimately in an ultra-rational framework. As his work developed he insisted that the primary myths of biblical religion, Creation, Fall, Atonement, and Parousia provided the substance for this ultra-rational framework ... the myths were products of experience in community but they received their power then, and continue to exercise their power now, because they relate to the deepest experience of human nature. This illumination of the deepest experience of human nature is called faith.²⁴

While Niebuhr holds the Hebrew/Christian myths of Creation, Fall, Incarnation and the Parousia in what Durkin describes as creative tension, the Atonement is always central to Niebuhr's understanding of all Christian myth.²⁵ For Niebuhr the Atonement is central to understanding the myths because "it expresses the paradoxical relationship between grace and sin, mercy and judgment ...[it] reveals the pattern which is stamped on the historical process."²⁶ Indeed, we may say that for Niebuhr the Atonement provides the lens through which Christian myths are most truly viewed and the pattern by which those truths are most faithfully expressed in the lives of Christians. While *The Nature and Destiny of Man* presents Niebuhr's most sustained attempt at a systematic theology his interpretation of the Atonement reflects his abiding concern for a relevant theology for Christian life and social responsibility. Perhaps we may say that it is through the Atonement that Niebuhr enlists the full panoply of Hebrew/Christian myth in meeting this responsibility. As

²³ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 176-177.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

his interpretation in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* reveals the Atonement is for him the ground of Christian humility and the attitudes he associates with it.

Within the Atonement Niebuhr perceives history as the revelation of divine wrath upon humanity's sinful pride and reflects upon attempts to resolve the problem of how God is to overcome the tragedy of history, i.e. how He "can cure as well as punish the sinful pride in which man inevitably involves himself."²⁷ God's wrath, according to Niebuhr, is "the world in its essential structure reacting against the sinful corruptions of that structure."²⁸ While his characteristic avoidance of precise definitions may create confusion at this point, the concept is important in his understanding of the Atonement and merits clarification. Here Durkin offers this clarifying insight:

"Wrath" is...the disintegrating process which is consequent upon the corruption of the triple harmony of self with God, self, and neighbour. The law of life of the essential structure is the law of love. Wrath is the consequence of the defiance of the law of life as love. It is the exercise of justice for the defiance of the law of life."²⁹

The resolution of this problem is found in the atoning work of Christ who reveals the relation of God's judgment to His mercy, His wrath to His forgiveness. It is evident here that for Niebuhr the historical and theological significance of the Cross event--the "symbol of the redeeming power of God in Christ"--is most fully understood through the lens of the Atonement.³⁰

Christian faith sees in the Cross of Christ the assurance that judgment is not the final word of God to man; but it does not regard the mercy of God as a forgiveness which wipes out the distinctions of good and evil in history and makes judgment meaningless. All the difficult Christian theological dogmas of atonement and justification are efforts

²⁷ *Nature*, 152.

²⁸ *Destiny*, 58.

²⁹ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

to explicate the ultimate mystery of divine wrath and mercy in its relation to man. The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself, and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life, since human life remains within the vicious circle of sinful self-glorification on every level of moral advance.³¹

Niebuhr believed that human nature attests a "general" revelation wherein human beings may perceive God as creator and judge and long for divine forgiveness and reconciliation. While these inchoate perceptions may be variously expressed, in Biblical faith vague longings are clarified and find ultimate coherence. This coherence is achieved through the "special revelation" perceived and interpreted within the history of the Jewish people. In special revelation inchoate longings become expressed in terms of gratitude, contrition, reverence, moral obligation and the longing for forgiveness.³² For Niebuhr these are attitudes of humility.

But most important is Christ's "special and distinct" revelation of the true character of God, Who by divine initiative and sacrifice "takes the consequences of His wrath and judgment upon Himself and into Himself." The assurances of divine mercy found in the Old Testament were tentative because the prophets were uncertain of how the relationship between God's judgment and his mercy was to be resolved.³³ A profound consequence of this uncertainty, observed Niebuhr, was reflected in the shaping of a Messianic hope in which the "righteous" believed that God's final revelation "must consist of His vindication of the righteous rather than in His mercy to sinners." Here is the reason that a messianic concept of the suffering servant, one who would suffer for sinners, was so offensive to the good people of Jesus' time. But in the suffering of Christ the Old Testament problem of the relationship between God's judgment and His mercy is resolved as innocent and vicarious suffering are revealed in "the very character of the divine." Here, for Christian faith is "the

³¹ *Nature*, 152-153 (Emphasis mine). For Niebuhr it follows that Christian responsibility also entails making such distinctions.

³² Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 103-4.

³³ *Destiny*, 57.

ultimate revelation of God.”³⁴

In the Atonement the true nature of mankind is also revealed. Because humanity’s true nature is free and self-transcendent, nature and history cannot provide man’s ultimate good which can be found only in faith. In prophetic faith Christ reveals the true character of God and, as the second Adam, the true character of mankind. The nature of God is revealed as love which, Niebuhr observes, “is the ultimate reality upon which the created world depends and by which it is judged...[God] is not an ‘unmoved mover’ or an undifferentiated eternity, but the vital and creative source of life and of the harmony of life with life.”³⁵ In Christ love is also revealed as the true nature of finite but free and self-transcendent humanity. Thus only the law of love provides the ultimate norm in which “free personality is united in freedom with other persons.”

The coerced unities of nature and the highly relative forms of social cohesion established by historic “laws” are inadequate as final norms of human freedom. The only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which actually transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified.³⁶

Thus for Niebuhr the true character of history is revealed in the Cross event as interpreted through the Atonement.³⁷ Here sin is revealed as so profoundly disordering that it causes even God himself to suffer. Yet it is also the supreme act of divine reconciliation in which judgment remains but “the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness.”³⁸

³⁴ *Nature*, 154. In his examination of the resources of faith for the social task Harland notes the importance of Niebuhr’s Christology. See Harland, ix-x. As with Harland, an expansive treatment of Niebuhr’s Christology is beyond my purpose here, but such a treatment is provided in Paul Lehmann’s essay, “The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Kegley and Bretall, 251-280.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁷ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 99.

³⁸ *Nature*, 159.

This doctrine of atonement and justification is the “stone which the builders rejected” and which must be made “the head of the corner.” It is an absolutely essential pre-supposition for the understanding of human nature and human history.³⁹

The Challenge of Prophetic Faith

Here sinful human nature is confirmed as the central problem of history. Humanity's estrangement from God is not the result of its creaturely limitations but of its prideful and abortive attempts to escape creaturely finitude.⁴⁰ Human attempts to avoid or compromise the Atonement's inescapable truths regarding the significance of sin simply confirm Niebuhr's understanding of its persistent and pervasive place in human nature. Mankind's rejection of this truth is yet another manifestation of sinful pride. Humanity's prideful pretension issues in vain endeavours to overcome its creaturely limitations and it is this pretension, not human finitude, that is the root of sin.⁴¹ The great task of prophetic faith is to be an "affront" to all manifestations of human self-esteem and pride.

Human history stands in contradiction to the divine will on any level of its moral and religious achievements in such a way that in any “final” judgment the righteous are proved not to be righteous. The final enigma of history is therefore not how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous, but how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome.⁴²

Only in Jesus' reinterpretation of prophetic faith is this enigma resolved.⁴³ Niebuhr finds this reinterpretation most perfectly explicated in the parable of the Last Judgment wherein the sheep are sorted from the goats. While the received prophetic

³⁹ Ibid. For a critique of Niebuhr's interpretation of history see Karl Lowith's "History and Christianity," Kegley and Bretall, 281-290.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 158.

⁴¹ *Destiny*, 26.

⁴² Ibid., 44.

⁴³ Ibid.

motif of ultimate vindication of righteousness over evil is retained, Jesus adds an astounding new dimension to prophetic faith: “The righteous are humble and do not believe themselves to be righteous” (Mt.25: 37-39). Conversely the unrighteous do not recognize their unrighteousness. Here Jesus distinguishes on the basis of who has served their fellows and who has not. Those who have served most faithfully know that even their best efforts fall short in God's judgment. Those oblivious to their obligations to others are too self-centred to recognize their sin before God. In Jesus' interpretation of the final judgment prophetic faith's distinction between good and evil is nevertheless retained:

Yet it is asserted that in the final judgment there are no righteous, i.e., in their own eyes. Jesus' conflict with Pharisaic self-righteousness is governed by the same conviction. It is the contrite publican who is “justified” before the righteous Pharisee, for “whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”⁴⁴

This insight holds great significance for Niebuhr. It affirms that human responsibility entails relative judgments regarding good and evil *in* history while humankind's relative judgments are ultimately judged by God *beyond* history. Further, it affirms that the “righteous” are always under divine judgment, perhaps doubly so when they act from the self-righteousness for which the prophets denounced ancient Israel. Thus in prophetic faith “the good are added to the mighty, noble and wise as standing particularly under the judgment of God.”⁴⁵ When the social implications of this judgment are recognized we see that this insight resides at the heart of Niebuhr's treatment and understanding of power.

A Paradox of Strength Perfected in Weakness

In Niebuhr's reference to abasement we discern the motif of the suffering servant and its significance to his understanding of humility. As the suffering servant Jesus

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁵ *Nature*, 239.

reshaped prophetic tradition in ways that brought him into lethal conflict with the religious righteous of his time. Here Niebuhr discerns the recurring motif in history that finds “the truth of Christ contending constantly against the truth as men see it.”⁴⁶ These motifs appear early in Niebuhr's writing where the suffering of Jesus reveals an essential characteristic of God's nature. This revelation illumines Niebuhr's understanding of humility: in Jesus' suffering “God's strength is made perfect in weakness.”⁴⁷

Yet he cautions lest this revelation be subject to errors of misinterpretation. In the optimistic error, i.e., for Niebuhr the interpretation of “liberal” Christianity, Christ's vicarious suffering reveals that love eventually overcomes evil; suffering love begins with the tragedy of the Cross but ends in the triumph of good over evil *in* history. The pessimistic error, on the other hand, is that suffering love points to *ultimate* victory over evil yet is “defeated and tragic” in history. But if human experience refutes the optimistic view that sin is gradually overcome in history, the tragic view leaves the question of evil *in* history unresolved:

How is the evil of history overcome? Does the power of the guilty, under which the guiltless suffer, go on indefinitely? Is history a constant repetition of the triumph of evil on the plane of the obvious and is the triumph of the good merely the inner triumph of its own assurance of being right?⁴⁸

Christ's revelation addresses these questions. He suffered *in* history but is more than simply a character *of* history because his divine nature is *above* history. In Christ God is revealed both in and above history as suffering for humanity's sin. For Niebuhr this truth of faith refutes the optimistic error in which evil and its consequences are to be gradually overcome in history. Rather, they are ultimately and finally overcome only “on the level of the eternal and the divine.” This does not abandon the field to the pessimistic view that evil is overcome only by an ultimate and indiscriminate

⁴⁶ *Destiny*, 49.

⁴⁷ *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1946), 175.

⁴⁸ *Destiny*, 47.

destruction of all human history. In Jesus' Messianism, wherein the righteous are seen as unrighteous in God's judgment and evil is overcome by His bearing of all evil, God's infinite mercy is also revealed as embracing all human history:

Just as the idea that the distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous disappears in the final judgment is implicit in the most radical prophetic analyses of history, so also the idea that God suffers in history is implicit in the whole Hebraic-prophetic idea that God is engaged and involved in history, and is not some unmoved mover, dwelling in eternal equanimity.⁴⁹

For Niebuhr the more enduring pessimism emanates from the recurring refusal of the "righteous" to accept Christ's radicalising of even this most radical of ideas: that both the righteous and the unrighteous are sinful before God, and that this sin causes even Him to suffer. Only until man comprehends the profound seriousness of sin, revealed to him in history through the suffering atonement of Christ, can God's mercy be effective. Only when the individual knows himself to be a sinner can the proper divine-human relationship be restored.⁵⁰

It is by that knowledge that man is brought to despair. Without this despair there is no possibility of the contrition which appropriates the divine forgiveness. It is in this contrition and in this appropriation of divine mercy and forgiveness that the human situation is fully understood and overcome. In this experience man understands himself in his finiteness, realizes the guilt of his efforts to escape his insufficiency and dependence and lays hold upon a power beyond himself which both completes his incompleteness and purges him of his false and vain efforts at self-completion.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The Grace of Humility

Only through grace is the contrite and humbled person brought to newness of life. This grace brings us to the new life and to the faith that God's mercy ultimately overcomes sin. Grace sustains the new life through both power ("grace in judgment") and wisdom ("knowledge into the nature of history and ethics").⁵² It expresses the freedom of divine power; as we observed in Niebuhr's critique of Augustine, the grace through which His truth is revealed and sustained cannot be appropriated by any human institution. Attempts to do so are simply another guise under which the sinful pride of finite man seeks to insinuate itself into the eternal truth that only God possesses. Yet from Niebuhr's perspective of the Atonement grace empowers the contrite and humbled Christian whose newness of life embraces the ever-expanding possibilities of human freedom and knowledge. As Durkin discerned, grace in Niebuhr's thought provides wisdom to perceive both the possibilities and limitations of human power for good. It is power "beyond human power and operative only when human powers recognize their own limits."⁵³ Such knowledge illumines the "proximate" mysteries and complexities of human experience while always pointing to "a mystery beyond itself." For Niebuhr this operation of grace places humility and its attitudes at the heart of prophetic faith.

There is, therefore, no way of understanding the ultimate problem of human existence if we are not diligent in the pursuit of proximate answers and solutions. Nor is there any way of validating the ultimate solution without constantly relating it to all proximate possibilities.⁵⁴

Grace as both wisdom and power thus illumines the obligations of the new life while recognizing the creaturely limits and incompleteness attendant upon all finite human endeavours. This confirms, from Niebuhr's perspective of the Atonement, the meaningful but fragmentary nature of human history that "points beyond itself to the

⁵² Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 101.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁵⁴ *Destiny*, 218.

judgment and mercy of God for its fulfilment.”

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement, with its paradoxical conception of the relation of the divine mercy to the divine wrath is therefore the final key to this historical interpretation. The wrath and the judgment of God are symbolic of the seriousness of history. The distinctions between good and evil are important and have ultimate significance....On the other hand the mercy of God, which strangely fulfils and yet contradicts the divine judgment, points to the incompleteness of all historic good, the corruption of evil in all historic achievements and the incompleteness of every historic system of meaning without the eternal mercy which knows how to destroy and transmute evil by taking it into itself.⁵⁵

Niebuhr's interpretation of the Atonement is thus the touchstone of his prophetic faith and the grounding of his understanding of Christian responsibility in history. It is, he wrote,

The beginning of wisdom in the sense that it contains symbolically all that the Christian faith maintains about what man ought to do and what he cannot do, about his obligations and final incapacity to fulfil them, about the importance of decisions and achievements in history and about their final insignificance.⁵⁶

Social Dimensions of the Atonement

Niebuhr's prophetic faith seeks to apply the truths of the Atonement to Christian social responsibility. As this present work attempts to demonstrate, Niebuhr was above all a practical theologian who believed that his theology must be a profound resource in humanity's daily and enduring struggles for justice. This was the defining characteristic of his prophetic vocation.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 219.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 220.

While Niebuhr cautioned against its “sacramental” usurpation by the Roman Church or any human construct, the Atonement illumines a bridge between the Christian's personal religious experience and the social relevance of that experience.⁵⁷ Articulating a faith perspective relevant to both personal and social ethics became a persistent motif in Niebuhr's prophetic calling. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* his attempt to construct a theological bridge between personal and collective ethics had produced a dualism that left a distinct taste of cynicism regarding the relevance of faith to social ethics.⁵⁸ Following *Moral Man*, however, Niebuhr continued to build his bridge. He found its essential building materials in the "paradoxical" concept of the freedom and finitude of human nature: man as both *imago Dei* and sinner. Drawing upon history and experience Niebuhr believed that the paradox of human nature comprehended in Christian myth could be discerned in human collectives. Only prophetic religion, in which humanity comprehends its sinful state before God, “can maintain the elements of decency, pity and forgiveness” necessary for social justice. It is this spiritual perspective and the attitudes that flow from it that provide ultimate political guidance for human collectives. All economic theories, political strategies and social arrangements, at best only partially just, must be judged from the spiritual perspective illumined by faith's ultimate truths.⁵⁹ This insight, according to McCann, “represents the closest thing to a religious conversion in Niebuhr's experience.”⁶⁰

His rediscovery of an authentically Christian spirituality meant that the abiding truth in myth provides guidance for public affairs as well as personal meaning. Inspired by this rediscovery, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is meant to show how finiteness and freedom, anxiety, and sin and grace are key to understanding the moral and religious situation of human societies. Just as individuals may interpret their actions in terms of these categories, so patterns of social and institutional behavior may similarly be illuminated. For in Niebuhr's

⁵⁷ McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 62.

⁵⁸ See Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, with new introduction and afterward (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 142.

⁵⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Problem of the Communist Religion,” *The World Tomorrow* 17 (July 26, 1934): 379.

⁶⁰ McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 32.

view, the problem of anxiety is just as fundamental to the soul of society as to an individual self.⁶¹

Because anxiety is a concomitant of human collectives as well as individuals, the Atonement provides an analogous key to understanding “finiteness and freedom, anxiety, and sin and grace” in their collective expressions. While cognizant of historical varieties of human experience and cultural development, Niebuhr believes that insights revealed through the Atonement provide the most comprehensive understanding of human nature in its “total environment...which includes both eternity and time.”⁶² Using an analogical approach Niebuhr finds that the egotism of human nature is expressed collectively as tyranny (wherein pride is variously expressed through power) or anarchy (wherein pride takes the form of sensuality). From the truths he believed were discerned through the Atonement Niebuhr observes that “the divine power which bears history is clarified; and, with that clarification, life and history are given their true meaning.”⁶³

As he surveyed history and examined the contemporary totalitarian alternatives of fascism and communism, Niebuhr concluded that liberal democracy provided the form of governance that most closely approached the truths revealed in prophetic faith. The dialectic between prophetic faith and experience led Niebuhr to believe that the “structural contrition” of the liberal democratic tradition “reflected the truths revealed in the myth of the Atonement.”⁶⁴ Democracy’s structural contrition is achieved through an equilibrium of social, economic and political forces that allows power sufficient to maintain a just order. Democracy’s great achievement, he observed, is its ability to “embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶³ *Destiny*, 57.

⁶⁴ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 124.

⁶⁵ *Destiny*, 278.

All communities are more or less stable or precarious harmonies of human vital capacities. They are governed by power. The power which determines the quality of the order and harmony is not merely the coercive and organizing power of government. That is only one of the two aspects of social power. The other is the balance of vitalities and forces in any given social situation. These two elements of communal life--the central organizing principle and power, and the equilibrium of power--are essential perennial aspects of community organization; and no moral or social advance can redeem society from its dependence upon these two principles.⁶⁶

While Niebuhr defended democracy he rejected attempts to sanctify it. From the perspective of prophetic faith *all* political arrangements nevertheless remain human constructs subject to the inevitable distortions of sinful human pride: all forms of government stand under God's judgment. Prophetic faith denies any human collective's pretensions to perfect justice just as it condemns complacency in the face of conflicts that threaten even limited achievements of justice. Thus Niebuhr's prophetic faith requires the pursuit of "the higher possibilities of justice within every historic situation." This commitment is discerned through the individual experience of justification by faith:

Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not regard the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice.⁶⁷

We see then that for Niebuhr the Atonement is the lens through which we discern the central truths of Christ's revelation for both personal faith and social responsibility. It reflects a humility that illumines the limits of human power yet is a power beyond human power for good in Christian responsibility. It is this grace of humility that establishes the right relationship with God which in turn orders all right human

⁶⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 294.

relationships. While our profound experience of God is an intensely personal one our new life reflects in attitudes and action the divine love at its center. This grace is at once the ground of our most profound personal experience and knowledge of God and the power that sustains and orients the redeemed life. Perhaps no writer has more ably captured the essence of Niebuhr's understanding of the supreme importance of humility in all of Christian life and responsibility than has Gordon Harland.

It is ever a gift of grace, appropriated in faith and renewed in love and obedience. Therefore when we speak of humility as one of the resources of faith for the social task, we speak not of some virtue or other but rather the social significance of the whole tonal quality of the life of faith.⁶⁸

Pride Revisited: Niebuhr's Antithetical Approach to Understanding Christian Humility

The significance of humility within Niebuhr's theology has been approached from two perspectives. In the first we found his place broadly though not uncritically within the Augustinian traditions in Christian humility. In the second we explored Niebuhr's understanding of humility in light of his interpretation of the Atonement, an interpretation that forms the core of his prophetic faith. In both discussions Christian humility is seen as the gift of grace that establishes, illumines and sustains the right ordering of all human relationships. Yet Niebuhr does not offer any precise definition of humility. As with Augustine, Niebuhr typically uses an antithetical approach in discussing the characteristics of humility and its attitudes. While the attitudes of humility and their importance glint throughout *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, for example, the word "humility" appears in the index of neither volume of this, Niebuhr's most systematic work. "Pride," however, receives numerous entries and is treated at length. If we are to fully grasp the significance and meaning of humility in Niebuhr's incidental work we must treat with its antithesis, pride, in its various guises.

⁶⁸ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 133.

Origins of Pride in Human Nature

Reflecting his study of Augustine, Niebuhr's understanding of sin as pride is integral to his assessment of human nature because it emanates from "the very centre of human personality--in the will." Neither human freedom nor finitude is sinful. Rather they characterise mankind's unique creatureliness within the creation that God pronounced good. Man's sin, rather, lies in the refusal to accept his creatureliness, in his pretension to be more than he is. Here Niebuhr encapsulates the ironical enigma of human nature: "Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is free self-determination. His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction."⁶⁹ While the essence of sin is the creature's rebellion against God there is an additional dimension of enormous consequence. In the wrong use of its freedom, humanity also rebels against its own nature. Though created individuals, human beings are social creatures whose true nature, as revealed in Christ, is love. This law of love in human nature seeks the harmony of life with life, the right ordering of all relationships. In that it reflects God's own true nature the law of love projects humanity in the image of God. But in the misuse of his freedom man desecrates his created *imago Dei* and violates the law of love, the harmony of life with life, by making himself the "center and source" of life. In the misuse of their freedom human beings sin against both the Creator and his creation.

The freedom of his spirit enables him to use the forces and processes of nature creatively; but his failure to observe the limits of his finite existence causes him to deny the forms and restraints of both nature and reason. Human self-consciousness is a high tower looking upon a large and inclusive world. It vainly imagines that it is the large world which it beholds and not a narrow tower insecurely erected amidst the shifting sands of the world.⁷⁰

From this paradox of freedom and finitude in human nature springs anxiety. Although Niebuhr notes that anxiety may spur creativity it is also humankind's "internal pre-condition of sin." Man's prideful response to anxiety is to deny his

⁶⁹ *Nature*, 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

creaturely vulnerability and claim for himself a permanence that his finite creatureliness refutes. Here creative freedom is corrupted by the “ideological taint” of the pretension that human knowledge somehow escapes human finitude.⁷¹ Here creativity and the destructive taint of pretension become fused in anxiety. Man is “anxious both to realize his unlimited possibilities and to overcome and hide the dependent and contingent character of his existence.”⁷² From its spiritual perch *above* nature humanity may assess the vicissitudes of nature and society but cannot alter its own ultimate contingency *within* nature and society. “The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities”, but Niebuhr recognises that few if any people possess the faith necessary to overcome all human anxiety.⁷³ Thus any realistic theory of human nature must understand how human beings respond to their anxiety failing this complete trust in God. Niebuhr believes that anxiety expressed through pride is humanity's basic sin. In its spiritual dimension pride corrupts man's proper relationship with God; in its moral dimension pride is the basis of social injustice.

Those who relieve the anxiety of their human condition by asserting themselves in pride require an inordinate share of life's resources to sustain their illusions of immortality and invulnerability. Their demands deprive other persons of what they need...Indeed, the demands of pride actually use persons themselves as resources, reducing them merely to instruments of the plans of others.⁷⁴

In religious terms pride is sin against God; in moral terms it is man's sin against others. In the former, sinful pride is characterized by rebellion against God or as human efforts “to usurp the place of God.” In the latter, sinful pride is characterized

⁷¹ Ibid., 194.

⁷² Ibid., 198.

⁷³ Ibid., 195.

⁷⁴ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 152. Lovin notes Niebuhr's position that sin in Biblical religion is primarily expressed as pride and self-love; he therefore gives much less attention to sin as sensuality. Niebuhr's prophetic faith is principally arrayed against “the stern moral rectitude of more recent Protestants, who quickly condemn sins of self-indulgence with no awareness whatever of the pride and self-love that elevated them to the positions of rulers and judges of other persons' lives.” Lovin, 143. Christians and the Church, he thought, are too often “enmeshed in an anachronistic puritanism which sees the sins of individuals but never the sins of society.” Fox, *Biography*, 114.

by social injustice.⁷⁵ The ego which denies God's supreme place in and above the universe "falsely makes itself the centre of existence" and "in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life."⁷⁶ Here Niebuhr underscores the relational nature of sin as it impairs the proper relationship with God and consequently with other human beings.⁷⁷ Conversely it is through the grace of humility that we come to the profound experience of God that illumines the destructiveness of prideful sin to all human relationships.

The sinfulness of the self is magnified in collective behaviour while the pride of collective pretension serves to quell individual moral qualms. Echoing a motif he treated earlier in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr marks the disparity "between the canons of ordinary morality and the accepted habits of collective and political behavior."⁷⁸ Collective behaviour exacerbates humanity's sinful will-to-power while it obscures the "true man" revealed in Christ who seeks the harmony of life with life. This is particularly manifest in the collective pride of the nation state. Awed by the state's power and symbolic majesty individuals succumb to its idolatrous pretensions to escape their own contingency. In the self-glorification of the national state human pride and pretension "reach their ultimate form and seek to break all bounds of finiteness. The nation pretends to be God."⁷⁹ National idolatry is, for Niebuhr, man's most pathetic and demonic attempt to escape his finitude: "The very essence of human sin is in it."⁸⁰

The tragedies of his own time confirmed history's continuing narrative of collective relationships disordered by human pride. While the individual is brought to the Christian life through the grace of humility Niebuhr's prophetic faith sought a theology relevant to this history and to humanity's struggle against the social

⁷⁵ *Nature*, 191.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

consequences of pride in its various guises. “What is distinctive about Niebuhr”, Harland observes, “is the power and insight with which humility is set in a wide social context...[and] how pride insinuates itself into our very desires to be humble; he also sees so clearly the significance of this for social relations.”⁸¹

Expressions of Pride in Niebuhr’s Theology

As with Augustine, Niebuhr provides no precise definition of humility. For both humility and its attitudes are antithetical to the sinful pride in human nature. Niebuhr, however, devotes considerable attention in his formal writing, most extensively in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, to the various guises in which prideful sin impedes the divine/human relationship and consequently blights all human relationships. In considering Niebuhr’s treatment of sin as pride we more fully grasp his antithetical approach to understanding the essential role of humility within his prophetic faith. That is the task to which we now turn.

In *Nature* Niebuhr distinguishes three expressions of pride and a fourth that is an inclusive expression of pride in its most “quintessential form.”⁸²

Pride of power. Here the ego’s willfulness seeks to make its finite power proof against its contingent existence: the ego “assumes its self-sufficiency and self-mastery and imagines itself secure against all vicissitudes.”⁸³ Anxious that its power is insufficient to its pretensions the ego constantly seeks to enhance its security and significance through accretions of power. The ego’s will-to-power thus makes pride its end. Whether expressed individually or collectively pride blinds the ego to its own contingency and obscures the injustice it inflicts upon others. This is the pride against which the Hebrew prophets so forcefully inveighed.⁸⁴ Pride of power

⁸¹ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 132-133.

⁸² *Nature*, 200. Niebuhr notes that these distinctions are blurred “in actual life.”

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

is also manifest by those all too aware of their limitations and insecurity. The egotism of those who lack power and are less secure seek another expression of power to overcome the weakness of which they are altogether too aware. This egotism seeks its security through comfort and material accretion. Here Niebuhr suggests that power is expressed as greed, the desire for over-abundance that attempts to mask the inescapable insecurity of finite humanity. This greed, Niebuhr observed, is the “besetting sin of a bourgeois culture.”⁸⁵

Because pride of power in each expression entails the submission of other wills, each violates human freedom and “involves the ego in injustice.”⁸⁶ In human collectives this injustice ironically engenders fear and animosity that increase the very insecurity power seeks to ameliorate. Herein is the prideful ego’s sisyphian struggle: “The more man establishes himself in power and glory, the greater is the fear of tumbling from his eminence or losing his treasure, or being discovered in his pretension.”⁸⁷

Intellectual pride. Intellectual pride, or pride of knowledge, is a second expression of egotistic will-to-power. In intellectual pride we refuse to accept or attempt to obscure the truth that all human knowledge like all human power is circumscribed by human finitude. In this expression pride we refuse to understand that what we can know cannot be separated from what we are, i.e., free but finite creatures. While humanity possesses the freedom to contemplate itself and the cosmos our knowledge never escapes the partiality of any human perspective. This “ideological” taint in human intelligence is destructive of human relationships as it ignores or denies its limited perspective. Human intelligence, Niebuhr observed, “pretends to be more than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge.”⁸⁸ Intellectual pride thus attempts to mask its finite character and self-interest by claiming universal truth that is beyond human

⁸⁵ Ibid., 203.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 207.

capability. In denying or obscuring the temporal nature of all human endeavours intellectual pride ultimately “imagines itself in complete transcendence of history.”⁸⁹

If prideful sin resides at the core of human nature, it follows that some ideological taint infects all human collectives. It is especially endemic to authoritarian and moralistic societies wherein egotistic will-to-power coalesces with intellectual pride so completely that the two create a particularly virulent expression of pride. Even as Niebuhr delivered the Gifford lectures in 1939 he witnessed this coalescence in Nazi Germany where the intellectual pretension of a learned culture was made to serve a demonic will-to-power. Niebuhr nevertheless was quick to remind his fellow-Americans and British colleagues that no culture escapes the ideological taint of intellectual pride.⁹⁰ It is this taint masks the degree to which competing cultures and ideologies are involved in the same errors for which they so vehemently oppose one another.

Moral Pride. The ideological taint of intellectual pride engenders *moral pride* that strives to “establish my ‘good’ as unconditioned moral value.” This is the self-righteous attitude that attempts to lend its partial values the authority of universal truth. Accordingly moral pride allows the self to judge itself and others by its own standards. Invariably when a morally prideful society judges itself by its own standards it declares itself good; when it judges others by these same standards it declares them evil. In moral pride mankind’s partial values become “the final righteousness and his very relative moral standards are absolute.”⁹¹ When cultural or national values are identified with God's standards moral pretension fuels the self-righteousness that condemns all non-conforming values and lends social approval and theological sanction to injustice and cruelty.

It involves us in the greatest guilt. It is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations of our fellowmen. The whole history of racial, national, religious and other social struggles is

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹⁰ *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1946), 31.

⁹¹ *Nature*, 212.

a commentary on the objective wickedness and social misery that results from self-righteousness.⁹²

Spiritual Pride. Intellectual pride and moral pride coalesce in its quintessential form as spiritual pride. Here Niebuhr finds that the ego commits the ultimate religious sin of making “the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit.”⁹³ In spiritual pride human beings claim divine sanction for their contingent and partial understanding of themselves, their society and their universe. Of supreme significance here is that in spiritual pride religion is itself perverted. It becomes the vehicle for self-glorification, individually or collectively, rather than the means through which persons seek the proper relationship with God. In the sin of spiritual pride religion ceases to express man’s search for God and becomes the “final battleground between God and man’s self-esteem.”⁹⁴

Spiritual pride profoundly corrupts collective human relationships when God is made “the exclusive ally of our contingent self.”⁹⁵ The more spiritual pride perverts religion the more religion is made to embrace false absolutes from which the most virulent expressions of self-righteousness and intolerance emerge. Even as he inveighed against totalitarianism Niebuhr insisted that no form of government or culture is immune to spiritual pride. America’s sense of particularity, that it “was called out by God to create a new humanity”, made it especially susceptible. Its particular temptation is a spiritual self-righteousness “which imagines that a man’s acceptance of ideals of justice and peace proves that it is someone else and not he who is responsible for injustice and conflict.”⁹⁶ While Niebuhr believed democratic rule was most conducive to social justice, his persistent prophetic warning to America was to avoid this and other such self-righteous illusions.⁹⁷

⁹² Ibid., 213.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 214.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 289n.

⁹⁷ John C. Bennett, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Social Ethics,” in Kegley and Bretall, 77.

We see then that in whatever its guise pride is essentially self-glorification, an idolatry of self and things of the self that radically rejects man's creaturely status before God. Here pride expressed through power, knowledge, and moral self-righteousness seen as attitudes through which we attempt to put our finite selves in the place of the infinite Creator. Again we see that the religious consequence of pride is alienation from God and that its social consequence is alienation among human beings.

The profound irony is that the pride we vainly enlist in efforts to escape creaturely finitude invariably compounds our insecurity. We reject true security grounded in the right relationship with God. Yet even as we are mired in sinful pride we sense the self-deception that the self-idolatry of a finite creature entails. Here the attitudes of humility would direct us to the transcendent source of true security. But in pride we enlist other human beings and human contracts to assuage our deep-seated doubts regarding our monstrous self-deception.⁹⁸ And here, once more, the social consequences of our pride are made manifest:

All efforts to impress our fellowmen—our vanity, our display of power or of goodness—must, therefore be regarded as revelations of the fact that sin increases the insecurity of the self by veiling its weakness with veils which may be torn aside. The self is afraid of being discovered in its nakedness behind these veils and of being recognized as the author of the veiling deceptions. Thus sin compounds the insecurity of nature with a fresh insecurity of spirit.⁹⁹

Attitudes of Humility for the Social Task

In seeking a Niebuhrian definition of humility for the social task we can confidently discern what it is *not*. Any perception of humility as indicative of weakness or passivity is inconsistent with Niebuhr's prophetic faith and the tradition of humility reflected in Augustine. This is certainly true as we consider the pattern of humility

⁹⁸ *Nature*, 219.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

that both Niebuhr and Augustine discerned in Christ who, along with Moses, is the only biblical figure described as “meek.”¹⁰⁰ Following in Christ’s pattern both Niebuhr and Augustine view humility as essential to Christian life and, through grace, a power in responsible action; its attitudes are always cast in a positive light. Yet as Lord Longford found among his political colleagues perceptions of humility are often decidedly negative. Particularly among the powerful the attitudes of humility may be perceived as weakness and irresolution in action. As Lord Longford notes some colleagues believed that humility indicates a lack self-confidence and “weakens the defence of a righteous cause.” In line with Augustine and Niebuhr Longford himself rejects such negative notions of humility. A fervent but reflective Christian Longford was a man of action for whom humility begins and ends with Christ. No “restrictive or negative understanding of humility,” he wrote, “possesses the authority of the Gospel.”¹⁰¹

It is evident that any perception of humility as indicative of weakness, passivity or irresolution is inconsistent with Niebuhr’s career, insistence on Christian responsibility, and the frequently polemical tone of his writing. “If some men conceive the resolute purpose to enslave us”, Niebuhr wrote in 1942, “nothing avails but an equally resolute purpose, armed with all available resources, to prevent the enslaver from affecting his purpose.”¹⁰²

Nor for Niebuhr does humility entail an unappreciative estimate of one’s capabilities or an attitude of self-denigration, as one of Lord Longford’s referees believed. Rather humility concerning one’s own perspective reflects the prophetic self-criticism that encourages objective self-examination before God. The attitudes of humility strengthen self-examination by allowing us to think beyond our narrow perspective; perhaps more importantly, we become aware of and seek to correct our subconsciously dishonest judgments.¹⁰³ These perspectives are provided through the

¹⁰⁰ The *Oxford Quick Reference Dictionary* defines the word meek as “humble and submissive” or “gentle.” We note particularly the linkage between humility and submissiveness, a popular perception that imputes largely negative qualities to humility.

¹⁰¹ Frank Pakenham, Earl of Longford, *Humility* (London: Collins, 1969), 60.

¹⁰² “The Christian and the War,” in *Christian Century* 59 (November 16, 1942): 6.

¹⁰³ *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 12.

continuous dialectic between experience and prayerful, revelatory insight. Here the attitudes of humility approach a God's eye perspective without the pretense of being God.

The vantage point provided by faith above the battle is precisely what motivates us to engage in the battle, and to temper the spirit in which we do our battling...it is exactly the joining of this humility and resoluteness that is the distinguishing mark of Niebuhr's thought.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

In this chapter I have undertaken to demonstrate that humility and its attitudes flow from the theology that underpins Niebuhr's prophetic faith. At the heart of Niebuhr's theology is his interpretation of the Atonement, its significance for both the individual experience of God and the attitudes that flow from that experience. For Niebuhr the Atonement provides the lens through which he views all Christian truth about the character of both God and sinful humankind. In Christ the true nature of God and man is revealed as love. But humanity's true nature and its true relationship with God is impeded by sin. In Christ the consequences of sin are revealed as so profound that they cause even the infinite God to suffer. Yet in God's humble assumption of human form in suffering the consequences of sin, the character of His love is most fully revealed.

The perfect God's judgment upon imperfect humanity remains but "the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness."¹⁰⁵ This suffering love does not eliminate His judgment of good and evil in history. But it is the source of divine grace that brings humanity to the profound experience of God in which we recognize ourselves as prideful violators of the law of love, as rebels against God and against our own true nature. Only here can we know and confess the disordering power of sin. And only here do we find the grace of humility that opens us to God's mercy and

¹⁰⁴ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 144.

¹⁰⁵ *Nature*, 159.

forgiveness and to the newness of life. Thus we can now say with Harland that for Niebuhr,

Humility is the pervasive quality of that relationship with God in which we stand before Him in the unity of our being, know and accept His judgment upon us, know and appropriate His forgiveness and seek to live in the light of that grand fact.¹⁰⁶

This definition of humility and our discussion of Niebuhr's place within the Augustinian tradition provide the foundation for discerning the attitudes of humility within Niebuhr's work. In the last chapter I characterized wisdom, self-knowledge, patience, compassion, forgiveness and responsibility as attitudes of humility within the Augustinian tradition. Toleration as an attitude of humility is included as it is clarified in Niebuhr's critique of Augustine's doctrines of the Church and grace. Here a succinct summary of the attitudes of humility we have discerned in Niebuhr's work completes the task of this chapter and prepares for the next.

Self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the first fruit of Niebuhr's humility. In a very early work Niebuhr observed that "the truly religious man does know himself as no one else does."¹⁰⁷ Truly religious persons are those who have had the profound experience of God, the gift of grace in which we see ourselves as God sees us. Here we know ourselves to be sinners yet also the forgiven and beloved creatures of a perfect Creator. This is a gift of grace that allows us to accept our finitude because we know that we are loved and redeemed by an infinite God, One who is active on our behalf in and beyond history. The humility of self-knowledge is essential to the right relationship with God that rightly orders all human relationships. As Cardinal Heenen observed to Lord Longford, "humility is essentially recognizing the truth about yourself and living accordingly."¹⁰⁸ Knowing the truth of one's self before God and living accordingly rejects any idea of humility as self-abasement. True self-

¹⁰⁶ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 133.

¹⁰⁷ *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 90.

¹⁰⁸ Pakenham, *Humility*, 20.

knowledge allows an appreciation of our gifts as further evidence of God's grace toward us as his beloved and redeemed creatures.

Wisdom. Self-knowledge points us toward true knowledge which is the wisdom of God. For Niebuhr, human wisdom is born of the profound experience of God discerned through Christ's atoning work. The wisdom of God is a possibility for us only when we humbly recognize the finitude, limits, and tainted character of our own knowledge. Through grace we access the wisdom that allows us a God's eye perspective without pretending that we *are* God. As an attitude or fruit of humility wisdom illumines righteousness while apprehending the ever-present temptations of self-righteousness. Once again the relational dimensions of humility are confirmed. For Niebuhr the grace of humility points to the "wisdom by which we deal with our fellow men, either as comrades or competitors."¹⁰⁹

Patience. In confessing our sinful and creaturely condition we recognize our common humanity before God. Patience with others who share our sinful nature is born of this recognition and reflects the humble character of Christ who, though perfect, was patient with others; a lack of patience indicates an absence of humility. Patience is an attitude of humility that must colour all our relationships but is perhaps especially required of those who possess power and exercise authority.¹¹⁰ It must be said that while Niebuhr appeals to patience as an attitude of humility, it is not always reflected in his own, more polemical writing. As we will see, amid wartime exigencies he was often enough impatient with those reacting wrongly or too slowly to events. While at times his impatience was vindicated and others not, the point is that patience as an attitude of humility discerned in context. It cannot be used as a pious mask for irresponsibility.

Toleration. Niebuhr's rejection of all human claims to absolute truth and of Augustine's doctrine of the Church are perhaps his most important critiques of Augustine. From his Reformed perspective Niebuhr rejected Augustine's belief that

¹⁰⁹ *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 16.

¹¹⁰ *Augustine Rule* 7.34.

the Church (or any human construct) possesses absolute truth or can mediate God's grace. If in the context of his own time Augustine was relatively tolerant of opposing views, Niebuhr saw in his doctrines the seeds of self-righteousness that infected both the Catholic Church and later radical reformers. Though Niebuhr had many Roman Catholic friends and colleagues whom he found personally humble and tolerant, he described the Roman Catholic Church as "collectively and officially intolerant."¹¹¹ In Niebuhr humility expressed as toleration is an essential safeguard against religious and moral self-righteousness. For him toleration is an essential attitude of humility for free and democratic societies. Yet, like patience, toleration must not be allowed to mask self-deceptive irresponsibility. All the attitudes of humility as gifts of grace illumine the point at which the tolerable becomes intolerable and action is required.

Forgiveness. Niebuhr believed that forgiveness is the "crown of Christian ethics." If God's forgiveness is at the heart Christ's atoning work it characterizes the divine/human encounter and thus informs all human relationships. Forgiveness in the humble and religious soul is the grace that militates against the fury of self-righteousness. It reflects God's true character, his wisdom and mercy. The forgiving attitude is inextricably related to each of the attitudes of humility and as it embraces them forgiveness becomes an occasion of grace, a power beyond human power for good. The forgiving spirit seeks the God's eye perspective that rejects the human absolutes that lend demonic fury to social conflict. The forgiving spirit does not pretend to be God but knows that there is a God's eye perspective in which "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags."¹¹² Forgiveness characterizes the Christian spirit in conflict.

Compassion and Responsibility. The relational dimensions of humility are discerned in each of its attitudes. For Niebuhr the biblical understanding of God's compassion and responsibility for human beings is revealed most fully in Christ's atoning work. In Christ we see God's compassion for humanity's sinful state and for all human suffering. In Christ's ministry and atoning work God's compassion is reasserted as

¹¹¹ *Destiny*, 230.

¹¹² *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 141.

he confirms His responsibility for the world and takes the consequences of sin upon himself. This divine compassion and responsibility are asserted in the self-humbling of Christ who reveals the law of love as the true nature of both God and Man. When we respond in love to God's love we know that His compassion for all human beings requires our responsibility to and for others. The grace of humility that brings us to the new life is also the power beyond our power to meet the responsibilities it entails.

As these brief treatments of humility attest, it is difficult to find in Niebuhr any characteristic of the Christian life that precludes humility. This is particularly true when the dimensional nature of humility is understood in Niebuhr's work. He discerned the signal importance of humility in his study of Augustine but in his critique of Augustine he gave increased immediacy to its importance within the complexities and relationships of contemporary social life. In proclaiming the truth of Christ Niebuhr's prophetic witness echoes Augustine's call to "convince the proud of the power and excellence of humility."

While prideful sin resides in human nature, both Niebuhr and Augustine understood that power magnifies the temptations and social consequences of sin. Niebuhr is particularly concerned with understanding the moral ambiguity of power and its use in meeting Christian social responsibility. His emphasis on pride in its various guises is particularly directed at those with power and political responsibility for social justice. In underscoring the profoundly destructiveness of human pride upon all human relationships Niebuhr proclaims the essential power of humility. In his frequent polemic against the "righteous", however, Niebuhr understood that it was first necessary to convince the proud that they are, in fact, proud. It is through the lens of humility and its attitudes that Niebuhr finds "the truth of Christ contending constantly against the truth as men see it."¹¹³

But the truth in Christ cannot be speculatively established. It is established only as men encounter God, individually and collectively, after the pattern of Christ's mediation. The creative consequences of such encounters, the humility and charity of true repentance, the

¹¹³ *Destiny*, 49.

absence of pride and pretension, must be the proofs that there has been an encounter with the only true God.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ "Intellectual Autobiography," in Kegley and Bretall, 20.

Chapter Three

Humility and Niebuhr's Christian Realism

Humility he believed, must temper, not sever, the nerve of action.¹

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I examined Augustine's significant influence upon Niebuhr's understanding of humility and his "realist" perspective on society and human nature. In the second chapter Niebuhr's understanding of the origins and significance of humility were examined in the context of his prophetic faith. Particular attention was given to Niebuhr's linkage of the individual's experience of the grace of humility and its attitudes for the Christian's social task.

In this chapter I will examine the attitudes of humility and their operation in what came to be called Niebuhr's Christian realism. Here Niebuhr is placed in the theological and political context and his realism compared with several prominent political realists who both influenced and were influenced by Niebuhr's work. Because Niebuhr's "mature" Christian realism focused on American international responsibility the primary concern is to illumine the attitudes of humility in meeting those responsibilities.

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., forward to Charles C. Brown's *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy*, new ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), vii.

Significance of Humility in Christian Realism

Niebuhr's theology fundamentally shapes his understanding of Christian responsibility. In his explication of humility born of the self's profound encounter with God we acknowledge responsibility for our sins and stand judged before the perfect Creator. Yet in this encounter we experience the divine mercy and know ourselves to be his infinitely loved and forgiven creatures. Thus humility and responsibility share their common source in Niebuhr's theology and are concomitant characteristics of the Christian's participation in God's redemptive work. This acknowledgment of responsibility for self and for others discerned in the profound encounter with God is a tenet of faith that undergirds Niebuhr's Christian realism.²

Essential to Christian responsibility is accepting the reality of sinful human nature and recognizing its consequences in collective human behaviour. It is at the conjunction of Christian responsibility and action that Harland observed, "no theme courses through the whole of Niebuhr's writing with greater strength or constancy than the theme of the social relevance of humility born of faith's encounter."³

Niebuhr's insistence upon the relevance of humility to action is evident in his earliest work. In his first published book, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1928), he wrote that the "intricate social life" of human collectives can be achieved only through the humility and love that persuades the religious person "to regard the values of his religion critically."

² Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 147. Niebuhr's idea of Christian social responsibility provides a rich vein mined by his critics, including Stanley Hauerwas who objects to its "Constantinianism." Christians concerned with social justice want "to play the game of responsibility" based upon Niebuhr's assumptions that Hauerwas cannot accept. "Having bought the Niebuhr's assumption that one can live the kingdom ethic or promote justice but not do both, Hauerwas concludes that justice 'is a bad idea for Christians.'" Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 358.

³ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 132.

Humility is therefore a spiritual grace which has value not only for its own sake but for its influence upon social problems. Traditional religions... easily fall into a pride of their own, the pride which comes from identifying the absolute standards of their inspired source with their partial achievements and inevitable compromises. But religion in its purest and unspoiled form is always productive of a spirit of humility which regards every moral achievement as but a vantage point from which new ventures of faith and life are to be initiated toward the alluring perfection which is in God.⁴

In *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (1932) Niebuhr observed that “true religion prompts to both love and humility, and the humility preserves the unselfish man from assuming he is unselfish.” In the profound encounter with God, the religious person knows how short he falls of God’s holiness; and it is in this sense that the “truly religious man does know himself as no one else does.” The animosities of social conflict are reduced through self-knowledge grounded in religious humility, Niebuhr wrote, because it deprives “the privileged classes of the moral conceit which is one of their chief weapons, as well as a principal cause of their political intransigence.”⁵

The significance of humility in what would become Niebuhr’s Christian realism developed over the following decades as he studied and experienced the operation of pride in human nature. This significance is reflected in what most likely is his ultimate understanding of Christian realism. “Let’s be clear that realism means particularly one thing,” Niebuhr observed late in 1969, “that you establish the common good not purely by unselfishness but by the restraint of selfishness. That’s realism.”⁶

⁴ Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1928), 55.

⁵ Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 90-91

⁶ Ronald H. Stone, “An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (March 17, 1969): 50, cited in Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 238.

Pride and the Inadequacy of Liberal Idealism

Just as Niebuhr's understanding of humility is shaped in part by its oppositional attitude, pride, so too his understanding of realism is shaped by what he considered its opposite, liberal idealism. During his youth, education and early ministry Niebuhr had himself been immersed in an optimistic idealism formed in the synthesis of the Social Gospel and 19th Century American liberal idealism. Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel envisaged the Kingdom of God not as a transcendent hope but as a historical possibility. In its fusion of religious and liberal idealism, Schlesinger wrote, the Social Gospel encouraged the belief that politics "could incarnate the absolute."

The laws of the Kingdom were identical with human nature and society; the Christian ethic and the commandment of love were directly applicable to social and political questions; and that Christian policies offered practical alternatives to secular policies in specific situations. Charles M. Sheldon's question, "What would Jesus do?" was considered the key which would unlock social and political perplexity⁷

While the Social Gospel provided America's liberal idealism a religious sanction the work of John Dewey shaped its "humanistic and secular rationale." Dewey believed human progress would be achieved by the application of scientific method to the political and economic aspects of society. Ignorance and prejudice were all that stood between humanity and utopia; education would remedy the former and scientific method the latter. Through education and scientific method society would eventually achieve

⁷ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," in Kegley and Bretall, 128. This appears to Robin Lovin an overly simplistic characterisation of Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel: "Rauschenbusch's call for social reconstruction that would be both Christian and scientific was far more attentive to the complexities of life in industrial society than some of his nineteenth-century predecessors." *Reinhold Niebuhr & Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5. Nor was Rauschenbusch as naïve as realists such as Schlesinger and Niebuhr characterised him: "We must not blink from the fact that idealists alone have never carried through any great social change For a definite historical victory a great truth must depend on the class which makes that truth its own and fights for it." Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 420-421.

“definitive solutions to the great political and economic issues.”⁸ Schlesinger found that the Social Gospel and Dewey’s rationalism converged to “vindicate a common attitude toward man and society—a radiant sense of optimism and hope, a conviction of the manageability of human tensions and the plasticity of human nature.”⁹

Writing in retrospect Niebuhr provided something of a caricature of the liberal idealism that he himself had largely embraced in his early life and pastorates.¹⁰

- a. Injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
- b. Civilization is becoming gradually more moral and that it is a sin to challenge the inevitability of the efficacy of gradualness.
- c. The character of individuals rather than social systems and arrangements is the guarantee of justice in society.
- d. Appeals to love, justice and good-will and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood.
- e. Goodness makes for happiness and that the increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.
- f. Wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of wars.¹¹

⁸ Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretall, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰ Kenneth Thompson, “The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Kegley and Bretall, 173. This is a salient example of what Thompson calls Niebuhr’s “normative, polemical and vague” approach to defining terms and concepts.

¹¹ “The Blindness of Liberalism,” *Radical Religion* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1936): 4.

As the callow young minister in his first pastorate Niebuhr “found that the simple idealism into which the classical faith had evaporated was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was to the complex social issues of an industrial city.”¹² It would in Niebuhr’s view prove equally irrelevant as he began to focus on America’s international responsibilities. The chief flaw of liberal idealism was its unwillingness or inability to recognize the fact of prideful human nature and its consequences for collective behaviour.

At the time Niebuhr took up his ministry at the Bethel Evangelical Church in burgeoning Detroit, the Great War that then embroiled Europe was a distant nightmare for America. For the United States, 1915 fell within an era of technical advance and cultural optimism. American technology had made possible the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, transcontinental telephone service had just been introduced, and the nation’s industrial output equalled that of Great Britain and Germany combined.¹³ There appeared to be many sound reasons for America’s optimistic idealism then, especially in Detroit where the nascent auto industry employed thousands of workers under the reputedly paternal eye of Henry Ford. Yet beneath the city’s vibrant veneer and Ford’s vaunted \$5 per day wage, pastor Niebuhr discerned the drudgery and insecurity of most industrial workers in America’s largely unregulated economy.¹⁴

We see in his mid-1920s fight to expose Ford’s pretensions several essential elements in what came to be called Niebuhr’s Christian realism. First, he recognized that the truth of any situation always requires that pretensions and idealisms be unmasked to allow the underlying reality to be examined as clearly as possible. For Niebuhr, Ford’s pretension

¹² Niebuhr, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in Kegley and Bretall, 6.

¹³ Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 24. Such was the spirit of American optimism, Brown notes, that WWI “hardly shook the sunny temper of American culture or the optimistic theology and philosophy of the Yale faculty.” *Niebuhr and His Age*, 18. Niebuhr had completed his MA at Yale in 1915.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1980), 65.

was obscured by America's liberal idealism that in reality provided "cover for power."¹⁵ Second, Niebuhr witnessed first-hand the social and moral consequences of unbridled economic power and unregulated industry; the injustices of Ford's industrial practices occurred in large measure because there was no countervailing power in the hand of labour. "Besides the brutal facts of modern industrial life," he wrote after a plant visit in 1925, "how futile are all our homiletical spoutings."¹⁶ As his understanding of pride and will-to-power in human nature developed Niebuhr became convinced that some balance of power rather than more futile pleas from the pulpit was essential to ameliorating the excesses of power itself.

Niebuhr was nevertheless deeply influenced by the Great War, particularly its aftermath of dissolution and cynicism. Despite some initial reluctance he had taken time from his pastoral duties to visit military installations, to counsel youthful recruits and to support President Wilson's wartime objective to make the world safe for democracy. In the course of doing so, as reflected in *Leaves* and elsewhere in his writing, Niebuhr pondered the incongruities of war and "how to reconcile its necessities with the Christian ethic."¹⁷ But despite his revulsion at the violence concomitant with war he rejected pacifism, seriously considered the chaplaincy himself, and was a patriotic proponent of Allied victory against his father's native Germany. It is quite possible to detect during this period an element of the stridency that prompted later critics of Niebuhr's Cold War positions to characterise him as an "apologist of power."¹⁸ Reflecting later on the nature of his early support of Wilson's idealistic war aims, Niebuhr himself later confessed that "I was more than ordinarily patriotic during the war."¹⁹

¹⁵ Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985; Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 29.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸ Bill Kellerman, "Apologist of Power: The Long Shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism," *Sojourners* 16 (March, 1987):14-20.

¹⁹ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 22.

Reflecting on Niebuhr's views and work during WWI and after we discern a willingness to acknowledge error in light of theological reflection and experience. As the spectacle of Versailles unfolded in 1919, Niebuhr observed that Wilson's idealism won him the worship of the crowd but rendered him impotent at the conference table: "They will let Wilson label the transaction if the others can determine its true import. Thus realities are exchanged for words," Niebuhr recorded in his diary.²⁰ "Wilson at Paris trusted too much in words while the "sly Clemenceau...helped by Mr. Lloyd George undermined his aims by writing into the terms of peace large reparations demanded from Germany."²¹ In 1923 he toured the structural and financial wreckage of the Ruhr Valley which France had occupied when Germany defaulted on the reparations. There he witnessed the consequences of Wilson's political naïvety and the arrogant vindictiveness of the Allies. Niebuhr, whose German relatives were among the victims of this vindictiveness, was outraged: "One would like to send every sentimental spellbinder of war days into the Ruhr. This, then, is the glorious issue for which the war was fought! I didn't know Europe in 1914, but I can't imagine that the hatred between peoples could have been worse than it is now."²²

These early experiences pre-date Niebuhr's encounter with Augustine and his analysis of sin as pride in human nature. We nevertheless discern in his Detroit experiences and his ruminations on WWI a deepening conviction that pride is somehow at the heart of all human disorder. If he had not yet developed the systematic analysis of sin and pride presented in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, his early experiences were essential prerequisites to unmasking the ideological guises of pride and its social consequences.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 20.

²¹ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 22; Niebuhr quote from "What the War Did to My Mind," *Christian Century* 45 (September 27, 1928): 1161.

²² Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 42.

Pride and the Marxist Alternative: Having and Not Having the Truth

Niebuhr's dynamic ministry at Bethel, renowned attacks on Ford, leadership in addressing Detroit's social problems, and insightful writing gained him a chair of Christian Ethics at Union Seminary in 1928. His Detroit pastorate and committed involvement with social and industrial conditions provided the foundation for his life-long understanding of America "as a nation of behavers and experiencers and not very often as theorists about their belief."²³ At Union he made it his task to identify and prophetically critique America's particular self-understanding and its social consequences. If he had appropriate concern for his paucity of scholarly theological training, his experience revealed the inadequacy of religious and secular idealisms for the task. In retrospect Niebuhr discerns pride as central to this inadequacy.

I found each with a sense of superiority over the other because it possessed, or had discarded, the Christian faith. But this contest was ironic because the viewpoints of the two communities were strikingly similar, both were obviously irrelevant to the ultimate realities, whether in terms of mankind's collective behaviour or in terms of individual man's ultimate problems.²⁴

Within the context of the Great Depression Niebuhr looked increasingly at the Marxist alternative. It appealed to Niebuhr for several reasons. For one, he found that it provided a more realistic theory and analysis of capitalism and the causes of class conflict. For another, the Marxist theory that capitalism would succumb to some great "end-of-history" catastrophe was a sobering physic to liberalism's historically insupportable view about human perfectibility and progress. Perhaps most important Niebuhr found the Marxist understanding of the power of self-interest in collective

²³ Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 (October, 1974): 336.

²⁴ Niebuhr, "Autobiography," 7.

human behaviour a far more more effective tool for social change than liberalism's appeals to "sentimental idealism."²⁵

Yet Niebuhr came to see that Marxism shared the basic flaw of secular and religious liberal idealism. This flaw was another expression of human pride. If religious and secular liberal idealisms preached humanity's eventual perfection in history, Marxism proclaimed the Kingdom of God in history and saw in the Soviet Union "the incarnation of the absolutes."²⁶ Both liberal and Marxist idealisms, in Niebuhr's estimate, attempted to transform contingent and finite systems of thought into universal and absolute truths. Just as Christian moralists made the Sermon on the Mount absolute to social ethics, Communists elevated Marxist theory to an equally absolute social ethic. "The pathos of Marxian spirituality," Niebuhr wrote, "is that it sees the qualified and determined character of all types of spirituality except its own."²⁷

Niebuhr's critique of Marxism reflects his view that pride resides at the heart of human nature and is magnified in collective behaviour. The Marxist view that human nature "would be transfigured with the withering away of the state" was for Niebuhr "a pathetic illusion."²⁸ Schlesinger observed that for Niebuhr the reality of Soviet Communism confirmed his view that no social system or idealism could essentially change the prideful will-to-power of human nature.

If power remained the central fact of society, and the desire for power man's ireradicable failing, then the destruction of economic privilege

²⁵ Schlesinger, "Niebuhr's Role," in Kegley and Bretall, 138. In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* Niebuhr inveighed against religious idealism in which "the law of love needed only to be stated persuasively to overcome the selfishness of the human heart." *An Interpretation*, 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation*, 76

²⁸ Thompson, "Political Philosophy," in Kegley and Bretall, 160.

could hardly be expected to alter human nature to the degree that no one thereafter would desire to make selfish use of power.²⁹

Nevertheless in his retrospective 1939 essay “Ten Years that Shook My World,” Niebuhr confirmed his belief that Marxist analysis of the relationship of economics to politics was “essentially correct” and he remained convinced that only socialism provided the balances of economic and political power necessary to address the injustices of American capitalism.³⁰ Having rejected the Marxist alternative and dismissing Roosevelt’s New Deal as “whirligig reform,” Niebuhr believed that only socialism could address the nation’s economic crisis and, as he reviewed the international scene, arrest what he feared as a possible drift toward fascism.³¹ Only gradually did he begin to accept the creative possibilities of New Deal strategies wherein “social power could best be distributed and balanced.”³² Niebuhr’s conversion from radical socialism was reluctant and perhaps grudging but he eventually embraced, albeit critically, Roosevelt’s gradualism and pragmatic method of social change.³³

Quandary of American Power and Responsibility

Niebuhr’s wavering counsels in the 1930s regarding US international responsibility reflected an abiding fear that its economic and military power would tempt America to

²⁹ Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretall, 139.

³⁰ *Christianity Century* 56, no. 17 (April, 1939): 542.

³¹ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 72.

³² Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretal, 142. . . Schlesinger believed that Niebuhr’s dismissiveness of New Deal policies in the 1930s indicated a lack of informed economic analysis. It reflected a failure of imagination in which the only economic choice was “between nationalizing everything and balancing the budget; the power and resources of fiscal policy in a capitalist economy did not figure in his calculations.” “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretall, 142. Could pride have been at work here? In the early 1930s Niebuhr was a repeatedly unsuccessful socialist candidate for public office in liberal New York City. Following one trouncing Niebuhr attributed the Socialist Party’s loss to the “inertness” of the American people who preferred Roosevelt’s gradualism to Niebuhr’s radical nationalization program. Fox, *Biography*, 136.

³³ John C. Bennett, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Social Ethics,” in Kegley and Bretall, 74.

address its problems through prideful “intransigence and defiance of world opinion.” As early as 1932 Niebuhr warned against American economic power that was not balanced by experience and skill in international affairs. He saw American foreign policy as driven by powerful commercial interests whose influence was so poorly perceived by an uninformed electorate that there was little check upon business excesses. He feared a prideful coalescence of American economic and military power devoid of any “critical attitude towards national pretensions and ambitions.”³⁴

These factors led him to counsel American detachment from the turmoil and militaristic ventures then plaguing the international landscape. He apparently hoped that European collective security would avoid major armed conflict long enough to correct the unjust social systems and economic rivalries leading to war.³⁵ As the international crises of the 1930s multiplied Niebuhr typically “criticised the self-righteousness of the League, and attacked moralistic illusions, but he did not emphasize American responsibility.”³⁶ As late as 1938, when a European war appeared certain, Niebuhr wanted the United States to stay clear of the conflict. Even Roosevelt's modest re-armament proposals drew his near-hysterical ire.³⁷

Niebuhr never lost his suspicion of American power. Yet having concluded that social justice requires a balance of power he rejected any moral absolute as an antidote to, or as an escape from, the reality of power. Thus he rejected Christian non-resistance as a moral absolute for public policy. The “moral achievement of goodwill is not a substitute for the mechanisms of social control,” he wrote. It may “perfect and purify” the individual, “but it cannot create basic justice.”³⁸ In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* he had likewise critiqued the non-violent ethic of liberal Christian theology and socialist

³⁴ Niebuhr, “The Perils of American Power,” *Atlantic Monthly* 149 (January, 1932): 95.

³⁵ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 85-86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁷ Niebuhr, “Brief Notes,” *Radical Religion* 3, no. 2 (Spring, 1938): 7.

³⁸ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation*, 111.

pacifism as absolutes for public policy.³⁹ He recognized the positive possibilities of non-violent approaches such as Gandhi's; that non-violent means reduce animosity in conflict and allow those involved "more objectivity in analysing the issues in dispute."⁴⁰ It is nevertheless necessary to recognize that non-violent strategies may be as indiscriminately destructive and unjust to the innocent as the use of coercive force. A case in point was the pacifists' call for League of Nations' economic sanctions against Japan following its 1931 attack on Manchuria. "If the League of Nations should use economic sanctions against Japan, or any other nation," Niebuhr wrote, "workmen who have the least to do with Japanese imperialism would be bound to suffer most."⁴¹

In Niebuhr's quandary over American power in the 1930s we perhaps discern his struggle to find a responsible course between two expressions of pride. Certainly he recognized the evil potential in American pride and power. Yet he recognized the operation of pride in moral absolutes that appear to offer an escape from the ambiguity and taint of power.⁴² Here Niebuhr confirms that the prideful-will-to-power residing at the core of human nature can be ameliorated socially only by some form of countervailing power. Those committed to relative justice must understand the reality of power and the necessity of its balance in some form. "The task of securing justice is a

³⁹ The book earned Niebuhr the enmity of pacifists of both persuasions. Norman Thomas, the 1932 Socialist presidential candidate, labelled Niebuhr's rejection of pacifism "defeatism," while the pacifist *Christian Century* denounced its cynicism and "unrelieved pessimism." Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 248.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 241. Henry Kissinger notes that the League lacked the necessary enforcement powers to impose even economic strictures and that no country mired in the Great Depression would willingly and unilaterally curtail trade with Japan; nor was any, including the US, willing or prepared to wage war over the matter. This episode, writes Kissinger, was the first step in the League's unraveling.: "None of the League members knew how to overcome these self-inflicted contradictions." *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Shuster; Touchstone, 1995), 286.

⁴² "It is significant, for instance, that the middle-class Church which disavows violence, even to the degree of frowning upon a strike, is usually composed of people who have enough economic and other forms of covert power to be able to dispense with the more overt forms of violence." *An Interpretation*, 114.

never-ending political task,” Harland writes of Niebuhr. “It is therefore always involved in a contest of power.”⁴³

With the Munich debacle, the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August, 1939 Niebuhr recognised that American power had a necessary role in the struggle. While he discerned very early the threat of Nazism and spoke often against the international barbarism of the 1930s, he had not “articulated a coherent policy for the US prior to WWII,” Stone observed. “His prescriptions for foreign policy had been hesitant, and he had hope that the United States would remain out of the military struggle.”⁴⁴ But along with other Christian realists Niebuhr came to see that American neutrality, which he himself had appeared to advocate earlier, coupled with a “confused pacifism,” represented “the cardinal weakness of democracy in facing the perils of tyranny.”⁴⁵ If Niebuhr had discerned the evil potential of prideful US power he saw less clearly that the failure to use power responsibly entailed still worse evil.

His prophetic faith sanctified no form of government but it did require choices between lesser and greater evils. There is no perfectionist solution to the inevitable tensions entailed in fashioning the requisite balances of power. Nor does faith remove the moral ambiguity of power. But the Christian is not thereby excused from responsibility for social justice within and among the nations. What profound faith does offer for the task are the attitudes of humility that illumine decisions and open humankind to grace that is power beyond human power for good.

⁴³ Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 51.

⁴⁴ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 91.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940; Archon Books, 1969), 46-47.

A Deficit of Clarity

Niebuhr's mature period, the era of the work and activism of Niebuhr the Christian realist, has been described as those years just preceding WWII and through the early Cold War to 1950.⁴⁶ While his realism in this period was more immediately a theological and political response to the world-wide cultural crisis of the War and its aftermath, it was not formulated to provide a policy blue-print for that or any other era: Niebuhr's Christian realism always entails a relevant faith attuned to specific context and specific consequences. His purpose, rather, was to express "the Christian faith in terms consistent with the way in which the world settles questions of truth."⁴⁷ His Christian realism attempted to provide a prophetic perspective from which America could participate in addressing those questions.

Typically perhaps, Niebuhr's definition of realism lacks what Lovin decries as "definitional specificity."⁴⁸ Niebuhr admits as much in observing that the "definitions of 'realist' and 'idealist' emphasise disposition rather than doctrines; and they are therefore bound to be inexact."⁴⁹ In *Christian Realism and Political Problems* Niebuhr struggles

⁴⁶ Dennis McCann, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional models of Practical Theology," *Journal of Religion* 58 (January, 1978): 144-45. Warren has done good service in reminding us of the "prophetic band" of Christian realists who laboured along side Niebuhr and were eclipsed by his prominence. These included Niebuhr's close Union Seminary colleagues Henry Van Dusen and John Bennett with whom he established *Christianity and Crisis* in early 1941. Like Niebuhr, these were not armchair activists. Warren cites Van Dusen's role in formulating Roosevelt's Lend-lease program. *Theologians*, 3.

⁴⁷ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 243.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3. Lovin wryly observes that Niebuhr devotes little effort to definitions, a fault that has earned Niebuhr the criticism of even close associates. Thompson, for example, critiques Niebuhr's characterization of idealism in his 1936 essay "The Blindness of Liberalism," as "inconsistent, polemical and vague." Thompson, "Political Philosophy," 173. As with Niebuhr's antithetical approach to humility, Dan Rhoades finds that Niebuhr characterizes realism by its dispositional opposite, liberal idealism. "The Prophetic Insights and Theoretical-Analytical Inadequacy of 'Christian Realism,'" *Ethics* 75, no. 1 (October, 1964): 4. Harland rather gently notes that Niebuhr's "definitions do not always possess the precision that a political philosopher desires and demands." Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 180. Niebuhr himself was less concerned than his critics about his lack of precision. See "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Kegley and Bretall, 436.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 120.

with a definition of realism that convincingly confirms Lovin's criticism.

In political and moral theory "realism" denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self interest and power. In the words of a notorious "realist," Machiavelli, the purpose of the realist is "to follow the truth of the matter rather than the imagination of it; for many have pictures of republics and principalities which have never been seen." This definition of realism implies that idealists are subject to illusions about social realities, which indeed they are. "Idealism" is, in the esteem of its proponents, characterized by loyalty to moral norms and ideals, rather than to self-interest, whether individual or collective. It is, in the opinion of its critics, characterized by a disposition to ignore or be indifferent to the forces in human life which offer resistance to universally valid ideas and norms. This disposition, to which Machiavelli refers, is general whenever men are inclined to take the moral pretensions of themselves or their fellowmen at face value; for the disposition to hide self-interest behind the façade of pretended devotion to values, transcending self-interest, is well-nigh universal.⁵⁰

Acutely aware of the lack of precision in Niebuhrian terminology, Lovin appeals to Niebuhr's dialectical method for clarification. As has been noted, the approach here is to develop concepts negatively by noting what they are not and to clarify positions by those that they reject. The depth of meaning in Niebuhr's work is most fully mined when we recognize that "his aims are synthetic, linking related ideas into a complex whole, rather than strictly delimiting the individual elements."

⁵⁰ Ibid., 119-20.

This is especially apparent in the terminology of Christian Realism itself. Niebuhr's position emerges as a complex of theological conviction, moral theory, and meditation on human nature in which the elements are mutually reinforcing, rather than systematically related. The "logic" of the biblical doctrine emerges as we carefully distinguish it from other views and come to appreciate "the adequacy of its answer for human problems which other views have obscured and confused." We understand what Christian Realism is largely by identifying what it is not.⁵¹

We cannot escape the lack of clarity and consistency of definitions in Niebuhr's work. Lovin is chiefly correct in his view that we understand what Niebuhr means by Christian realism by antithetical analysis and by an examination of its constituent elements. Here Robin Lovin's work is of significant help.

Christian Realism's Constituent Realisms

Lovin's *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* provides a recent benchmark in Niebuhrian criticism in which he analyses the constituent realisms that comprise Niebuhr's Christian realism. Here the purpose is to discern what may be seen as distinctly Christian about Niebuhr's Christian realism. Although Lovin cautions against any strict delimitation of the constituent elements in Niebuhr's Christian realism, he nevertheless finds analysis of its particular compound of realisms helpful to understanding the depth and cohesion of Niebuhr's public theology. Niebuhr's "distinctive insights come as these perspectives are drawn into a relationship in which no one of their conclusions is definitive, but from which, likewise, none can be omitted."⁵² Lovin identifies these constituent elements as political, moral and theological realisms.

⁵¹ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 3; Niebuhr quotation from *Nature*, 151.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28

Political Realism. Lovin sees Niebuhr's Christian realism as a form of political realism that takes into account self-interest, power, fear, and all the factors that underlie political decisions. Here Niebuhr's use of Marxist theory in analysing social conditions, most evident in his earlier writing, was a precursor to the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that became an essential analytical tool of liberationist theologians.⁵³ Utilizing this approach each factor is carefully weighed to determine its true impact on events rather than its position within the dominant system of values and ideals. Put differently, Niebuhr's realism entails the use of the social sciences; if Christians are to address the social and economic ills of society, they must first identify and understand their root causes. Following Marxist thought, Niebuhr believed that the realities of society, what was really going on, were reflected in the realities of economic power.⁵⁴ Because social conditions are based on the reality of power political realism holds that we cannot "rely on moral argument alone to decide on political action nor should we overestimate the power of moral suasion to determine the course of events."⁵⁵ Niebuhr's political realism, then, cannot accept the ethics of Jesus as a "simple possibility." The history of human conflict reveals the enormous void between "what the ethics of Jesus demands and any possible social organization."

The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problems of everyday human life--the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces. It has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics, nor of the necessary balances of power which exist and must exist in even the most intimate social relationships.⁵⁶

⁵³ The early liberationist theologian J. Segundo, developed a hermeneutic model which harnessed the concept of suspicion with use of the social sciences. "Everything involving ideas, including theology, is intimately bound up with the existing social situation in at least an unconscious way." *Liberation Theology* (Dublin, 1977), 8. It is perhaps ironical that later liberation theologians would turn their suspicions on Niebuhr's Christian realism as "an ideology of the establishment." See Dennis McCann's *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 129. For a summary of Niebuhr's criticisms of liberation theology, see Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 55-8.

⁵⁴ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation*, 23

Moral Realism. Nevertheless Lovin observes that Niebuhr's Christian realism reflects a moral realism which accepts that moral ideas have power and therefore political consequences because people believe in them. The perfectionism of Jesus may be called unrealistic but its social impact is nevertheless real and enduring because millions of people believe it--some may even try to live it. Analogically, while the Marxist ideals of the withering away of the state and of the classless society may have proven unrealistic Marxism was a potent 20th Century force because it embraced the hopes of the masses.⁵⁷ Thus moral idealisms may be unrealistic but nevertheless have real and profound social impact. But moral realism looks beyond the real effects of the ideal which flow from the strength of its believers. For an ideal to be realistic in Niebuhr's moral realism it must also be true irrespective of whether it is supported by the force of its believers. Thus the moral realist holds "that whether a moral statement is true or false depends on a state of affairs that exists independently of the ideas that the speaker or the speaker's community holds."

A moral claim might be true, even if nobody believes it. If, for example, the truth or falsity of a moral claim depends on what God has commanded, and God has commanded that no person be held in slavery, then slavery is wrong, even if everyone in a slave-holding society, including the slaves themselves, believes it is morally right.⁵⁸

While political realism *per se* is concerned for the tangible social effects of belief systems, the moral realist believes "that moral statements are true of the world, and not just true of our beliefs about morality."⁵⁹ Lovin readily points out, however, that there are varieties of moral realists and locates Niebuhr among those who largely embrace an *ethical naturalism*. Moral realists of this sort discern moral terms on the basis of the "natural properties of 'good' or 'bad' persons, situations, and actions." To be

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, "Marxism in Eclipse," *Spectator* 170 (June 4, 1943): 518-19.

⁵⁸ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

distinguished from ethical naturalism is *reductive naturalism* “which holds that the moral term means nothing but the natural properties.”⁶⁰ Thus while Niebuhr’s moral realism may hold that moral truths can stand independent of our particular beliefs, it does not follow that such truths have natural properties in a universe “in which there were no human beings to know and respond to them.”⁶¹

Typically, Niebuhr characterised his moral realism by distinguishing it from others and focused his attention primarily on Catholic natural law tradition. As was evident in his treatment of Augustine’s theology, Niebuhr’s analysis of this tradition is decidedly informed by his Reformed perspective regarding human freedom. As a result, Lovin observes, perhaps Niebuhr did not recognize the degree to which his Christian realism shared in the chief premises of the natural law tradition: that right action conforms to human nature; that the action of the good person encourages rather than defeats human capacities; and that the good person strives to maximise human potential while maintaining realistic expectations regarding its possible achievement. But while recognising here that individual morality must conform to human nature, Niebuhr’s primary brief was to demonstrate that conformity to human nature informs social morality as well. Societies are morally imperiled when they ignore the requirements of human nature because “their moral systems and political institutions do not truthfully represent the possibilities and limitations of human life.”⁶²

[A] free society prospers best in a cultural, religious and moral atmosphere which encourages neither a too pessimistic nor too optimistic view of human nature. Both moral sentimentality in politics and moral pessimism encourage totalitarian regimes, the one because it encourages the opinion that it is not necessary to check the power of government, and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁶¹ Ibid., 15.

⁶² Ibid., 17

the second because it believes that only absolute political authority can restrain the anarchy, created by conflicting and competitive interests.⁶³

Yet Niebuhr stressed that the good in conformity with human nature does not follow the determinative cause/effect characteristics of the natural order. To be sure human beings are creatures of nature but in their spiritual freedom they transcend nature. Man shares nature's finitude and contingency, but his "essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence."⁶⁴ Human freedom inserts a troublesome wrench into the works of those who would "formulate the requirements of human nature into a determinate set of rules, goals, or virtues."⁶⁵ For Niebuhr the truly moral human existence, both personal and collective, it entails the full use of uniquely human qualities: imagination yoked with reason that reveals both life's realities and its full potential.

Theological Realism. That human beings are by their nature imaginative creatures who can envision life differently from that which they experience indicates that idealism is an inevitable element in personal and social morality. Yet Niebuhr rejected the sentimental idealism of the sort he believed characterised much of the Social Gospel movement because it proved ineffectual in addressing social realities. Following his early experiences in Detroit, moreover, his hermeneutics of suspicion was always operative regarding the liberal idealisms that mask the realities behind self-serving and self-righteous morality. Nevertheless he recognised that idealism has its origin in imaginative human nature and must therefore have an appropriate place in individual and collective moral life. Demonstrating the "the relevance of an impossible ethical ideal" was the task to which Niebuhr the moral realist turned in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*.⁶⁶ Here, Lovin observes, we encounter Niebuhr's theological realism.

⁶³ Niebuhr, forward written in 1959 to a new edition of *The Children of light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), viii, in Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 16.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature*, 297

⁶⁵ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 17.

⁶⁶ *An Interpretation*, 62-83.

The dimension of depth in the consciousness of religion creates the tension between what is and what ought to be. It bends the bow from which every arrow of moral action flies. Every truly moral act seeks to establish what ought to be because the agent feels obligated to the ideal, though historically unrealized, as being the order of life in its more essential reality. Thus the Christian believes that the ideal of love is real in the will and nature of God, even though he knows of no place in history where the ideal has been realized in its pure form. And it is because it has this reality that he feels the pull of obligation.⁶⁷

Niebuhr's theological realism posits God's infinite love as the ultimate source of unity in which human communities flourish but it does not assert that we know the specifics of what God's law of love requires. Thus to claim that the God whose law is love is real does not sanction any particular pretension to a "God's-eye point of view" of morality. Rather, for Niebuhr, "the religious conviction that such a perspective belongs to God alone may be the best way to insure that no person or group can lay a claim to it."⁶⁸ It was for this reason that Niebuhr frequently inveighed against religious self-righteousness. And it was for this reason Niebuhr insisted that the obligations of love, and the inevitable conflict among perspectives for meeting those obligations, must be discerned through the lens of Christian humility; "a humility born of the recognition that since one of us, at least, must be wrong, it may be me."⁶⁹

If in Lovin's analysis the role of humility in Niebuhr's Christian realism is implicit it is more explicit in Harland's *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, a book which won Niebuhr's rare approbation.⁷⁰ From his analysis of Niebuhr's theology and his antithetical treatment of pride Harland developed our most succinct statement of the

⁶⁷ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 4-5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁰ After Harland's book appeared in 1960 Niebuhr wrote that the "book by Harland on my thought is the best yet." Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 265.

operation of humility and its attitudes in Niebuhr's work. Harland does not solve our definitional deficit problem but his observation indicates the character and task of Christian realism.

Niebuhr is a realist, but he is also a Christian realist, that is he seeks to inquire into the political behavior of the realist who knows that he still lives and acts under a norm that transcends the realities with which he must responsibly deal. To locate and describe the character of this boundary line, against those who would completely separate the realms of politics and religion or those who would too simply identify them, has constituted a large portion of his task. But he has sought to do more: he has endeavoured to show wherein the vantage point of Christian faith illuminates the task of the political realist.⁷¹

Stance of Niebuhr's Christian Realism

In his essay "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," Kenneth Thompson discerned five characteristic stances in Niebuhr's Christian realism.⁷² A brief review of these elements provides a helpful introduction to our current task.

First, from the history of his own times Niebuhr concluded that moral absolutes such as pacifism are to be avoided in the conduct of foreign policy. Along with political realists such as Hans J. Morgenthau and George F. Kennan, Niebuhr rejected idealistic tendencies to apply some philosopher's stone to the resolution of international conflict. Like them Niebuhr rejected the meretricious appeal of moral absolutes such as pacifism and neutrality that obscure the reality of power in international politics.⁷³ To embrace moral absolutes, Niebuhr concluded, may be both futile and in the event irresponsible or

⁷¹ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 193

⁷² Thompson, "Political Philosophy," in Kegley and Bretall, 170 *passim*.

⁷³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946; Phoenix Books, 1965), 95.

irrelevant; those who seek to avoid the guilt incurred by action incur the guilt of inaction. Idealistic absolutes, he observed, “measure realities, not in terms of possible historical alternatives but by comparison with purely ideal possibilities.”⁷⁴

Second, though he had in the 1930s counseled US “aloofness” from Europe’s struggles,⁷⁵ Niebuhr came to reject the notion that America could avoid exercising political power in the international sphere. Morgenthau, whose concept of human nature was significantly shaped by Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, affirmed that the exercise of power was essential to any ordered social existence. Both accepted power politics as integral to international affairs; their political realism aimed not at eliminating power politics but at reducing its destructiveness. As Schlesinger observed, Niebuhr’s experience and analysis of human nature led him to accept conflict as both “the consequence of power” and the “antidote to it.”⁷⁶

Third, Niebuhr is disdainful of idealisms based upon some belief in human perfectibility and moral progress. Here as well Niebuhr shared Morgenthau’s realism that rejects the notion that basic human nature may be perfected by education and “moral exhortation.” Wilson’s substitution of a liberal ideal, i.e., the League of Nations, for the reality of power politics following WWI led to the next generation’s agony because it failed to acknowledge “the actual conditions of human action.”⁷⁷ Niebuhr found in

such false idealisms not merely harmless illusions which should be avoided if one is not to be disappointed, but in some cases an escape from urgent responsibilities and in other cases the source of the most destructive forms of idolatry and of cruel fanaticism.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Power Politics*, 75.

⁷⁵ “After recognizing the combination of American power and political ineptness, he counselled aloofness from the European struggles.” Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 86.

⁷⁶ Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretall, 145.

⁷⁷ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 173.

⁷⁸ Bennett, “Social Ethics,” in Kegley and Bretall, 49.

Those who espouse idealisms that assume some perfectibility of humankind will encounter either of two results. The more benign result is that those devoted exclusively to “morally right” social strategies such as pacifism render themselves irrelevant in the event. The more malignant result is that the moral absolute holds sway as political strategy and “proves horribly destructive, abolishing the necessary balances of power and unleashing potent fanaticism.” In Niebuhr’s realism, the key to resolving conflict in any given situation lies in recognising and understanding the particular factions and forces in play.⁷⁹ Idealisms and moral absolutes as the basis for action skew analysis, understanding and expectations.

Fourth, Niebuhr’s realism requires the study and interpretation of history. If he lacked the skill and precision of a trained historian, he more than most social critics and philosophers reflected a critical historical awareness.⁸⁰ This characteristic appears essential to Niebuhr’s ability to read the signs of his own times.

Fifth, as expressed in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr is convinced that understanding the prideful core of human nature is essential to any realistic understanding of collective behaviour. His critique of liberal idealisms, Marxism, pacifism, and world-government idealism all reflect his Christian understanding of sinful human pride.⁸¹ Prideful human nature is the “rock-bottom problem” that Christian realism addresses and is the test of Christian realism’s adequacy as a public theology.

While Thompson does not probe Niebuhr’s understanding of humility he obliquely recognizes its role in the application of Niebuhr’s realism to international relations.

⁷⁹ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 6.

⁸⁰ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 138.

⁸¹ Bennett, “Social Ethics,” in Kegley and Bretall, 49.

We have a right to ask of our national leaders a kind of cosmic humility regarding the moral actions of states. If realism strives to guard against over-rating the influence of moral principles upon politics, it does so because this humility is so frequently the missing factor.⁸²

It is the missing factor of humility that Niebuhr's Christian realism always brings to the table of political decision-making. Regarding international relations Niebuhr's realism assumes a bottom-line of national self-interest and looks beyond whatever ideologies may mask self-interest: "No nation," he wrote, "is good enough to do what is right, unless its sense of duty is compounded with its sense of survival."⁸³

Niebuhr's writing, perhaps most notably his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, significantly influenced the realist school of American politics that included Hans J. Morgenthau and George F. Kennan.⁸⁴ The German émigré Morgenthau, whose 1947 book *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* bore Niebuhr's imprint, became the doyen of American political realists.⁸⁵ In 1949 the two men served on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff then led by Kennan. A distinguished diplomat, Kennan's political realism significantly shaped the US policy of Containment in the early years of the Cold War. His February 22, 1946 Long Telegram from Moscow and his subsequent anonymous article in *Foreign Affairs*, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," are benchmarks in 20th Century US diplomacy.⁸⁶ A brief analysis of Kennan's and Morgenthau's

⁸² Thompson, "Political Philosophy," in Kegley and Bretall, 174.

⁸³ Niebuhr, "Our Responsibilities in 1942," *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 24, (January 12, 1942): 1.

⁸⁴ Of this school Kenneth Thompson wrote: "Undoubtedly ... these authorities admittedly owe an important intellectual debt to the Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who as early as 1932 in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* elaborated a realistic theory of international politics. Not long ago Kennan ... identified Niebuhr as the precursor of the so-called realists or, in Kennan's words, 'the father of us all.'" "Beyond National interest: A Critical Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theory of International Politics," in *Review of Politics* 17, no. 2 (April 1955): 167-188. Fox asserts that Kennan did not recall making such a statement; that in any case it was Niebuhr's philosophical perspective and not his political judgment that he found "personally attractive." Fox, *Biography*, 238.

⁸⁵ For Niebuhr's favourable review of *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, see *Christianity and Society* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1947): 33-34.

understanding of political realism in the context of international relations illumines Niebuhr's place among the leading realists of his day. It illumines as well the distinctions between them and Niebuhr's Christian realism.

Principles of Political Realism in International Affairs

In *Politics Among Nations* Morgenthau suggests two opposed theories regarding human nature and its political implications.⁸⁷ One believes that a rational and moral order can be achieved by the application of universally valid principles. Here it is assumed that human nature is essentially good, infinitely malleable and perfectable through education and social reform; that, in short, society can change human nature. The second theory holds that the imperfections of society result from inherent forces within unchanging human nature. To improve a world characterized by conflict it is necessary to understand how the inherent forces within human nature may be used to balance and check competing interests. Looking at history the realist sees no perfection of human nature or society but "aims at the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good."⁸⁸ In the realists' theory of human nature Morgenthau discerns six principles for international affairs.⁸⁹

I. Through understanding the objective laws rooted in human nature, political realism posits a theory of political behaviour that reflects these laws. Because no theory escapes human imperfection and bias realism is tested by experience and reason. Thus realist

⁸⁶ George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), 293. Kennan writes that the telegram was intended to provide the baffled US State Department the truth regarding post-war Soviet conduct and its origins. The telegram, Kennan notes with some satisfaction, was "neatly divided like an eighteenth-century Protestant sermon, into five separate parts." Kennan was a child of the manse.

⁸⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁹ I am indebted to David E. Roberts whose paraphrase of Morgenthau's six principles informed my own. See "Hopeful Realism: A Theological Ethic of Contemporary Conflict" (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2000), 28-30.

political theory demands that the facts be known and their meaning understood through rational analysis. In international relations, realism assumes that the true character of foreign policy is understood through the interpretation of concrete political action and consequences. Beyond an examination of what statesmen do, realism requires an analysis of why they acted as they did.

We put ourselves in the position of statesmen who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which the statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances (presuming always that he acts in a rational manner)...It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics.⁹⁰

2. In international relations realism defines the national interest in terms of power. This, we may say, provides the hermeneutical stance from which political realism interprets the facts of international affairs at any given moment. Here national interest defined in terms of power is seen as autonomous sphere of action apart from economic, moral, and religious interests. While the political realist is certainly not indifferent to other spheres of interest, nor indeed to the statesman's imputed motives, all interests are evaluated through their relationship to national power.

We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears this assumption out....Thinking in terms of interest defined as power, we think as [the statesman] does, and as disinterested observers we understand his thoughts and actions perhaps better than he, the actor on the political scene, does himself.⁹¹

3. While the concept of national interest defined in terms of power is universally valid, the realist does not see "interests" as permanently fixed. Concrete action is dominated

⁹⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

by material and ideal interests, not ideas of how things might be different. But as Max Weber wrote, “these ideas have very often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests kept actions moving.”⁹² Thus the power that drives national interest may adapt to the political and cultural environment in which it is expressed. If national interests are the product of history the realist recognizes that they will change. Indeed, the realist accepts that developing technology and moral requirements may replace a world order of nation states with “larger units of a quite different character.” What the realist rejects is the notion that the transformation of the international order can be effected by idealisms that ignore political realities that reflect the prideful will-to-power in human nature.⁹³

4. Prudence is the political virtue that relates political action and moral principle. The realist knows that political action has moral implications and, indeed, insists that tension between moral command and successful political action be fully recognized. Failure to do so obscures the relevant moral and political issues by making it appear that the “stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less demanding than it actually is.” Unlike individuals, states cannot abandon responsibility for national interests and those in its care on the basis of abstract moral principles. To be applied to political action realism requires that moral principles be “filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.” Prudence, the realist holds, provides this filter.

There can be no political morality without prudence: that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence--*the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions*--to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethic judges action by its political consequences.⁹⁴

⁹² Marianne Weber, *Max Weber* (Tubingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1926), 347-48, cited in Morgenthau, 11.

⁹³ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 11-12.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 (emphasis mine).

5. Realism rejects the identification of national moral aspirations and universal moral principles. The realist may accept that all nations are subject to moral law. But the realist knows the fundamental difference between “the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one’s side.” Here, Morgenthau notes, is precisely the sin of pride against which the Biblical prophets inveighed. The realist’s concept of interest in terms of power militates against moral self-righteousness because it allows us to see our own and others’ interests.

We are able to judge other nations as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgment.⁹⁵

6. The political realist insists on the autonomy of the political sphere. Just as the economist analyzes action in terms of wealth, the lawyer in terms of the law, and the moralist in terms of moral principle, the political realist analyzes action for its effect on the nation’s power. Realism is aware of these perspectives and their relevance but will not subordinate the autonomy of politics to them. The realist always sees the national interest in terms of power and “parts company with other schools when they impose standards of thought appropriate to other spheres upon the political sphere.” Error follows when political action is not based upon national interest in terms of power and is unrelated to rationally anticipated consequences. For Morgenthau, the “legalistic-moralistic approach” to international affairs subordinates the true national interest to legal and moral requirements with often disastrous results.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 13-14. As an example of error in the legal-moralistic approach Morgenthau cites the British and French response to the Soviet invasion of Finland.

This claim to autonomy is critical to Morgenthau's political realism, particularly in his insistence that "the autonomy of the political sphere must be protected against the encroachment of the military."⁹⁷ Realism discerns that pride in its sundry guises skews objectivity and the ability to interpret the facts rationally. The moral limitation upon understanding is human pride: "pride in his intellect, pride in his goodness, pride in the collectivity with which he identifies himself as against other collectivities."⁹⁸ Intellectual pride retards our ability to learn from past mistakes and enfeebles creative thinking on immediate problems. Self-righteous pride impedes objectivity in thinking and action regarding the situation at hand and mistakes a patina of abstract moralistic principles for substantive analysis. Moreover, the embrace of idealistic principles may tempt flight from responsibilities that a realistic assessment would impose. The resultant policies may have serious and potentially catastrophic consequences.⁹⁹

Political Realism in Practice

George F. Kennan's political realism provided the foundation for the West's post- WWII policy of Containment. Unlike Morgenthau and Niebuhr, Kennan was by profession a diplomat whose famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow of February 22, 1946¹⁰⁰ and his subsequent anonymous article in *Foreign Affairs*, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," are benchmarks in 20th century US diplomatic history.¹⁰¹ Kennan's political realism, as with Morgenthau's, is articulated within the context of international relations and politics.

⁹⁷ Hans. J. Morgenthau, *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 264-265.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 268. Here Morgenthau offers Winston Churchill's realism as a corrective to American idealism during WWII. While Churchill saw WWII within the continuum of European history, and during the war itself discerned post-war Soviet objectives within that continuum, America largely viewed military victory as an end in itself. Victory was seen as the harbinger of a new and peaceful age, made safe once more for democracy; the defeat of Germany and Japan presaged "the elimination of the major political problems that faced the Western world, and what remained could safely be left to mutual good will, especially toward the Soviet Union, and to the United Nations."

¹⁰⁰ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, 293.

¹⁰¹ George F. Kennan ("X") *Foreign Affairs*, XXV, no. 4 (July, 1947): 566-82.

In formulating his political realism Kennan like Morgenthau and Niebuhr rejects moralistic idealisms as the basis of national policy. For Kennan the idealist seeks aloofness from the the exigencies of political reality while favouring policies derived from some transcendent set of values. All three thinkers see two types of idealists. The “pretentious” idealist fails to see the hypocrisy such moral claims entail and, more seriously, the self-righteousness they often engender. The “perfectionist” idealist, finding hypocrisy in the state’s claim to act in accordance with universal moral values, withdraws from, or becomes irrelevant to, political realities. In Niebuhr's fight with Henry Ford and his later split with pacifism we find his critique of both types, while Kennan and Morgenthau focus their critiques upon pretentious idealism.¹⁰²

Kennan, like Niebuhr, was a keen detector of irony in human behaviour and saw in pretentious idealism the crowning irony in the legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems.¹⁰³

Whoever says there is a law must of course be indignant against the lawbreaker and feel a moral superiority to him. And when such indignation spills over into military contest, it knows no bounds short of the reduction of the lawbreaker to the point of complete submissiveness...It is a curious thing, but it is true, that the legalistic approach to world affairs, rooted as it unquestionably is in a desire to do away with war and violence, makes violence more enduring, more terrible, and more destructive of political stability than did the older motives of national interest.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Robert C. Good, “The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr's Debate with Morgenthau and Kennan,” *Journal of Politics* 22, no. 4 (November, 1960): 602. The following discussion regarding Niebuhr, Kennan and Morgenthau reflects the insights offered in Good's essay.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1952), 100-101.

Kennan found with Niebuhr that human freedom thwarts those who seek to make history conform to their particular ideals. Befogged by their pretensions such idealists do not understand that “the greatest law of human history is its unpredictability.”¹⁰⁵ This was true of Marxist idealism as well as the liberal democratic idealisms arrayed against it in the Cold War. Such idealisms, thought Kennan, succumbed to the colossal pretension that international life could be moulded in their own image.¹⁰⁶ The statesman has the responsibility of distinguishing less and more harmful idealisms, but any realistic assessment of fact always requires that they be unmasked and not allowed to drive foreign policy. Policies based upon moral absolutes complicate immeasurably the resolution of international conflicts and promote self-righteousness that embitters relations while impeding possibilities for mutual understanding. Idealist-driven policies make it immensely difficult, if not impossible, to discern justice among competing claims. “Where is the right or the wrong of the Kashmir dispute,” Kennan asked. “And how about the conflict between the Israeli and the Arabs?”¹⁰⁷

While our conduct must conform to our own moral ideals we fall into error if we expect or oblige others to share them.¹⁰⁸ In counselling realistic policies Kennan strikes something of an Augustinian note: we must assume an attitude of the detached, non-judgemental physician in discerning the national interest:

We will have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding—and the courage to recognize that if our own purposes and undertaking here at home are decent ones, unsullied by arrogance or hostility toward other people or delusions of superiority, then the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world. *This concept is less ambitious and less inviting in its immediate prospects than those to which we have so often inclined and less pleasing to our image of ourselves. To*

¹⁰⁵ Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 92.

¹⁰⁶ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 69.

¹⁰⁷ Kennan, *Realities*, 36. Kennan raised these questions in 1954.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-9.

*many it will seem to smack of cynicism and reaction. I cannot share these doubts. Whatever is realistic in concept and founded in an endeavor to see both ourselves and others as we really are, cannot be illiberal.*¹⁰⁹

Both Kennan and Morgenthau believe that acting upon the national interest has a particular “moral dignity” of its own: “The national community is the only source of order and the only protector of minimal moral values in a world lacking order and moral consensus beyond the bounds of the national state.”¹¹⁰ Here acting upon the national interest is seen as meeting the demands of both morality and political realism.

Thus for all their insistence on a realism determined by the national interest neither Kennan nor Morgenthau are without a moral compass. Good senses in Kennan’s writing “a humility and a breadth characteristic of profound faith,” a recognition of the imperfections and creativity of human nature that is coupled with historical responsibility.¹¹¹ “In the fabric of human events,” Kennan observed, “one thing leads to another. Every mistake is in a sense the product of the mistakes that have gone before it.” Here, he thought, was the locus of a “cosmic forgiveness” for those who must assume historical responsibility. Yet in the sense that each generation’s mistakes determine those of the future, there is also a cosmic “unforgiveableness.”¹¹² Kennan’s prescription for the role of moral principle in pursuing the national interest accordingly reflects his aversion to moral absolutes in judging the moral standing of others. “No people can be the judge of another’s domestic institutions and requirements, and we have no need to be apologetic to anyone, unless it be ourselves, for the things we do and the arrangements we enforce within our own country.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 103 (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁰ Good, “The National Interest,” 605.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 611.

¹¹² Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 50.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

Given his aversion to moral absolutes in the conduct of international affairs Kennan, according to Good, has chosen “to occupy the less difficult and less dangerous position of moral relativity.”¹¹⁴ Yet we can see that Kennan’s position partially reflects the attitudes of humility discerned in Niebuhr’s prophetic faith.

To the extent that we are able to develop a social purpose in our own society, our life and our experiences will become interesting and meaningful to peoples in other parts of the world. We must remember that we are practically the only country that has been able to afford for any length of time the luxury of this experimentation with the un-inhibited flow of self-interest. Almost everywhere else, men are convinced that the answers to their problems are to be found in the acceptance of a high degree of collective responsibility and discipline. To many of them, the sight of an America in which there is visible no higher social goal than the self-enrichment of the individual, and where that self-enrichment takes place primarily in material goods and gadgets that are of doubtful utility in the achievement of the deeper satisfactions of life-this sight fails to inspire either confidence or enthusiasm. The world knows we can make automobiles and television sets and that we can distribute them, but it is looking to us for other things as well, things more relevant to the deeper needs of men everywhere.¹¹⁵

Morgenthau more explicitly than Kennan asserts that there are transcendent norms that delimit policies driven by the national interest. Such moral rules, Morgenthau wrote, “do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency. There are moral absolutes “which must be obeyed regardless of considerations of national advantage.”¹¹⁶ While he discerns what Good describes as the

¹¹⁴ Good, “The National Interest,” 611. Morgenthau the realist academic insists that the objectives of realist foreign policy are always relative and conditional. That relativist traits color the counsels of Kennan the realist diplomat would not be unexpected.

¹¹⁵ Kennan, *Realities*, 115- 16. In a 1999 interview Kennan said that, “If you think that our life here at home has meritorious aspects worth of emulation by peoples elsewhere, the best way to recommend them is, as John Quincy Adams maintained, not by preaching but by the force of example.” *New York Review of Books* 46 (August 12, 1999): 4-6.

¹¹⁶ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 213-14. Churchill had wept at the necessity of destroying the French fleet and Oran. Perhaps the British strike at Oran exemplifies “preemptive” war while Stalin’s

irremedial gap between moral ideals and the reality upon which political decisions are made, Morgenthau particularly warns the realist against the “sin of the Fascist mind,” i.e., attaching moral superiority to political and military success.¹¹⁷

What Morgenthau calls transcendent norms such as liberty serve an essential function to the realist: “the norm is not only a judgment against, but the goal of, political life—a constant, relevant, directive force.” Morgenthau attends more to norms as judgment upon rather than the goals of political action; their insights serve to promote what he calls a “cosmic humility” in accessing the morality of action.¹¹⁸ Even so, the essential cautionary note remains. “To know that states are subject to the moral law is one thing; to pretend to know what is morally required of states in a particular situation is quite another.”¹¹⁹ Here Morgenthau’s idea of the role transcendent norms in international affairs appears to reflect Niebuhr’s view that faith perspectives “illuminate but do not *prescribe* what ought to be done.”¹²⁰

Niebuhr’s Critique of a Political Realism of the National Interest

Like the two political realists, Niebuhr accepts the national self-interest as a fact of international life. He knows the perils of ignoring the national interest. Yet he sees as well the moral hazards of a too selfish devotion to the national interest and he rejects the national interest as a primary norm¹²¹

proposal at Yalta to execute 50,000 German officers describes a “preventative” war action. The distinctions are discussed in Chapter Ten.

¹¹⁷ Morgenthau, “The Escape from Power in the Western World,” *Conflicts of Power in Modern Culture, A Symposium* (New York, 1947): 8-10, cited in Good, “The National Interest,” 612.

¹¹⁸ Good, “The National Interest,” 612.

¹¹⁹ Morgenthau, “Another Great Debate,” *American Political Science Review* VII (December, 1952): 977.

¹²⁰ James F. Childress, “Niebuhr’s Realistic-Pragmatic Approach to War and the ‘Nuclear Dilemma,’ ” in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (London: Mobray, 1986), 125.

¹²¹ Good, “The National Interest,” 598.

There are modern realists...who, in their reaction to abstract and vague forms of international idealism, counsel the nation to consult only its own interests. In a sense collective self-interest is so consistent that it is superfluous to advise it. But a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests because it will fail to do justice to the broader and longer interests of other nations. A narrow national loyalty on our part, for instance, will obscure our long range interests where they are involved with those of a whole alliance of free nations.¹²²

Neither Kennan nor Morgenthau, in Niebuhr's estimate, satisfactorily discern the moral limits inherent in any policy of the national interest. Morgenthau, Niebuhr believed, was right in seeing the necessary hypocrisy of masking national interest by appeals to moral idealism; a bald appeal to national interest skirts sheer cynicism. But any nation's moral legitimacy based upon the national interest is made ambiguous "given the fact that the same power which assures order within the national community appears to guarantee disorder beyond the national community."¹²³ Here, in short, any morality of the national interest is judged in its own courts. Niebuhr only partially accepts the importance that Morgenthau attaches to political prudence. He agrees that finding concurrence between self-interest and the general interest is the object of statecraft. But prudence does not itself produce this result, Niebuhr believes, because prudence in essence applies "merely a precedural standard" to expressions of self-interest.¹²⁴ In short, prudent statesmen following their particular national interest are inclined to define the general interest too narrowly. Niebuhr insists that spiritual resources beyond political prudence are required for the highest achievements of statecraft: "The sense of justice must prevent prudence from becoming too prudential in defining interest."¹²⁵

¹²² Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 136.

¹²³ Good, "The National Interest," 605.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 606. Gabriel Fackre notes that in Niebuhr's calculation of the requirements of community, "prudence...is itself caught in the trap of self-interest and will tend to poison human relationships." *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 49.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, "Our Moral and Spiritual Resources for International Cooperation," *Social Action* 22 (February 1956): 18-19, cited in Good, "The National Interest," 606. Good suggests that "by prudence is meant circumspection and caution, the opposite of rashness and indiscretion."

Kennan's call for modesty in discerning the national interest is in Niebuhr's view valid "as far as it goes." But for Niebuhr the national interest remains an expression of innate human egotism that is inevitably magnified in collective behaviour. Human reason may serve to delimit the national interest but it cannot escape the egotism of all human nature. Modesty is after all a self-defined product of human egotism.

Egotism is not the proper cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism...The cure for a pretentious idealism, which claims to know more about the future and about other men than is given mortal man to know, is not egotism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind," derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power¹²⁶

Niebuhr's frame of reference is American national self-interest filtered through its own sense of historical particularity and wedded to unprecedented wealth and international power. While finding wisdom in Kennan's appeal to modesty Niebuhr believes a morality based upon the national interest is a thin and unavailing reed against pretension and prideful power.

Does not a nation concerned too much with its own interests define those interests so narrowly and so immediately...that the interests and securities which depend upon common devotion to principles of justice and upon established mutualities in a community of nations, are sacrificed?...*It would be fatal for the security of the nation if some loyalties beyond its interests were not operative in its moral life to prevent the national interest from being conceived in too narrow and self-defeating terms.*¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 148.

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, "The Moral Issues in International Relations," an unpublished and undated paper prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation, cited in Good, "The National interest," 605 (emphasis mine).

For Niebuhr the national interest must be illumined beyond the light shed by Morgenthau's autonomous political realism and Kennan's appeal to modesty. It is here that Niebuhr brings Christian realism's insights to bear upon determinations of the national interest. These moral and spiritual insights serve to discern a national interest that recognizes the partiality of all human perspectives and insists that the truths of faith transcend all other Christian loyalties. These are truths most fully illumined through the lens of Christian humility.

The truths perceived through the grace of humility both negate and serve the national interest. They negate the idea that the national interest represents any more than the finite, fallible, and partial perspective of all human effort. Here is the God's eye view in which "the nations are as a drop in the bucket and are counted as small dust in the balances." Only this perspective fully illumines any true national interest. It is a perspective gained through the grace of humility and applied to all human relationships. Humility allows us to transcend the insights of autonomous political realism and self-defined moderation, i.e. to see that my moderation may be your undoing.¹²⁸ Rather, the attitudes of humility illumine the possibilities of the true security that is the ultimate objective of the national interest. This true security always lies in ever greater achievements of human understanding and community. However idealistic this appears, Niebuhr the realist found that various liberal idealisms proved incapable of its achievement because they failed to understand prideful human nature. Niebuhr the Christian realist knows that political realism rightfully rejects illusions about human nature but does not escape it. If Christian realism knows there is no prescription for perfection in history it also knows that the grace of humility at once illumines and critiques responsible action.

¹²⁸ Good, "The National interest," 615.

Attitudes of Humility and the National Interest

While humility is essential to all Christian action certain of its attitudes are emphasised in Niebuhr's critique of political realism in international relations. In this context humility expressed as toleration is given significant importance in the building of community, the core requirement of true security that is the goal of the national interest. As an attitude of humility toleration is not simply accepting that others have a right to their own views. The paradoxical grace of humility is the ground of our truth and our source of confidence in it; but humility always requires that we acknowledge our finite grasp of the truth. Here humility expressed as toleration reflects the profoundly relational character of the attitudes of humility. Toleration is thus essential to inhibiting national self-righteousness and moral crusading in the conduct of international relations.

This reflects the first of two tests that Niebuhr poses for Christian toleration: the "willingness to entertain views which oppose our own without rancour and without the effort to suppress them." If he believed that modern culture has met this first test to a reasonable degree it has been less successful in meeting the second: "The ability to remain true to and to act upon our best convictions."¹²⁹ This latter test is the more stringent because it relates not to peripheral ideas but to our understanding of truths central to Christian responsibility and action. Rather the second test requires a critical and difficult balance between recognizing our fragmentary grasp of truth while avoiding complacency and irresponsibility. An absence of this balance leads to self-righteousness or perfectionism on the one hand and to complacency on the other. Christian toleration can never mask "irresponsibility and indifference towards the problem of political justice."¹³⁰ As he surveyed the domestic and global crises of his day Niebuhr came to believe that American religious and secular liberalism failed this test, often disastrously, and often enough with the best of intentions.

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 245.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

Thus toleration is essential to maintaining the precarious balance of power and interests necessary for relative justice within and among nations. It is reflected in the ideal of diplomacy that Morgenthau commends to us,¹³¹ and in this regard has its proper place in political realism's pursuit of the national interest. Christian humility regarding the partiality of our own truths does not obviate the necessity of judging among greater and lesser social evils. Nor does it obviate responsibility for acting in defence of our own truths and values. But in making and acting upon inescapable judgments, Christian humility always requires that we acknowledge the partiality of our perspectives and the potential for evil in even our own "good" action.¹³² Here, as Harland wrote, we recognise that "the righteousness of our cause, though real, is not absolute."¹³³

Niebuhr closely associates toleration with the profound importance of forgiveness in Christian responsibility.

Our toleration of truths opposed to those which we confess is an expression of the spirit of forgiveness in the realm of culture. Like all forgiveness, it is possible only if we are not too sure of our own virtue. Loyalty to the truth requires confidence in the possibility of its attainment; toleration of others requires broken confidence in the finality of our own truth.¹³⁴

Here we recognize the sinful state of all humanity, first and foremost our own. In light of our complicity in sin toleration born of humility fosters the forgiving spirit in conflict: "Mercy to the foe is possible," Niebuhr observed in this regard, "only to those who know themselves to be sinners."¹³⁵ The grace of humility expressed in Christian forgiveness reflects God's true character, wisdom and mercy. This spirit of forgiveness is thus the

¹³¹ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 531.

¹³² Niebuhr, *Pacifist*, 30.

¹³³ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 153.

¹³⁴ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 251-52.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

crown of Christian ethics because it is essential to all individual and social relationships. When we recognize that the root of social evil lies in the broken relationship with God and that forgiveness restores this fundamental relationship, we discern the restorative power of forgiveness in human collectives. “The root of forgiveness toward the foe lies not in the supposition that he did right in his own eyes,” Niebuhr observes, “but rather in the recognition of the mutuality of guilt which finally produced the explicit evil against which our anger is aroused.”¹³⁶ Here is the God’s eye perspective that transcends political realism’s appeal to prudence.

Forgiveness is a moral achievement which is possible only when morality is transcended in religion. No pure morality can bridge the gap which divides men according to their conflicting interests and their natural, racial and geographic backgrounds, because their moral idealism is conditioned by these very factors.¹³⁷

For Niebuhr, then, toleration is expressed theologically as a spiritual fruit of Christian humility and socially as an essential and practical tool in the pursuit of relative justice. In international relations it ameliorates narrow and rigid national self-interest and enables us to see, as Lovin observes, “that all people have some claims that deserve to be recognised.”¹³⁸

Pride and America’s Sense of National Particularity

While rejecting the sanctification of any political system Niebuhr believes that democracy establishes the balance between human freedom and selfishness necessary for relative social justice. This equilibrium of power within democracy avoids the extremes of tyranny and anarchy, the “Scylla and Charybdis between which the frail bark of social

¹³⁶ Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1946), 29.

¹³⁷ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation*, 137.

¹³⁸ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 245.

justice must sail.”¹³⁹ As he observed in his wartime defense of democracy the democratic process “seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the framework of order.”¹⁴⁰

Although Niebuhr’s prophetic faith validates democracy against alternative political systems, its grounding in humility militates against the pretension that democracy embodies absolute truth. This is evident in the process through which democracy reaches its particular understanding of the truth. The democratic process approaches relative social justice through balancing not destroying competing powers and interests. The equilibrium of power necessary for relative social justice in democracy is thus tenuous and requiring constant care. Democracy checks but does not destroy the political and economic forces that compete for dominance.¹⁴¹ Likewise, truths regarding social ideals such as justice are verified, affirmed and broadened through the balancing of competing truth claims. Democratic truths, though measured against universal or transcendent truths, nevertheless remain partial and finite truths.¹⁴² Christian realism requires democracy to humbly acknowledge that it produces neither absolute truth nor perfect societies. It requires, Niebuhr wrote, “a patriotic devotion which preserves a critical attitude toward national pretensions and ambitions.”¹⁴³

Niebuhr recognized that American power and sense of particularity combined to engender unconditioned loyalty to its democratic ideal. He found Americans too readily tempted make their democratic ideal a universal norm and to lend it the ultimate ends of religion. This prideful confusion diminishes the self-critical attitudes essential to any democratic equilibrium of power and reduces creativity in meeting responsibilities. In

¹³⁹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 268.

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 34.

¹⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 273.

¹⁴² Niebuhr, “What is at Stake?” *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 8 (May 19, 1941): 1-2.

¹⁴³ Niebuhr, “Perils,” 96.

short the sanctification of our democratic ideal is an expression of pride that imperils the system to which we are so profoundly attached.

Even if our democracy were more perfect than it is, and if our current notions of it were not so obviously drawn from the peculiar conditions of the world's wealthiest nation, devotion to democracy would still be false as a religion. It tempts us to identify the final meaning of life with a virtue which we possess, and thus to give a false and idolatrous religious note to the conflict between democracy and communism for instance.¹⁴⁴

Without the grace of humility we risk the partial goods of democracy and commit the sin of idolatry by substituting them for the ultimate good that is God alone. Yet there are points at which responsibility born of this same Christian humility may require us to defend partial goods, even to Lincoln's "last full measure of devotion." As we do so the grace of humility requires that we avoid the illusion that our cause embodies absolute truth. Only through the grace of humility do we discern a common humanity in the midst of terrible conflict and "call upon the mercy of God to redeem us not from the predicament of democracy but from the human predicament."¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

It was during WWII and the early Cold War that Niebuhr sought the relevance of faith to the responsibilities entailed by America's power and wealth. Although he entered this era with his theology of Christian realism largely in place, it never ceased to be refined and tested by the dialectic of experience and faith. As America's wealth and military power became determinant facts of global life, Niebuhr's Christian realism and prophetic vocation sought to make the truths of faith relevant to the realities of American power. In the crucible of WWII and the Cold War that followed relevance required that these truths

¹⁴⁴ Niebuhr, "Democracy as Religion," *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4, 1947): 1.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

of faith illumine the struggle to “construct the delicate balance of forces under which human survival and even human flourishing might be possible.”¹⁴⁶

It is difficult to find a more discerning summary of the purposes that Niebuhr would have his Christian realism serve. Illumined by faith it attends to the practical realities of the human situation while it knows that perfection lies only with God. Niebuhr’s Christian realism seeks strategies to make our imperfection and finitude serve God’s perfect and eternal purposes. Only through the perspective of humility is this possible. For Niebuhr the grace of humility is first the foundation of our proper relationship with God. It is through this grace that our lives are redeemed and reoriented. Our profound relationship with God, in turn, illumines and properly orders all other relationships. Thus in Niebuhr’s Christian realism humility is central to ordering both the spiritual and social dimensions of life. In this light, humility provides the pattern through which the requirements of Christian realism are discerned and the attitude that must always characterise its action.

Herein the sensitive compassion of the profoundly religious spirit is joined with the resolute action of the political realist and the discriminating judgements of the morally serious person. The foe remains a real foe; he must be resolutely opposed. But the temper of the struggle will be mitigated by the knowledge that the righteousness of our cause, though real, is not absolute.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 236.

¹⁴⁷ Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 134.

Part II

Case Studies in Humility: Niebuhr's Incidental Writing, 1941-1952

The Christian faith believes that God is the sovereign of history, and that all the tortuous historical processes are finally, though not simply, meaningful. It understands, as it were, the meaning of chaos. Thus it relates the objective judgments of history to the internal judgments of God. The chaos is meaningful because it represents the judgment of God upon all human pride, individual and collective, and proves the futility of all efforts to organize life with the self as the center of it, whether that self be an individual self, or the German or the Russian, or the British or the American collective self. Thus the God who visits the soul in the secret recesses of its uneasy conscience is identified by Christian faith as the same God who presides over the processes of history, before whom the nations are as a drop in the bucket and the judges of the earth are vanity.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

¹“The Christian Perspective on the World Crisis,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 7 (May 1, 1944): 4.

Chapter Four

Introducing the Case Studies on Humility in Niebuhr's Incidental Writings, 1941-1952

To love our enemies cannot mean that we must connive with their injustice. It does mean that beyond all moral distinctions in history we must know ourselves one with our enemies not only in the bonds of a common humanity but also in the bonds of a common guilt by which that humanity has been corrupted. The Christian faith must persuade us to be humble rather than self-righteous in carrying out our historic tasks. It is the humility which is the source of pity and forgiveness.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

At the heart of this dissertation is the thesis that Christian humility, as Niebuhr understood it, provides a lens through which his Christian realism should be read. Because Niebuhr believed that relevance to the human condition is the great test of his own or any theology or ethical system,² this claim necessarily asserts the political and social relevance of humility and the attitudes Niebuhr associates with it. While I have drawn principally upon Niebuhr's formal work and related secondary material to discern his understanding of Christian humility, the practical relevance of humility is most obviously found in his massive body of incidental work that addressed the issues of his day. With a few notable exceptions I have chosen incidental pieces from the decade 1942-1952 to demonstrate Niebuhr's practical, if often enough oblique, appeal to humility as that "grace" most essential to US power and responsibility during the 20th Century's most tumultuous decade.

¹ "Our Responsibilities in 1942," *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 24 (January 12, 1942): 1-2.

² Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 230.

It was during this decade that historical developments forced America to forsake decades of isolationism and to assume international responsibilities commensurate with its wealth and power. Today most Americans do not know of a world in which their nation did not play such a role. For them the debate is not whether the US has international responsibilities but where and how these responsibilities are to be met. But for Niebuhr and the Americans of his generation neither of these questions had been settled. For them WWII and the protracted Cold War forced the nation to accept international responsibilities. Niebuhr understood that this acceptance did not itself confer wisdom commensurate with American responsibility. He believed that the grace of humility born of faith is a source of such wisdom; indeed, that the attitudes of humility are essential to the responsible use of all power.

This chapter provides the context in which Niebuhr's understanding of humility and Christian responsibility is developed in his incidental work. Most of the incidental work examined is taken from the decade 1941-1952. The purpose here is not to present a substantive analysis of those events but to demonstrate the dialectic between experience and faith that marks Niebuhr's public theology. Just here we discern Niebuhr's understanding of the practical implications of humility to political power and responsibility. The case Studies are presented in the following four chapters.

Humility and International Responsibility: The Conduct of the War

Humility and International Responsibility: The US and the United Nations

Humility and International Responsibility: The Marshall Plan

Humility and International Responsibility: Democratic Self-Criticism

Pride and Irresponsible Power

"It is the illusion of strong men and nations," Niebuhr wrote in 1932, "that power is the basis of security." Though as a realist he saw the necessity of force in

maintaining relative social justice he was equally clear that history rebukes those who equate spiralling accretions of power with increased security. He understood that the egotism of human nature meant that power is inevitably self-serving. Power corrupted by egotism increasingly clouds political judgment and perverts the balance of social forces required for justice. It thereby becomes the irresponsible and unjust power rebuked by the prophetic faith whose God “knows how to ‘put down the mighty from their seats.’”³

During much of the 1930s Niebuhr feared the real and potential perils of America’s international position. Its chief peril lay in a disproportionate economic power largely uninformed by a concomitant political wisdom. A radical socialist, he believed that the American economy was dominated by businessmen and engineers whose technical competence amassed great wealth but whose pride blinded them to the social injustice entailed in the creation of that wealth.⁴ Internationally, American commercial interests disdained the patient give and take of diplomacy and sought what they perceived to be the disinterested and technical problem-solving practices they followed in the business world. Many decades before debates would rage over economic globalisation, Niebuhr perceived that political leaders and ordinary Americans too readily accepted the illusion that business efficiency “created some kind of magic solution for the perennial problem of the protection of the weak against the exactions of the strong.”⁵ Thus Niebuhr believed that American economic power, insufficiently illumined by political wisdom and abetted by the complacency of the American people, imperilled justice both at home and in the international community. Though attitudes of humility are implied here in non-theological language, Niebuhr’s words echo the message of the Biblical prophets, “challenging pride and complacency in the name of a God who calls for justice within and among nations.”⁶

³ Niebuhr, “The Perils of America Power,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 149 (January, 1932): 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 8.

What Niebuhr saw as the irresponsibility of American power was not due entirely to the prideful limitations and influence he associated with the business mind. Only with the advent of WWI, he thought, did America seek an international political presence commensurate with its power and thus was bound “to betray a novice’s lack of skill.”⁷ Living in a vast continent, unlike their British cousins, many Americans had little interest in or access to information that might help them see their country as viewed by the international community. In 1932 Niebuhr perceived that many Americans had little understanding of international economic interdependencies; almost certainly they would have been surprised to know that they were living in the economic empire Niebuhr described. While perhaps proud of their nation’s positive role in international affairs most Americans had little understanding of how American power operated at the international level and of its impact on other peoples. Nor were most politicians, sharing the general view that America’s interests generally followed commercial interests, able or courageous enough to educate their constituents on the international impact of US economic policies. “Thus,” Niebuhr wrote, “the phenomenal power of the American empire is scarcely under conscious control.”⁸ This is to say that, in Niebuhr’s view, public complacency and the prideful power of uncontested self-interest faced no countervailing power to hold economic power accountable to wider community interests, i.e., more equal social justice. These are familiar themes in his work dating from his Detroit attacks on Henry Ford, whom Niebuhr credited for educating him in “the abuses of laissez-faire capitalism.”⁹

If the average American was aware of the hostility his nation’s commercial policies created abroad Niebuhr found little support in middle America to oppose that hostility with military power. Most Americans, in Niebuhr’s estimate, were not particularly interested in impressing the world with military might. His hope in 1932 was that America would avoid the coalescence of economic and military power then enveloping Japan and Germany. By avoiding that prideful snare Niebuhr believed the

⁷ “Perils,” 92. Its importance notwithstanding this essay offers several examples of Niebuhr’s attraction to sweeping generalisations, e.g., for negotiating a settlement of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904, US President Theodore Roosevelt became the first American to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 28.

US might over time develop a political awareness commensurate with its economic power and find its responsible place in the international community. An essential component of this political sophistication entailed the responsibility to see ourselves as others see us. Reflecting his fear of an American drift toward fascism,¹⁰ Niebuhr presciently warned that, “the more our economic power is supported by military strength, the more we shall be inclined to solve our problems by intransigence and defiance of world opinion, and the more we shall multiply animosities against us in the world community.”¹¹

A prescription for avoiding this peril included the development of a strong US labour movement that, unlike America’s complicit or complacent middle classes, Niebuhr believed would provide the critical detachment required to puncture imperial pretensions. He saw the lack of intelligent labour leadership as more culpable than other American social classes in the failure to check the injustice of US economic power. This failure underscored the necessity of a “not too unqualified” national loyalty and a patriotism that “preserves a critical attitude toward national pretensions and ambitions.” Niebuhr continues:

Without this element of criticism in the life of the nation, the national pride of the man in the street is compounded with the ulterior purposes of the privileged groups which gain special advantages from their nation’s dominance in world affairs, and the resultant mixture is a national will to power which imperils the peace of the national community and destroys the security of the wilful nation by the very actions which are meant to guarantee it.¹²

Thus democratic self-criticism is for Niebuhr a social expression of the humility essential to check prideful power; without the force of critical opinion and countervailing power, unaccountable power becomes irresponsible power. Without these attitudes even the most determined programs of national security become vain and self-defeating.

¹⁰ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 72.

¹¹ “Perils,” 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96.

Yet there is a certain irony in Niebuhr's call for national humility in 1932. Doubtless most Americans felt themselves deeply humbled by the great depression and believed that their government's countervailing policies were weak and ineffectual. In the November elections they demanded a federal government willing to use its power to combat their misery. But although they demanded change they largely rejected Niebuhr's radical socialist prescriptions. Niebuhr was soundly defeated as a New York Socialist Party candidate for Congress; apparently what he called the "inert" electorate was not confined to middle America.¹³ Nevertheless if Niebuhr was peevish about his defeat it was due to more than any sense of personal rejection. As he surveyed the misery of his depression-ridden country he believed that only socialism offered any hope of addressing the nation's economic chaos while resisting a fascist alternative. He made no attempt to conceal his contempt for the laissez-faire libertarianism that characterized the American economy. Moreover he believed that US foreign policies were so driven by narrow economic interests that they endangered efforts to build international community.¹⁴ Long after America's economic recovery and emergence from isolationism Niebuhr would continue to rail against what he considered the baleful influence of US business interests on US international policy.

Another irony is that while Niebuhr feared the perils of American international power the US entered a period of isolationism. As the New Deal focused on domestic problems there was little enthusiasm for international military or economic intervention or, for that matter, cooperation. At the July, 1933 World Economic Council meeting in London President Roosevelt withdrew America from efforts to stabilize international currencies, favouring instead his own national priorities. That this action essentially crippled international efforts to fight the depression confirmed Niebuhr's estimate of American economic power. Nor is it difficult to imagine that the President was unaware of the international impact of this decision. At the same time Roosevelt slashed his military budgets and reduced further the already shrunken US Army making more unlikely the wedding of economic and military power that

¹³ Fox, *Biography*, 136.

¹⁴ "Perils," 92.

Niebuhr most dreaded.¹⁵ These signals regarding US economic non-cooperation and its intentionally enfeebled military capacity were lost on neither Nazi Germany nor Japan. Doubtless the Nazis remembered America's irresponsible retreat from its post-WWI promises to guarantee French security, and Japan the recent US failure to support international economic sanctions following the brutal occupation of Manchuria.¹⁶

A significant milestone of Niebuhrian prophecy, his 1932 essay, "The Perils of American Power," provides a succinctly critical analysis of irresponsible American power. He discerned America's innocence regarding the reach of its great economic power and its lack of understanding of the impact of that power upon other peoples. If the nation could bridle self-righteously at the idea of being an empire, all the more important that it should develop the political and the spiritual insights of humility required to use its economic power responsibly. If over time America could achieve that, its security would rest on a strong foundation that would make its military power of secondary importance. Niebuhr's chief fear in 1932 was that his nation might lack the patience for this strategy and, like Germany and Japan, seek a totalitarian solution to its economic problems.

An unmistakably prophetic note is repeatedly struck against national pride. This basic sin of human nature magnified by collective egotism fuels each of the perils Niebuhr identified with American power. He insisted that Americans disenthral themselves of the prideful view that the US could draw wealth from the world yet remain detached from its problems. Pride, he reminded his fellow citizens, feeds "the illusion of strong men and nations that power is the basis of security." Whereas selfish egotism foolishly seeks to secure freedom and wealth through ever increasing power, humility wisely counsels that true security rests in seeking a more just distribution of freedom and wealth at home and within the community of nations.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 338.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 382; 93. At the time the *Philadelphia Record* opined that "The American people don't give a hoot in a rain barrel who controls North China." In Thomas A. Bailey's *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 699. If Niebuhr was often given to generalisations he appears seldom far off the mark.

¹⁷ "Perils," 93.

Prologue to Tragedy: The Chaos of Irresponsible Power

Events of the 1930s dealt Niebuhr's prophetic analysis something of a paradoxical hand. As Roosevelt demonstrated at the World Economic Council in 1933, the depression prompted an American isolationism in which it focused on its own national economic interests. Initially, at least, American economic power would not be in the service of the world community.¹⁸ On the other hand the severe depression and related New Deal priorities required a significant reduction in military expenditures, thus reducing the immediate likelihood that there would be some coalescence of American economic and military power.¹⁹

This peril of American power at least temporarily abated, Niebuhr devoted much of the remainder of the decade to advocating domestic and international economic justice. He embraced radical socialism and feverishly supported national labour movements.²⁰ A significant connection between his radical socialism and unionism is evident in "Perils." In 1932 he believed the depression to be the death knell of capitalism and saw socialism as the only hope for a more just international economic system; for Niebuhr the question of socialism was not whether but when and how.²¹ Intelligent labour union leadership, he had observed in "Perils", is indispensable to the balance of political power necessary to achieve social justice. Thus he believed that America, and indeed all the western liberal democracies, had to achieve economic democracy if they were to maintain their political democracy against the chaos enveloping the world.²² Niebuhr accordingly regarded socialism and politically

¹⁸ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁰ From his time in Detroit Niebuhr was personally active in the US labour movement and wrote frequently on its behalf. His pro-union articles appeared frequently in what was then the flagship of liberal Protestant opinion, Charles C. Morrison's, *Christian Century*. See Brown, 25. Later the two men would break bitterly over the journal's pacifism and American responsibility in the war.

²¹ In "Thomas for President" Niebuhr strongly endorsed the Socialist Party's 1932 candidate for president. *The World Tomorrow* 15 (July, 1932): 195.

²² "Ten Years That Shook My World," 545.

intelligent unionism as essential to transcending the narrow national economic interests that threaten international cooperation and mutual security.

Though Roosevelt's New Deal strongly supported organized labour and undertook reforms to promote economic justice, Niebuhr criticised its gradualism as "whirligig" reform. As late as 1939 he continued to claim that economic justice could be achieved only at the cost of "the socialisation of property."²³ A keen observer of the international scene and frequent world traveller, Niebuhr's impatience over the pace of US economic reform was fuelled by global events. He hoped that economic reforms would strengthen the international community and promote a sense of mutual security sufficient to prevent war. Otherwise, another world war seemed certain, even if its timing was not.²⁴ Yet even as his hopes were overtaken by events, Niebuhr's fears regarding US military power continued to the end of the decade. In 1938, when German and Japanese aggression prompted Roosevelt to propose a modest increase in US defence spending, Niebuhr reacted with near hysteria: "The billion dollar defense budget of the Roosevelt administration cries to heaven as the worst piece of militarism in modern history."²⁵

It is difficult not to conclude with Stone that Niebuhr had failed to articulate "a coherent policy for the United States prior to World War II"; certainly we can agree that Niebuhr's "prescriptions for foreign policy had been hesitant."²⁶ For Niebuhr America's primary responsibility in the 1930s was to justly order its own economic house. This entailed curbing the prideful egotism he attributed to the business interests he believed drove the American foreign policies that created the injustice

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, 147.

²⁵ "Brief Notes," *Radical Religion* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1938): 7. Niebuhr's dramatic conversion following Munich and the Soviet non-aggression pact with the Nazis is reflected in his 1941 essay "Repeal the Neutrality Act." There he calls the 1939 Neutrality Act "one of the most immoral laws that was ever spread upon a federal statute book." *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 18 (October 20, 1941): 1-2; reprinted in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 177. This startling redirection of Niebuhr's hyperbolic tendencies may raise some questions regarding a lack of humility in some previous judgments.

²⁶ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 91.

and animosities recounted in “The Perils of American Power.” Thus meeting its responsibility for domestic economic democracy was requisite to finding America’s proper place within the international community. Unless this was accomplished the pride of unjust economic power would be increased by coalescence with military power. The result would be American irresponsibility within the community of nations.

Nevertheless international events eventually forced Niebuhr to confess that Roosevelt had more accurately assessed the immediate evils that threatened the world community.²⁷ While Niebuhr had inveighed against the more subtle evils inherent in uncontrolled US economic power, more overt and vicious evils appeared in the form of Nazi and Japanese militarism. To be sure he had no illusions regarding the military exploits of Japan in Manchuria, Italy in Ethiopia and Nazi Germany in the heart of Europe. He had nonetheless opposed any unilateral US intervention and thought it too late for an American entry into the League of Nations to make any significant difference.²⁸

The Munich fiasco of 1938 proved a dramatic conversion experience for Niebuhr. There France and Great Britain sought to appease Nazi Germany by stripping Czechoslovakia of the Sudetenland and its only credible defences. Ironically, Hitler had based his claim to the Sudetenland on the principles of self-determination proclaimed but often ignored at Versailles. This cynical act, Niebuhr observed, was the tragic end of liberal culture. It was the culmination of the “stupidity of Europe’s statesmen of that period,” personified by Chamberlain’s well-intentioned grovelling before the Nazi dictator.²⁹ At Versailles, in Niebuhr’s view, the prideful democratic victors shattered liberal illusions that education and science had overcome human

²⁷ Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” 144.

²⁸ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 86.

²⁹ Niebuhr, “Churchill’s Hour,” a review of Winston Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm*, in *Nation* 166, no. 26 (26 June, 1948): 720. Niebuhr usually reserved such pejorative labels for his fellow-Americans; e.g., in an essay on race legislation before Congress, Niebuhr labelled certain Southern politicians as “both stupid and reactionary.” “The Race Problem,” *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1942): 8. In the year before his death the fragile Niebuhr was abed when the then President Richard Nixon appeared on a television broadcast. “That Bastard,” he mustered. Fox, *Biography*, 290.

vindictiveness; and at Munich sentimental and irresolute liberalism imagined that the vindictive injustice of Versailles “could be expiated by a peace of capitulation.”³⁰ Both the vindictive “peace of Versailles” and the craven “peace of Munich” led to great disaster because, in Niebuhr’s view, they reflected liberal idealism’s failure to understand the egotism and pride of human nature. “I conclude that the whole of contemporary history proves that liberal culture has not seen the problem of mankind in sufficient depth to understand its own history,” he observed. “Its too simple moralism has confused issues at almost every turn.”³¹

If Munich was seen as an immediate failure of liberal European responsibility, isolationist America was not off Niebuhr’s hook. Because the idealistic Wilson was politically ineffectual at Versailles the US was complicit in the vindictive provisions that ripened Germany for Nazism. Niebuhr shared the view that the peace of Munich would have been unlikely had there not first been the peace of Versailles.³² Moreover the US, whose influence had been decisive in creating Czechoslovakia, distanced itself from the negotiations with Hitler that would decide the little nation’s fate. “The government of the United States,” President Roosevelt announced, “will assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations.”³³ When Chamberlain returned from Munich in meretricious triumph a note from the White House awaited him: “Good man,” wrote the President of the United States.³⁴ Nevertheless only four weeks after the Munich pact Roosevelt asked Congress to strengthen America’s armed forces and undertook secret plans to evade US neutrality laws in order to assist Britain and France.³⁵

The Munich disaster notwithstanding, it took the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August, 1939 to confirm Niebuhr’s acceptance that the US could no longer remain

³⁰ “Ten Years That Shook My World,” 542-543.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 542.

³² Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 314. Munich, according to Kissinger, was not a single event but “the culmination of an attitude which began in the 1920s.” The authors of Versailles had constructively ceded its “iniquitous” provisions by allowing the Germans to throw off one provision after another.

³³ *Ibid.*, 312.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 382-383.

aloof if the Western democracies were to survive. With the signing of this agreement, reached only days before the German attack on Poland, “the death watch for Europe began.”³⁶ The pact was the proximate cause of Niebuhr’s final break with Christian pacifism and his resignation from the Socialist party because of its pro-Soviet line. He finally rejected pacifism as a moral absolute because it thwarted the balance of power essential for social justice and therefore entailed irresponsibility.³⁷ Likewise, he wrote, enshrining neutrality as a political or Christian absolute offered a too “easy and vapid escape” from reality and responsibility.³⁸

Perhaps greater humility on his own part might have enabled Niebuhr to see more clearly that Roosevelt’s pragmatic New Deal was producing the balance of political power required for a more just and democratic economy.³⁹ As it was, he was late to support the New Deal, and did so initially because he had come to respect FDR’s prescience in foreign affairs.⁴⁰ In the end, however, Niebuhr humbly acknowledged that events had vindicated Roosevelt’s modest rearmament program and wrote contritely that the pragmatic president had “anticipated the perils in which we now stand more clearly than anyone else.”⁴¹ His conversion nearly complete, Niebuhr began his active support for US military assistance to the beleaguered European democracies. In late 1940 he launched *Christianity and Crisis* to promote non-pacifist Christian opinion and helped found the Union for Democratic Action, a liberal anti-communist group united in its opposition to US isolationism.⁴²

What became of Niebuhr’s great fear of a coalescence of American economic and military power? The more obvious response is that he came to recognize that US

³⁶ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 425.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Power Politics*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁹ Schlesinger, “Niebuhr’s Role,” 147.

⁴⁰ June Bingham, *The Courage to Change* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 251.

⁴¹ “Niebuhr’s Role,” 144. Endorsing Roosevelt’s candidacy in 1944 Niebuhr observed that “Roosevelt...managed to anticipate the inevitabilities of the foreign situation, which practically all other American leaders chose to defy.” “A Fourth Term for Roosevelt,” *The New Statesman and Nation* 25, no. 638 (May 15, 1943): 316.

⁴² Bingham, *Courage to Change*, 252-253.

power was essential to the survival of the western democracies. Nothing less was at stake. That evil attends all human use of power remained true, but Christians could not escape responsibility for choosing between the lesser and greater evils by claiming some moral equivalency between them. Niebuhr's acceptance that US military power was the lesser of the evil choices in this context never abated his view that American power, like all power, entailed evil consequences; mankind, he wrote, cannot "escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievement, good."⁴³

Less obvious answers to the question are also anticipated in "Perils." The egotism that disrupts all human relationships, most basically the profound relationship with God, is the same pride that corrupts all human use of power. In 1932 Niebuhr's chief concern was for the consequences of egotistic economic power to social justice and world community. In religious terms the attitudes of Christian humility provided the insights necessary to check the pride that perverted power. In secular terms he called for power to balance power, with humility expressed as critical opinion and, where necessary, through countervailing force. Without the attitudes of humility that suppress egotism power is inevitably irresponsible power in which social injustice impedes true community. If America's true security rested upon its proper place within the world community, as Niebuhr insisted, it could not be achieved by destroying American economic power.⁴⁴ Rather, America had to embrace a community of interests wider than its own economic and national concerns. This, for Niebuhr, entailed international responsibilities illumined by the spirit and attitudes of humility regarding America's place in the world.

That America discerned this place by being forced into a war for which it was desperately unprepared was itself a cause of national humility if not humiliation. "There can be no justice in the world if we resent only the injustice which is done to us," Niebuhr observed. Despite all the signs pointing to disaster an irresponsible America had failed to see it coming. "There is no escape from moral responsibility,"

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 296.

⁴⁴ "Perils," 95.

Niebuhr wrote shortly after Pearl Harbor, “and no evasion of our duty toward our neighbors in the community of nations.”⁴⁵ The war forced the nation to see that its true security lay in assuming its place within a community of mutual responsibility. Equally important for Niebuhr, America’s assumption of wartime responsibilities would assure a commensurate role in the post-war peace. And, he hoped, a “continuing loyalty to a community of free nations, faced with years of strife and decades of striving toward the goal of an ordered and just world.”⁴⁶

If Niebuhr tardily accepted that American international responsibility required the use of military power he remained suspicious of it. Power, even in the service of good, never escapes the taint of egotistic human nature. Without the attitudes of humility, power, especially great power, becomes irresponsible power. In the midst of national catastrophe Niebuhr reminded Americans of Lincoln’s sublime words calling them to the responsibility of humility.

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right; let us strive to finish the work we are in...to all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.⁴⁷

Humility and Responsible Power

“Our Responsibilities in 1942,” an essay written shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, reflects many of the major issues that would occupy Niebuhr’s incidental writing for the next decade.⁴⁸ Most are related to Niebuhr’s belief that American power entailed international responsibilities and that these must in turn shape both its self-identity and its national interests. This essay is also important in

⁴⁵ “We Are at War,” *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 23 (December 29, 1941): 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “Our Responsibilities in 1942,” 1-2.

reflecting the varying approaches Niebuhr employs in alluding to the role of humility and attitudes associated with it in the incidental work.

As Niebuhr had come to understand, American isolationism offered no escape from the international responsibilities that its wealth and power entailed. Now, as with the other world powers that had failed to transcend their own interests to create a community of common cause, the US was thrown with them into a “community of common sorrow.”⁴⁹ Niebuhr here confirms a prophetic faith that requires an acceptance of responsibility for justice in the world and rejects perfectionist interpretations of faith that encourage escape from responsibility. But if Christian faith did not allow the war to be prosecuted with an easy conscience neither did it foster the delusion that a purer Christian conscience could be had at the price of irresponsibility. Just as prophetic faith entails Christian responsibility it also offers insights and spiritual resources to illumine our decisions and bear those responsibilities with courage and patience. Contemplating the daunting challenges of war when prospects were most bleak, Niebuhr’s thoughts reflected the spirit of Lincoln’s determined humility: America’s wartime responsibilities must be met without the hatred and self-righteousness that perpetuates the vicious cycle of injustice, conflict and violence.

To love our enemies cannot mean that we must connive with their injustice. It does mean that beyond all moral distinctions of history we must know ourselves one with our enemies not only in the bonds of a common humanity but also in the bonds of a common guilt by which that humanity has become corrupted. The Christian faith must persuade us to be humble rather than self-righteous in carrying out our historic tasks. It is the humility which is the source of pity and forgiveness.⁵⁰

That Christian responsibility and Christian humility are inextricably linked became a recurring and pervasive theme in the incidental work of this period. If Niebuhr’s Christian realism seldom strayed far from the topic of power it was because he

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

insisted that power entailed responsibility. Christian humility must ever illumine Christian responsibility because power is invariably corrupted by human pride and self-righteousness. Without the grace of humility there is no Christian approach to the use of power and therefore no truly Christian expression of responsibility.

In the realist's approach of his incidental work Niebuhr is nevertheless concerned with the practical import of humility in the exercise of Christian responsibility. This does not imply that the incidental work provides a systematic blueprint for humility's role in the exercise of power; by practical is meant the application of the attitudes of humility as they illumine responsibilities and requirements of faith in any given situation. As in "Our Responsibilities in 1942," Niebuhr may refer directly to particular attitudes of humility such as forgiveness and the avoidance of self-righteousness in conflict. He may also allude to what he considers false attitudes of humility that, though perhaps well-intentioned, promote irresponsibility and terrible consequences. Moral absolutes such as pacifism, Niebuhr had concluded, often prove to be both futile and in the event irresponsible; those who seek to avoid the guilt incurred by action incur the guilt of inaction.⁵¹ In January, 1942 as he surveyed the grim responsibilities ahead Niebuhr was moved to remind Christian and socialist pacifists that hatred is not avoided nor forgiveness achieved by capitulation to evil: "To love our enemies does not mean that we must connive with their injustice."⁵² This is a false humility. Though the conscience may be soothed by sentimental expressions of faith, the failure to use available power against injustice done to others until we ourselves suffer injustice is, in Niebuhr's view, an "egoistic corruption" of responsibility.⁵³

That "Our Responsibilities in 1942" lacks the critical stridency that marks much of his incidental work over the next decade perhaps indicates contrition on Niebuhr's own part. Doubtless he recalled his enthusiastic support for US involvement in WWI and his subsequent disillusionment when Wilson failed to prevent the victorious allies, particularly France, from imposing the vindictive Treaty of Versailles on

⁵¹ *Nature*, 290n.

⁵² "Our Responsibilities in 1942," 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Germany. He had recognized that its unjust provisions engendered the hatred and resentment that create new conflict. Certainly he had seen very early the dangers posed by Nazism and Japanese militarism. Yet his radical socialist's suspicions of American economic power coupled with his low assessment of America's political acumen--a fault accentuated by US power--bred wavering counsels regarding American international responsibility. He had warned a decade earlier in "The Perils of American Power" of the animosities being created by the nation's economic power and what he saw as naïvely uncritical attitudes toward "national pretensions and ambitions."⁵⁴ The contrite note struck in "Our Responsibilities in 1942" appears to reflect his own late recognition that while all power entailed some injustice, America's failure to use power responsibly made it complicit in the greater evils that engulfed the world. Aloofness from events provided no escape from the nation's complicity in and responsibility for the world's evil:

The fact that we could not decide whether we had any responsibilities for the preservation of civilization and that our indecision was overruled by historical events ought to fill us with a sense of grateful reverence for the fact that God knows how to make the wrath of man to praise him.⁵⁵

The responsibilities of 1942 unquestionably embraced the immediate duties of waging war to America's full capacity. In this respect, Niebuhr wrote, Christian duties "are no less compatible with our faith and our loyalty to God than many other duties and responsibilities which Christians face even when the world is not at war."⁵⁶ These wartime responsibilities, like all Christian duties, must be met with resolute humility and without hatred and bitterness. In wartime the Church is called to present the truth and comfort of the Gospel to those afflicted by strife. A "community of grace and not of blood or nation," the Church in wartime must transcend conflict to be a resource for post-war reconciliation and reconstruction:

⁵⁴ "The Perils of American Power," 96.

⁵⁵ "Our Responsibilities in 1942," 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

“For as men know themselves to be united in Christ, they realize that momentary historical divisions and conflicts, however important for the moment, are not final.”⁵⁷

Thus Niebuhr insisted that planning for the post-war peace, even in the midst of the desperate and uncertain situation of 1942, was an essential and immediate wartime responsibility. Doubtless he recalled the post-war diplomatic chaos that produced the Treaty of Versailles, a vindictive precursor to the present conflict. Wilson’s inability to transform his ideals of freedom and self-determination into a realistic political blueprint for post-war order, Niebuhr believed, had been a massive failure of American responsibility. However essential its role in defeating the Axis powers, America had a concomitant responsibility in formulating politically realistic plans for the post-war order. If this responsibility were not met, he wrote, “We shall have fought the war in vain.”⁵⁸

Among the most important issues to be addressed would be the relationship between America’s sense of national sovereignty and its international responsibilities. If the prospect of alignment with the hapless League of Nations had raised isolationist hackles in libertarian America, Niebuhr the realist saw the idealistic futility of simply declaring national sovereignty incompatible with Christian ethics. Yet he insisted that some abridgement of national sovereignty would be required of all the world powers if a peaceful and reasonably just post-war order were to be achieved. He hoped that America’s wartime cooperation with the Allied powers would promote the trust essential to building the post-war community of nations. Where idealistic appeals for the abridgement of national sovereignty in the interests of international community failed, Niebuhr implies here, experience might suffice. A decade earlier he had urged Americans to find their true security through a responsible relationship within the world community. He believed in 1942 that events had shown the indispensability of mutual security. But even the realist Niebuhr acknowledged that notions of international responsibility will always reflect national self-interest: “No

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2. Niebuhr was a moving force among the largely Protestant theologians who established the World Council of Churches. See Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*, 116-131.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

nation is good enough to do what is right,” he wrote, “unless its sense of duty is compounded with its sense of survival.”⁵⁹

That post-war planning was not given the priority Niebuhr called for is a recurring motif in his wartime writing. Reading through that work we find Niebuhr denouncing idealistic calls for world government and the Allies’ wartime failures to make progress towards a realistic post-war settlement.⁶⁰ He is frequently so impatient on the issue of post-war planning that he appears oblivious to the desperate struggle to wage the war. One need not have been present in wartime Washington to know that it was engulfed by the exigencies of waging a two-front war for which an irresponsibly naïve America was unprepared. Forces had to be recruited and trained, industry retooled, rationing imposed, domestic security issues faced. War theatres had to be prioritised, command and supply arrangements sorted out with allies. During the early years of the war these frantic tasks were undertaken as Nazi and Japanese forces moved from strength to strength.

Niebuhr clearly understood the desperate situation facing the western democracies. Yet he insisted that even while under the chastisement of war we must hear God’s simultaneous call to repentance and see “the opportunities to bring forth fruits mete for repentance. Days of catastrophe are days of the Lord,” he wrote.⁶¹

Preoccupation with the immediate issues and urgencies among both statesmen and people, occasioned by the war, seems to render us incapable of lifting our eyes to the wider and more ultimate issues. But we must not succumb to this peril. Physical weariness could cost us the victory, but spiritual weariness or complacency could rob our victory of its virtue.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr’s proposals for post-war organization and his writing on US responsibility *vis à vis* the United Nations are discussed in Chapter Six.

⁶¹ “The Unity of History,” *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 7 (May 4, 1942): 2.

⁶² “Airplanes Are Not Enough,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 1 (February 7, 1944): 1-2, reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 189.

That he persevered on the issue of post-war planning reflected the opportunities he discerned through the attitudes of humility: wartime exigencies and decisions must promote the trust and mutual security essential to achieving a more just and lasting post-war agreement.⁶³ Unless America assumed a responsibility for the peace commensurate with its responsibility for waging the war, it would be tempted anew to the egotistic irresponsibility of isolationism. True post-war security would rest upon the mutual security arrangements of the international community shaped by the post-war peace. “The peace after the war must be informed by both moral purpose and political astuteness. We must not allow the cynics to make the peace. But they will dictate the peace if the idealists offer only utopian panaceas.”⁶⁴ These were the lessons of Versailles for those who would have the humility to learn them.

Although the signs of the times were grimly uncertain Niebuhr concluded his January, 1942 assessment on a humble note of prophetic encouragement:

In this, as in every great crisis in the life of men and nations, we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling and yet be grateful for the assurance that “it is God who worketh in you both to will and to do His good pleasure.”⁶⁵

Humility and Case Studies in the Incidental Work

Niebuhr’s understanding of the relationship between Christian humility and Christian responsibility developed over the two darkest decades of the 20th Century. If the theological grounding of this understanding is to be found chiefly in his formal works, the practical relevance of humility to responsibility glints throughout his prolific incidental work. Here the material requirements of Christian responsibility are discerned through a humble reading of the signs of the times. The times in 1932 were characterized by economic disaster and social injustice. In “The Perils of

⁶³ Niebuhr saw as well the wartime potential for greater racial justice for African-Americans.

⁶⁴ “Our Responsibilities in 1942,” 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

American Power” Niebuhr pronounced prophetic judgment upon the prideful and egotistic irresponsibility that had issued in the nation’s economic misery, both at home and abroad. In 1932 his Christian responsibility entailed a struggle against the prideful self-interest that engendered this misery and a duty to prevent irresponsible power being exacerbated by the inevitable temptations of military power. Yet a decade later Niebuhr wrote that “Our Responsibilities in 1942” required every resource, including American military power, to be marshalled in the cause of justice. We briefly noted events that prompted this significant change in what Niebuhr believed Christian responsibility entailed. Clearly, for Niebuhr, Christian responsibility must reflect the requirements met for social justice within its given context. What does not change is a prophetic insistence that we must “be humble rather than self-righteous in carrying out our historic tasks.”⁶⁶

Thus Christians had particular responsibilities for critiquing both the methods and the spirit in which the war was to be waged. However desperate the struggle, the war had to be conducted with a view toward the post-war order, toward the rebuilding of an international community more just and secure than the old. American responsibility entailed waging war with all its material and spiritual resources. But a failure to maintain a prophetic perspective that envisioned a more just international community beyond the war itself could doom the world to additional decades of chaos. The signs of the times, then, pointed not simply to American responsibility for the obvious exigencies of wartime but to its continuing responsibilities in shaping the nature of the peace to follow. Indeed, Niebuhr saw in these signs a “fateful significance.”

America’s coming of age coincides with that period of world history when the paramount problem is the creation of some kind of world community. The world must find a way of avoiding complete anarchy in its international life; and America must find a way of using its great power responsibly. These two needs are organically related; for the world problem cannot be solved if America does not accept its full share of responsibility in solving it.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “Our Responsibilities in 1942,” 2.

⁶⁷ “American Power and World Responsibility,” 200.

Ironically, the economic and military power that engendered American responsibility posed the greatest impediment to meeting its responsibility in building world community. Pride in its national particularity and great power distorted America's understanding of "all problems of human togetherness," Niebuhr wrote in 1943.⁶⁸ That his incidental writing seldom strays far from the topic of power reflects Christian realism's insistence upon the organic relationship between power and responsibility. For Niebuhr humility is the resource of faith that brings power into an organic relationship with Christian responsibility.

In approaching the case studies there can be no claim that humility born of faith provides a precise blueprint for Christian responsibility. Christian realism insists that the exact requirements of Christian responsibility must reflect the particular case. Rather, we seek to discern the operation of humility in illuminating these requirements in light of the overriding Christian responsibility for establishing greater justice within and among human communities. More specifically, within these case studies in Niebuhr's incidental work we examine the insights that Christian humility provides American power in meeting this responsibility within the international community.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 200-201.

Chapter Five

Humility and International Responsibility: The Conduct of War

To be in a battle means to defend a cause against its peril, to protect a nation against its enemies, to strive for truth against error, to defend justice against injustice... To be above the battle must also mean some reverent and pitying comprehension of the vastness of the catastrophe which has engulfed us all, friend and foe, and some sense of pity for the victims of the struggle, whether ally or enemy.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

If Niebuhr's prophetic vocation in wartime seldom strayed far from matters related to building the post-war world, neither did he question that an Allied victory was the condition precedent to a more just international community. If he did not appeal directly to the *ius in bello* of classical just war theory, Niebuhr insisted that the attitudes of humility be reflected in America's conduct of the war. Although he recognized that victory would require the Allies' most vital material and spiritual resources, Christian responsibility required protection of the innocent, compassion for the enemy, and the avoidance of unnecessary and indiscriminate killing and destruction. Though he does not appeal to just war theory, it is apparent that, for Niebuhr, the attitudes of humility must precede and under-gird the essential *ius in bello* criteria of "proportionality" and "discrimination."² To be sure reason has an

¹ "In the Battle and Above It," *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 4 (Autumn 1942): 3.

² Niebuhr viewed traditional interpretations of just war theory as "rigid, artificial and unhelpful." According to Colm McKeogh he "rejects any just war approach which offers straightforward rules and promises that, if they are followed, then moral standards can be upheld in international relations. Niebuhr's own approach does not attempt to set out rules and restrictions on actions, rules which, if followed, allow the actor to avoid guilt... His normative theory of international politics centres on a pragmatic ethic, which focuses on ends and which is flexible, though morally aware, as regards means. As such, it is a means of moral reasoning more common than one based on absolute rules and prohibitions." McKeogh nevertheless places Niebuhr within the pragmatic wing of just war tradition that "stressed the role of conscience and the avoidance of elaborate formulae." *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 148-149.

essential role in any Christian conduct of war. But Niebuhr insisted that humility must inform reason because reason is always shaped by human partiality and finitude; in short, human reason may easily become the servant of human egotism, the “vehicle of the sinful self by which it seeks to give the sanctity of a false universality to its particular needs.”³ Humility thus illumines proportionality and discrimination in wartime. Because it requires less certainty about the justice of our means and more contrition regarding those decisions we nevertheless must make, humility mitigates against the self-righteousness that engenders bloodlust in wartime and precludes justice in victory.

Niebuhr persistently reminded Americans of the inextricable relationship between how the war was fought and the possibilities of the ensuing peace. His belief that neither side in the conflict was blameless did not alter his conviction that an Allied victory served the cause of more equal justice. He chastised those who refused to join the struggle but nevertheless expected to frame the peace: “the ‘good’ people will presume to have the right, the duty, and the virtue to make the peace; while the ‘bad’ people fight the war to the kind of conclusion without which these peace plans are vanity.” But if those who take up the sword do not “preserve in battle the profoundest resources of the Christian faith, we might well create a situation in which no real reconstruction is possible.”⁴ Niebuhr thus underscored the inescapable tension between the exigencies of warfare and the spiritual and political requirements for rebuilding the post-war world. The policies and strategies employed in war had themselves to be as just as possible if victory was to serve the cause of a more just post-war world.

No blueprint on waging a “just” total war emerges from Niebuhr’s incidental work during WWII. But from his numerous essays it is possible to discern the attitudes that serve the cause of justice in wartime and thereby serve the cause of a more just post-war community. These, for Niebuhr, are the attitudes of humility that in faith may

For Yoder, Niebuhr is not a just war thinker but simply a realist. “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29, no. 2 (1956): 101-17, cited in McKeogh, 173.

³ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 301.

⁴ “Amidst Encircling Gloom,” *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 3 (March 9, 1942): 1-2.

illumine all human striving. Here, even in the conduct of a desperate conflict, we may admit before God the imperfect and finite nature of the justice we seek to defend. Accepting this and knowing that we stand ever under God's judgment, however righteous we perceive our cause, serves to preserve the spirit of justice both in the battle and beyond it.

Taint of Racial Pride

Though institutional racism against its Black citizens had been a continuing source of Niebuhrian reproach upon American democracy, in early 1942 he underscored the injustice and irony of racism in the conduct of total war against two explicitly racist regimes. In the hysterical aftermath of the disastrous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor thousands of Japanese American citizens were uprooted from their homes and communities and placed in internment camps. The shocking destruction of much of America's Pacific fleet (but, significantly, none of its aircraft carriers) seemed another of the inexorable Japanese triumphs that threatened to crush American power and influence in the Pacific. Rumours and unsubstantiated allegations of espionage were accepted as fact, particularly on the West Coast where most Japanese-Americans made their homes and which was thought most vulnerable to imminent attack.⁵

As a second generation German-American who had experienced America's anti-German sentiment in WWI, Niebuhr anticipated the disaster that in fact overtook many Americans of Japanese ancestry. In February of 1942 he recalled the earlier war-time hysteria and insisted that American Christians bore heavy responsibility for preserving civil liberties in wartime. If wartime conditions required that some freedoms had to be curtailed, Niebuhr warned that hysteria must not cause Americans to forget that "the thing which counts in making a free world is the freedom of the few, not of the many."⁶ Anti-Japanese hysteria nevertheless reached fever pitch with a greater breach of civil liberties than even Niebuhr had anticipated.

⁵ See Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 748-760.

⁶ "Civil Liberties in Wartime," *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 2 (February 23, 1942): 1.

The indiscriminate internment of Japanese-Americans was attacked by *Christianity and Crisis* in its April 20, 1942 lead editorial, "A Blot on Our Record."⁷ It decried the "Nuremberg-law" mentality fuelled by hysteria and race hatred that had shorn an entire class of persons of their essential rights as American citizens. While allowing that the internments were considered wartime measures as opposed to the Nuremberg laws drawn during peacetime, the editorial noted the "uncomfortable parallel" between Japanese-American citizens being made "scapegoats much as were the Jews in Germany under Hitler."⁸ It was hoped that the churches of America would not be as quiescent in face of Japanese-American internment as the churches of Germany had been of Nazi persecution of the Jews.

Niebuhr himself responded to the barrage of negative mail that "Blot" predictably fomented. He used the occasion to refute those who thought that criticism of government in wartime gave comfort to the enemy. Hitler, he observed, could make much more of American racial hypocrisy than of legitimate criticism of it; indeed, the idea that government should be immune from criticism in wartime is "dangerous to the spirit of democracy." Those Christians who urged the resolute prosecution of the war had to distinguish continuously between responsible and irresponsible criticism of the conduct of the war. Here Niebuhr reminded his fellow citizens that the exigencies of war militate against the self-criticism that enabled them to see that "there is no evil which Hitler represents in an extravagant form which is not present in democratic society in some potential or inchoate form."⁹ The injustice being inflicted upon Japanese-Americans reflected the racial pride that was the root cause of the systematic injustice so pervasively inflicted on black Americans. Racism, not

⁷ Vol. 2, no. 6. Although this editorial was written by Henry Smith Leiper, a member of the journal's editorial staff, Niebuhr was *Christianity and Crisis'* senior editor. Following an inundation of criticism from irate readers Niebuhr vigorously defended the positions taken in Leiper's editorial. See "The Evacuation of Japanese Citizens," *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 8 (May 18, 1942): 2-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1. It is an irony of American history that the future Chief Justice of the United States, Earl Warren, was at the time Attorney General of California. The editorial implies that Warren saw his promotion of the internment program as beneficial to his gubernatorial ambitions. He was in fact elected governor of California and later named U.S. Chief Justice by President Dwight Eisenhower in October of 1953. Warren would lead the court in a number of landmark civil rights decisions, including *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966).

⁹ "Evacuation," 3. America's greatest racial problem was and remains injustice toward its black citizens.

simply the exigencies of total war, accounted for the internment scheme.¹⁰ The wartime hysteria that predisposed Americans to believe that all American-born Japanese were disloyal had the same obvious and dangerous racial implications.

The cleansing of racism from America's household held implications for how the war would be fought as well as for the peace to follow. "In a war fought for political principles transcending the boundaries of race, color and nation," Niebuhr cautioned, "it is important to resist the natural but dangerous tendency to reduce the struggle to national or racial proportions."¹¹ This tendency hazards the great enterprise because racial pride obscures the depth of our culpability for the injustices we inflict on those of different races. Thus the racial pride blatantly evidenced in the wartime internment of Japanese-Americans was not only a moral blot on American democracy. If racial pride tainted the prosecution of the war, it would taint and endanger the peace to follow. While racial pride is not exclusive with any race, the combination of racial pride and technical power made white racism a particularly virulent hazard to world community.¹² Even under the chastisement of wartime exigencies American power had always to reflect its responsibilities to the wider community of nations. Whatever peoples its particular target, racism would be both a spiritual and political impediment to that responsibility.

The Humble Spirit in Waging War

If Niebuhr acknowledged that Christians could not support war with an easy conscience he realised that the brutality of warfare might batter any tender conscience to the point of despair.¹³ Yet if Christian responsibility offered no easy escape from the realities of modern warfare it nevertheless required every effort to minimize human suffering, destruction and further injustice. *Christianity and Crisis* subscribers read that faith may not say precisely how the battle is to be waged but it

¹⁰ "The Race Problem," *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1943): 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Niebuhr, "The Intelligent Man's Burden," *Nation* 156, no. 1 (January 2, 1943): 26.

¹³ "Our Responsibilities in 1942," 1.

does prescribe the spirit in which it is waged. A contrite and humble spirit fosters a sense of common humanity that raises us above the battle even as we wage it. To be above the battle, Niebuhr wrote, “means some reverent and pitying comprehension of the vastness of the catastrophe which has engulfed us all, friend and foe, and some sense of pity for the victims of the struggle, whether ally or enemy.”¹⁴ This God’s eye view of conflict characterises Christian responsibility in wartime and delimits any Christian understanding of “total war.” From this perspective we discern our complicity in the evil that foments war, its tragic necessities, and our responsibilities beyond the conflict.¹⁵ Only through the grace of humility is it possible to discern the spirit in which war is to be prosecuted and to gain some vision of the creative possibilities that may emerge from it.

Niebuhr’s support for the war entailed at least the tacit endorsement of the use of hellish weapons against the enemy. Certainly bombs were one such weapon. The advent of atomic weapons may today obscure the fact that the opposing camps in WWII possessed weapons quite capable of mass destruction, i.e. weapons that inflicted or could be reasonably expected to cause death and destruction on a large and indiscriminate scale. Nazi attacks on Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, Coventry and other cities caused massive loss of innocent life and prompted a gradual retreat from the earlier official allied policy of “precision bombing” of military or strategic targets. The combined American and British air attack on Dresden resulted in a firestorm that killed 35,000 people; a one-night attack on Berlin, 25,000 deaths. On March 3, 1945 American B-29s dropped bombs and incendiary weapons on Tokyo, leaving one million people homeless and 90,000 dead.¹⁶

In the face of these terrible realities of technical warfare what did it mean to be both in and above the battle? Can we disavow the use of bombs against an enemy who will prevail against us because he *is* willing to use them? Niebuhr provides no facile answer. It is not possible, he wrote, “to move in history without being tainted with

¹⁴ “In the Battle and Above It,” 3.

¹⁵ “The End of Total War,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 4 (Fall, 1944): 4.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 744; 847.

guilt.” There is on the one hand no “moral freedom to escape from these hard and cruel necessities of history.” On the other, we do have the moral freedom to meet the necessities of war “without rancor or self-righteousness.” Upon learning that certain Allied pilots had refused the Sacrament before their bombing raids Niebuhr reminded Christians that,

The Lord’s supper is not a sacrament for the righteous but for sinners....The Kingdom of God, of which the Sacrament is the symbol, is on the one hand the peace which comes to the soul when it turns from sin to righteousness. It is on the other hand the peace of divine forgiveness, mediated to the contrite sinner who knows that it is not in his power to live a sinless life on earth.¹⁷

When Allied strategy shifted from precision bombing to the carpet-bombing of primarily civilian population centres, Niebuhr demanded to know the reasons. “It is very confusing to find our authorities priding themselves in one moment on the accuracy of their ‘precision’ bombing and in the next moment promising the complete obliteration of all the great German cities.”¹⁸ He nevertheless rejected what he thought was the simplistic pacifist contrast between human values and military necessity. After all, he argued, a quicker victory over Nazi tyranny and the misery and death it was inflicting could be seen as “human value.”¹⁹ Yet the adoption of carpet-bombing could not be justified as a reprisal against Nazi attacks on Allied civilian populations. Nor could he accept that the destruction of German workers’ homes justified targeting cities rather than military installations even, apparently, if doing so might produce a quicker victory. The life and death struggles of total war obscured them, “but there are limits even in total war, and the systematic destruction of whole cities would certainly seem to exceed those limits.”²⁰ Niebuhr insisted that the peoples of the western democracies had a right to know the military

¹⁷ “The Bombing of Germany,” *Christianity and Society* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1943): 3.

¹⁸ “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 4 (March 20, 1944): 2.

¹⁹ “Is the Bombing Necessary?” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no.5 (April 3, 1944): 1.

²⁰ “Editorial Notes,” (March 20, 1944): 2.

justification for the change in strategy; the conduct of total war had to remain under democratic scrutiny.²¹

Later Niebuhr saw the development and use of atomic weapons as an element in the “historical logic” of total war conducted between technically advanced nations. Their use, he observed, “proved that ‘total war’ is not a Nazi invention,” and he noted that the decision to use atomic weapons against Japan was justified by the same logic the Nazis used in bombing Warsaw and Rotterdam; i.e., that the war would be shortened. Yet Niebuhr rejected any simplistic or blanket condemnation of the decision to make and use the bomb. He alluded to the great fear that the Nazis were developing such a weapon and that there was little question that once perfected they would use it. Could the Allied leaders, once in possession of such a weapon, withhold its use against Japan if doing so hastened the war’s end? Even so, Niebuhr was profoundly shaken by the indiscriminate atomic destruction of the two Japanese cities. The failure of the US to first demonstrate the power of the bomb before using it, he wrote, was a failure of moral authority. The world could hardly expect repentance on the part of the Japanese when they felt they were “defeated by the use of an illegitimate form of destruction.”²² Considering his earlier observations regarding American attitudes toward the Japanese, the inescapable conclusion is that Niebuhr saw the taint of racism in the decision to use atomic weapons on Japan.²³ It is also inescapable to conclude that the obscene brutality of the 1931 Manchurian invasion, Japanese diplomatic duplicity on the eve of the war, the nature of the attack on Pearl

²¹ See Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 742-45. Kennedy summarizes the military debate surrounding the shift of strategy in which the Allies “slid” across a moral threshold. He notes studies that indicated carpet-bombing was a significant but not a decisive factor in the German defeat.

²² “The Atomic Bomb,” *Christianity and Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1945): 3-5. While any full discussion of the issues surrounding the decision to use the bomb against Japan is beyond the scope of this paper some context is helpful. Brief consideration was given to a demonstration such as Niebuhr suggests but rejected for various reasons. Conventional bombing had caused 900,000 deaths across Japan before the nuclear strikes against Hiroshima and Nagasaki; it was questioned whether that the bomb would cause loss of life on any greater scale. Meanwhile, Japanese troops refused to surrender; on Okinawa only 7,000 of the original force of 77,000 survived while 100,000 civilians were killed in the fighting. Extrapolating the casualty rate to US troops on Okinawa, the human cost of the planned invasion of Japan itself was estimated at 268,000 US casualties. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 834-35.

²³ See “The Race Problem,” *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1942): 3-5; “The Evacuation of Japanese Citizens,” *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 8 (May 18, 1942): 2-5; and “Christian Faith and the Race Problem,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 21-24.

Harbour, the particularly harsh treatment meted out to Allied prisoners of war, the use of suicide pilots against Allied warships, and the fanatical refusal to surrender all fuelled the racial hatred of those targeted by Japanese power.

Niebuhr nevertheless saw no purely “Christian answer” to the problem of the bomb.²⁴ If Christian pacifism offered a clearer Christian witness in this matter, there is as well the Christian witness of those who assume responsibility for social justice and the security of their civilization. What future responsibilities might require could not be known but the atomic genie was out of the bottle. Any unilateral renunciation of its use might serve to encourage rather than discourage war. He thought that making absolute moral distinctions between atomic and other destructive weapons was not particularly fruitful; the moral issue was to avoid the use of any weapon for the purposes of indiscriminate mass destruction. The ironic challenge in the nascent atomic age was that the strategies designed to contain communism while preventing war entailed the unavoidable risk of atomic war.

If Christian responsibility entailed the risk of nuclear war Niebuhr appealed to the lessons of the Greek tragedies wherein “men may fall into evil by the very desperation of their effort to avoid it.” He was particularly concerned lest any doctrine that accepted the inevitability of war metamorphose into a doctrine of preventative war. In the atomic age Christian responsibility must avoid the temptation to seek primarily military solutions to the problems of international security. The chief hope of avoiding war, he wrote, lies in promoting the economic and moral health of the world community. This is the positive strategy necessary for avoiding war; a strategy in which, because of its wealth and power, the US must take a disciplined lead.²⁵

²⁴ “Which Question Comes First for the Church?”, *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 19 (November 12, 1945): 1.

²⁵ “The Christian Conscience and Atomic War,” *Christianity and Crisis* 10, no. 21 (December 11, 1950): 161. In this essay Niebuhr summarised the Federal Council of Churches’ report, *Christian Conscience and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Niebuhr was a signatory to the document, an edited copy of which was reprinted in pages 162-68.

Humility and Discerning a Victor's Justice

We have described humility as the attitude for all seasons of Christian responsibility, especially those in which decisions imperil lives and community. Such decisions always occasion contrition. It may be questioned, of course, as to whether victims of war are much comforted by the fact that those who have inflicted their suffering might themselves suffer from guilt. However that question might be answered, Christian responsibility in waging war means remembering the common humanity of all peoples and avoiding the hatred and self-righteousness that inevitably increase innocent suffering. For Niebuhr these are attitudes of humility that always point to a future beyond conflict, to the possibilities of forgiveness, reconciliation and community.

In the aftermath of total war the fruits of humility assume the practical character of feeding, housing and protecting all its victims.²⁶ Perhaps it is only as we assume these concomitant responsibilities in wartime that the enemy and innocent victims alike can begin to believe that we have inflicted their suffering with a troubled conscience. In these practical fruits of humility, our common humanity is affirmed and the hope for restored community is established. The attitudes of humility are thus all the more important for the victors because they bear the greater responsibility for shaping the character of the community that emerges from conflict. Thus Niebuhr's understanding of Christian responsibility in the conduct of the war precluded racial hatred, the indiscriminate infliction of suffering, while requiring care for all its victims.

Another wartime phenomenon that threatened the building of peacetime community is the imposition of a victor's justice upon the defeated enemy. We have seen that, in Niebuhr's view, the vindictiveness and self-righteousness of the western democracies towards Germany following WWI reaped the much greater whirlwind of WWII.

²⁶ Niebuhr wrote often, and often impatiently, of the Allies' responsibility for the civilian victims of war. See "Soberness in Victory," *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 9 (May 28, 1945): 1-2; "If Thine Enemy Hunger Feed Him," *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 22 (December 24, 1945): 2; "I Was An Hungered and Ye Gave Me No Meat," *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 23 (January 7, 1947): 5-6.

Even as the Allies struggled to win the present war Niebuhr was anxious that they apply the lessons of the earlier war, lessons most truly learned only in humility. No human situation, he wrote concerning the prospects of victory, “offers greater temptations to pride and vainglory.”

Do the victors understand that they are under judgment as well as the vanquished? If they do not they try invariably to falsify history and make it appear that the vanquished were solely responsible for the evil which befell all the nations. Invariably they also corrupt the execution of judgment with vindictive self-glorification. That is why victory in one war so frequently sows the seeds of another war...If we forget the mutual guilt in which we were all involved and if we imagine that we have banished evil from international relations by the defeat of our foes, we will fail in the task of organizing the international community.²⁷

The appalling scope of Nazi war crimes prompted universal revulsion and righteous anger. Knowing human nature, Niebuhr feared that the victorious Allies’ righteous anger would lapse into a self-righteousness whose objective was not justice but vengeance. Therein the tragic pattern of WWI would be repeated and the victors of WWII would create conditions resulting in WWIII. Niebuhr’s counsel in seeking to impose justice upon those responsible for terrible crimes was “to be angry but sin not.”

If ever there was a “just” war in the minds of the American people, it was the struggle against Nazi Germany and Militarist Japan.²⁸ It was easy to demonise these regimes and thereby fuel the hatred and vindictiveness that Niebuhr knew would imperil the future peace. Nevertheless, atrocities such as those committed by Japanese troops against American, British and Filipino prisoners during the Bataan Death March, could not be denied simply because they might create racial hatred among many people. But what is historically true, Niebuhr wrote, must not lead us to commit the “spiritual atrocity” of demonising an entire people: “We must be

²⁷ “The Perils of Being the Judge,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1943): 10-11.

²⁸ James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; Oxford University Press paperback, 1997), 8.

resolute in escaping the vicious circle in which cruelty begets cruelty and men create what they claim to abhor.”²⁹ While a particularly cruel adversary evokes what is worst in our human nature, in Christian humility we find the resources to recognise that to some extent the enemy reflects the sin and guilt of all humanity, including our own. Just as Christian responsibility may entail our having to make judgments regarding the guilt of others, the attitudes of humility illumine the egotism and vindictiveness that taint that judgment. “The more we recognize that we will not be perfectly just,” Niebuhr wrote, “the better chance we have of attaining some measure of justice.”³⁰ Again Niebuhr insisted upon the organic relationship between the conduct of the war, of which justice for the enemy is an integral part, and the peace to follow.

While knowing well that not all Germans were Nazis, Niebuhr believed that the German people, through their “political ineptitude” and “more positive political vices,” were implicated in a collective guilt for Nazi evil. If destroying Germany would atone for the millions of Nazi victims or assure the future peace of the world, he wrote, doing so might be justified. But such a morality of pure “justice” would neither restore life to Nazi victims nor guarantee the world a more peaceful future. Cultures and nations have developed systems of justice dealing with their criminals, but there is no such system to deal with criminal nations. Moreover, simply punishing individual war criminals does not of itself remove the underlying causes of collective guilt.³¹ Only through the humility of faith are we able to recognize that,

There are crimes too terrible to be punished by the hand of man; and there are punishments in history more terrible than any crime deserves, so the God of history is both more terrible and more merciful than any of our nicely calculated schemes of punishment and justice.³²

²⁹ “The Japanese Atrocities,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 2 (February 21, 1944): 1; “Factors of Cohesion,” *Spectator* 170, no. 5999 (June 18, 1943): 562-63.

³⁰ “A Just World Power,” *Current Religious Thought* 3, no. 8 (October, 1943): 13.

³¹ “Democratic Goals and World Order,” *New Leader* 27, no. 29 (September 23, 1944): 5.

³² “Justice for the Enemy,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1944): 6.

Humility thus illumines the possibilities of justice for even the most hateful enemy. It enables the God's eye view that all human efforts towards justice are finite and partial, and tainted by self-interest. The attitudes of humility point beyond the requirements of justice to the enemy, which can be met imperfectly at best, to the requirements of mercy and forgiveness that are also essential to the restoration of community. When Christian responsibility requires that we struggle to deal justly with so-called criminal nations, humility teaches that ruthlessness alone "solves no essential problem of world order"; we must "either cure the criminal or perish with him."³³

Here is yet another juncture in which the attitudes of humility issue in political prudence. Humility does not simply illumine the limited possibilities of any justice that we can devise for the foe who has committed terrible crimes. It illumines as well the national self-interest in recognizing such limits. It requires accepting the inescapable ambiguity of justice in relations between nations, particularly between victor and vanquished, and thus the limited purposes served by any punishment. Political prudence "adjusts itself to the complicated realities of the human community," Niebuhr wrote, just "as Christian forgiveness grows out of understanding the dimensions of good and evil, of mercy and wrath, which transcend the realities of history."³⁴ In the case of the people of Nazi Germany, prudence asks what punishment could be worse than that inflicted by the war itself wherein millions died, hundreds of cities were destroyed, and an economy that would be in ruins for years to come.

But if Niebuhr believed that there were more Nazis deserving of death than any civilized conscience could possibly allow he nevertheless was adamant that those most responsible for wartime atrocities "ought to be destroyed." Indeed, he seems to hold that summary or vigilante justice for war criminals, best served up by those on whom the criminals inflicted such evil, would serve a more wholesome purpose than trials conducted under the pretension of victors' impartiality. "Terrible as the

³³"Editorial Notes," (March 20, 1944); 2.

³⁴"Justice for the Enemy," 6.

consequences of such 'lynchings' may be, terrible that is in the inexactness of punishment, it must nevertheless be hoped that most of the individual criminals will be punished in that way." Niebuhr, accordingly, believed that wartime criminals deserved to be punished. But he also believed that extensive war trials with tens of thousands of accused would detract from what he saw as the more important tasks in achieving greater social justice: the reconciliation and rebuilding of the international community.³⁵

Thus if Niebuhr's Christian responsibility always entails the pursuit of justice it also knows that social justice is inextricably contextual even when attempted on an international scale. It knows that there is no complete escape from the self-interested and partial perspective attendant upon all human attempts at justice. These impediments persist in peace as in war, but they are exacerbated by the exigencies and fury of armed conflict. The victors posit their triumphs as proof of their virtue and thereby obscure their share of culpability for the conflict. Here self-righteous pride may so taint "justice" for the fallen enemy that judgment becomes revenge. Just here the attitudes of humility militate against the fury and error of self-righteousness. And just as they engender a God's eye view of responsibility in conflict, so they illumine the possibilities of a greater justice beyond conflict. Humility allows us to see that the power by which we triumph in a just cause also imperils the justice of our cause. In Christian responsibility there is no escape from making fateful choices between lesser and greater forms of justice, yet we cannot escape judgment by avoiding those choices.

In times of victory, when the so-called righteous nations have prevailed, we had better not forget the words of our Lord: "Judge not that ye be not judged," and the words of St. Paul, written in the same spirit: "Who art thou that judgest thy brother; for we must all be made manifest before the judgement seat of Christ." These words are spoken out of the ultimate insights of New Testament faith. They are

³⁵ "Justice and Forgiveness," *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 9. Possibly Niebuhr was here contemplating Mussolini's gruesome but alarmingly satisfying end in Milan.

furthermore remarkable sources of insight into our contemporary experience.³⁶

Conclusion

Niebuhr's prophetic faith did not offer escape from sinful human nature nor any guarantee that Christians can avoid all evil in meeting historic responsibilities. Christians, he wrote, cannot act in history without the taint of guilt nor can they escape guilt by inaction. But in conflict the spirit of humility illumines the common humanity shared by all people and affirms the truth of faith that all people and nations stand under God's perfect judgement. Niebuhr's prophetic warning to his fellow Americans was that this judgment falls most heavily upon the "good" people and nations who lay claim to some divine instrumentality.

Niebuhr insisted that the spirit in which the war was conducted would impact the possibilities for a more just post-war community. In advocating American responsibility to wage war he rejected perfectionisms that found moral equivalence between the evils of the democracies and the totalitarianisms against which they struggled for survival. But his stinging reminders that America's own moral failures shared in creating these evils called for a spirit of humility to guide the struggle. It is this humility about the moral purity of our own cause that mitigates self-righteous fury in waging war. It is this same spirit that points beyond the struggle toward the possibilities of a more just peace. For Niebuhr American power made its racial attitudes as relevant to the international community as its military strategies. Nor could the righteous wartime anger kindled against Nazi Germany and militarist Japan be allowed to degenerate into vengeance. Any pretence of a totally disinterested justice for the foe would further embitter relations between victor and vanquished and impede the rebuilding of a more just international community.

³⁶ "The Conflict Between Nations and Nations and Between Nations, and God," *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 14 (August 5, 1946): 2.

A more just world was the objective that Niebuhr persistently held to be America's greatest responsibility and one that must govern the spirit in which any war is waged. This spirit is a possibility only through the grace of humility and the attitudes it engenders for responsible action.

Chapter Six

Humility and International Responsibility: The US and the United Nations

The Christian ought to know that the creation of some form of world community, compatible with the necessities of a technical age, is the most compelling command of our day.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

In writing "Our Responsibilities in 1942," Niebuhr had called for the girding of Christian loins at a time when the Allies were in desperate peril. In his prophetic role he did not shrink from assigning proportionate responsibility for the situation in which America and the western democracies found themselves. At the same time he offered prophetic encouragement and affirmed the resources of faith in the struggle ahead. Moreover Niebuhr's insistence that planning for the post-war world was a concomitant responsibility of waging war, just when victory seemed so uncertain and distant, lends the essay an unmistakable aura of prophetic audacity.

But if Niebuhr's call in early 1942 for post war planning was audacious it was not inconsistent. He had persistently framed American power in terms of its international responsibilities and he believed the war was in part due to America's earlier failure to meet those responsibilities. In this respect the war should occasion contrite responsibility for setting right the underlying economic and social injustices that stoke overt armed conflict. The new chapter in history to be written after the war, he insisted, cannot be written without reference to the old: "The two chapters will be intimately related to each other."² Niebuhr's own approach to writing the new

¹ "Plans for World Reorganization," *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 17 (October 19, 1942): 6.

² "The Unity of History," *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 7 (May 4, 1942): 1.

chapter reflects the style and many of the recurring motifs of his mature thought. His approach is perhaps best captured in his 1942 essay, "Plans for World Reorganization."³

Approaches to Post-war World Organization

Niebuhr discerned two general approaches to post-war planning and reconstruction. The first he defined as the historical and realistic approach to politics, an approach which rests on understanding human nature and the limits of human possibilities discernable in history. The second approach is that of the rationalists and idealists whose focus is on the goal of new possibilities, not the underlying problems of human nature and the limitations they place on all human possibilities. For Niebuhr's realist there is little new in history; the perennial problems of human history may appear in new guises but they remain in essence the same.⁴ The idealists, focused as they are on new possibilities, tend to hope that the perennial problems of history and human nature will be eradicated by education and scientific advancement. In Niebuhr's estimate, the idealists are overly inclined to believe that injustice will recede before the moral demands of justice.

"In the present situation the idealists rightly insist that the economic interdependence of the world demands new international political organization. They believe in the necessity of some kind of world government, which will make our economic interdependence sufferable and which will organize the potential world community and make it actual."⁵

Niebuhr's realists deny neither new necessities nor new possibilities. But they insist that prescriptions for action be based upon understanding human nature and be consistent with the lessons of history. The realist thus must ask how possible is

³ "Plans for World Organization," 3-6.

⁴ This is somewhat analogous to Niebuhr's view that pride pitches itself at whatever new level of humility we may achieve through grace. *Destiny*, 141.

⁵ "Plans for World Organization," 3.

world government, whatever its necessity in the face of economic interdependence? Considering “that national pride and parochial self-sufficiency are something more than the mere fruit of ignorance but recurring forces in all efforts at social cohesion,”⁶ the realist asks how nations are to be coaxed into voluntarily relinquishing their national sovereignty and prerogatives.

Distinctions between these two approaches to building world community rest upon their understanding of the problems of political power. Niebuhr’s realists do not reject rational processes but neither do they believe reason to be the over-arching factor in motivating collective human behaviour. Dominant power in some form, these realists believe, is the cohesive element in all human collectives. Relative justice within collectives is possible only when this dominant power is balanced by countervailing power; without this equilibrium of power, reason and moral appeals will not produce social justice. Idealists, on the other hand, want to see history shaped less by power than by the “moral and social imperatives which a rational analysis of the situation generates.”

They look at the world and decide that its social and economic problems demand and require a “federation of the world.” They think of such a federation not primarily in terms of the complex economic and social interests and vitalities, which must be brought into and held in a tolerable equilibrium. Least of all do they think of the necessity of some dominant force or power as the organising center of the equilibrium. They are on the whole content to state the ideal requirements of the situation in as rigorous terms as possible.⁷

Here, of course, Niebuhr resorts to the generalisations and polemical style that earned him the criticism of both friendly and unfriendly scholars.⁸ Yet if he acknowledges that he has constructed something of straw man idealist it is because so much is at stake in getting it right this time. Perhaps Niebuhr’s polemics are best understood in the tragic and ironic context of his own times. The ideal of the League

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Thompson, “Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Kegley and Bretall, 173; Rhoades, “Prophetic Insights,” 4.

of Nations had failed in practice because the hegemonic nations were content with its powerlessness. Indeed, had the League included effective enforcement provisions it might not have ever been formed. Weak as the League was, the United States Senate rejected American membership. In the event, the League failed because it could not muster some countervailing military and economic force of the world community against Nazi, Japanese and Italian aggression. It will be recalled that each of these nations was an original signatory to the tragicomic Kellogg-Briand Pact in which nearly all members of the international community denounced war as an instrument of international policy.⁹ We need remember, too, the formative influence that the Munich agreement and the German-Soviet pact had had on Niebuhr's thinking about the relationship between idealism and power in the international community.

Niebuhr nevertheless recognized that the idealists can render an important service and that the realists do not possess a franchise on strategies to build a more just and peaceful world. Without the creative insights of the idealists, he observes, realists' tend toward complacency and cynicism regarding the role of political power. Realists too easily see power simply as physical force, whether economic or military: "They do not fully appreciate that a proper regard for moral aspirations is a source of political prestige; and that this prestige is itself an indispensable source of power."¹⁰ This is entirely consistent with Niebuhr's understanding that imagination is integral to human nature and is expressed in idealism. Thus for all the scorn heaped upon idealist straw men idealism has important and constructive purposes. Himself a realist, Niebuhr discerns the creative and positive possibilities in the tension between the two approaches. Reflected here as well is Niebuhr's belief in the creativity and flexibility of humility shaping and evaluating our strategies and actions. It is just here that the self-knowledge of humility requires that the criticism and correction offered by others be considered.

⁹ The officially named Pact of Paris of 1928 was originally negotiated between the US and France. It was expanded at the suggestion of US Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg to include all willing signers, thereby making it "as irresistible as it was meaningless." It was signed originally by fifteen nations, including Germany, Japan and Italy, and eventually enjoyed nearly universal endorsement. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 280-81.

¹⁰ "Plans for World Organization," 4.

But while he finds both the idealist and realist approaches to world order flawed, his greater loyalty lies with the realists. As we have seen, he saw no chance of building an effective international organisation of nations without their sacrificing some degree of national sovereignty. In this regard some idealists dismiss national sovereignty as simply a legal impediment to world community. They would obviate this impediment by superimposing international laws that deny any nation absolute sovereignty. Herein, he insisted, idealists show themselves ignorant of the intricate cultural and national complexities that underlie any nation's history and self-identity. More troublesome still, in his view, these idealists seemingly ignore the basic reality of international order that only power counters power. And yet other idealists, who seemingly understand the necessity of power in building an effective international organization, appear to equate the word with the deed. "They think it possible to create such a new international authority and then make a moral demand upon the nations to submit themselves to it."¹¹ This species of idealists, like Shakespeare's Glendower, obscure the vast distinction between the evocation of power and its actualisation.

The realists' approach to forming the post-war community, in Niebuhr's view, was superior because it was based upon wartime cooperation and mutual commitments. Sharing the prospect of defeat at the hands of an implacable foe, the Allies would sacrifice some degree of national sovereignty because it is in their national interest to do so. In short, Niebuhr believed that wartime necessities would compel a coalescence of mutuality and self-interest to a degree unachievable in peacetime. His great concern was that the necessities of peacetime would be less compelling and that the mutuality achieved in war would dissipate in the post-war world. Should this occur, as Niebuhr feared, the tragic cycle of history would continue:

This logic is irrefutable because an economically interdependent world must in some sense become a politically integrated world community or allow potential instruments of community to become instruments of mass annihilation.¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Yet he found that if realists see this logic and recognize that old problems reappear in new situations, they often fail to see that new situations also admit of new possibilities.

Here Niebuhr's analysis of post-war world organisation requirements takes an unexpected turn. Concerning the deployment of power in the new world order, Niebuhr espies two schools within realist thinking. One school would forsake any formal international political organisation and simply reconstruct a new balance of power among the nations. The other school espouses something of an imperial organisation of the world, "with some small group of dominant nations furnishing the imperial power." Regarding the balance of power school Niebuhr acknowledges the continuing necessity for recognizing the economic, political and geographical elements essential to achieving some international equilibrium of power. The new element this school did not appear to recognize is the destabilizing nature of rapidly developed technological warfare. His case in point was Nazi air power had, in his estimate, dramatically and quickly altered the balance of power in Europe. His point was that the balance of power necessary for international equilibrium, always subject to the vicissitudes of national politics and unforeseen events, was now subject to such rapid change that it could no longer prevent international anarchy. The rapid development and interdependence that characterize the technical age, in Niebuhr's view, rendered the old balance of power formula a less certain guarantor of world peace and stability.¹³

Niebuhr thought that the "imperial" realists had a more hopeful design for post-war world organisation. Niebuhr nowhere in this essay defines what he means by imperialism, leaving us to discern its meaning from his own description of its purpose. The imperialistic realists envisioned a world balance of power with what he calls an "organizing" power at its center. This organizing center would possess the instruments of power sufficient to manipulate "the social forces" of the world community and avert international anarchy. The composition of this organizing power would emerge from the conduct of the war itself. Realists variously saw

¹³ "Pillars of Peace," *Spectator* 171, no. 6017 (October 22, 1943): 379.

America, or the Anglo-Saxon powers, or the so-called four great powers of Russia, China, Britain and the US, as providing the organizing power within the new world order. Niebuhr himself believed that the power center, if it were to be truly a world organizing power, had to include the Soviet Union and China. He hoped that wartime cooperation and “the practical steps of statesmanship” among the Allied powers would make the arrangement workable in peacetime.¹⁴

That Niebuhr ventured into the fractious atmosphere created by the favourable contemplation of imperial power is initially puzzling. His strategy appears to be preemptive. In his view any realistic proposal to deal with organizing the post-war world would have to deal with the necessity of power at its center. It is best to anticipate that “there is no possibility of organizing the world at all, which will not be exposed to the charge of ‘imperialism’ by the idealists who do not take the problem of power seriously.”¹⁵ Yet he understood that the realists’ espousal of an imperial power center cannot be defended simply by attacking the idealists’ naïvety about *any* use of power. If the idealists are naïve about the problem of *power* the realists are too often complacent about the problem of *justice*. However more just an Anglo-Saxon imperialism might be compared with Nazi imperialism, it would not be sufficiently just, in Niebuhr’s view, to insure a more just world peace. The inclusion of Russia in any post war imperial power center, as difficult as it might prove to be, would be “a great gain.” If the power center he envisioned was to achieve order *and* justice it must itself achieve a “tolerable equilibrium” of power reflecting national interests and cultural perspectives.

What of the place of the smaller powers in a new world order dominated by an imperial power centre? How are their voices to be heard? Most important, how can their power be accommodated to provide some balance or check against the dominant powers? These are questions endemic to any discussion of imperialism, and Niebuhr’s struggle to answer them seems to reflect his inner doubts regarding

¹⁴ “The United Nations and World Organization,” *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 24 (January 25, 1943): 2; “National Power and the Organization of Peace,” *The American Teacher* 27, no. 7 (April 1943): 26.

¹⁵ “Plans for World Organization,” 5.

any realistic formula. The wartime cooperation he hoped would provide the foundation for the new organising power was fragile enough among the US, Britain and Russia; the smaller powers enrolled in the Allied cause appeared to have little voice in matters. That “the policies of the United Nations are not being democratically conducted,” he complained, presented a serious impediment to justice in the post-war world.¹⁶ Yet he recognized that unless the responsibility of member nations was commensurate with their actual power the new world organization would go the way of the League of Nations:

Constitutional arrangements which allowed smaller nations to determine policies, which they lacked the power to implement, could become as fruitful a source of new anarchy as unchecked dominant power could become a new source of tyranny.¹⁷

Niebuhr finds himself unable to provide satisfactory answers to all the questions regarding the just participation of the smaller nations; for the moment it will have to do that the questions have been acknowledged. For in any case, he would write a few months later, “the trouble with less dangerous schemes than the coagulation of dominant power at the center of world order is that the peril of a new anarchy is greater, in them, than the peril of injustice in a United Nation’s plan.”¹⁸

He cautioned that frustration in anticipating these and other problems must not foment irresponsible escapism. It may be true, for example, that a world comprised of model democracies, whose inner systems of checks and balances might moderate their international relations, would make for a more just world. Clearly such an ideal world did not exist; it is fatuous and dangerous to demand that the center of power necessary for a stable post-war organization meet some perfectionist ideal. “If a stable peace depended altogether on the achievement of an ideal democracy in the constituent nations,” Niebuhr wrote, “we would have to resign ourselves to decades

¹⁶ Ibid. Here Niebuhr uses the term United Nations to designate the Allied powers.

¹⁷ “Factors of Cohesion,” *Spectator* 170, no. 5999 (June 18, 1943): 562-3.

¹⁸ “Review of Henry B. Park’s *The World After the War*,” *Nation* 156, no. 10 (March 6, 1943): 354. Again, the reference here is to the Allied powers.

of further purgatory.”¹⁹ The purpose of constructing a tolerably just post-world order was best served by humbly acknowledging the imperfections that inevitably attend all human endeavours.

The Requirements of World Organization

Considering his realist’s protestations against perfectionism and idealist escapism, what then did Niebuhr’s vision of the post-war organization look like? In offering four principles of organization Niebuhr attempted a creative admixture of idealist and realist approaches to post-war possibilities.

1. A constitutional arrangement that would provide some equilibrium of power within the organizational structure itself. This “politically implemented” arrangement would be designed to accommodate the interests of the smaller powers as well as powerless nations.

2. An “organizing center” comprised of the great powers; they would provide what Niebuhr rather oddly describes as “the coagulation of dominant power at the center of world order.” But perhaps given that Niebuhr is attempting to prescribe a necessary cure for world disorder a medical expression just here is quite appropriate.

3. This “imperial” power center would be balanced by checks “to prevent its power from becoming vexatious.”

4. An accommodation of what Niebuhr termed “regional arrangements.” Niebuhr here concedes that spheres of influence will remain a part of the

¹⁹ “Plans for World Organization,” 5. Niebuhr observed in his review of Parkes’ book that it was vexatious problems such as protecting weaker nations that “drive so many good democrats to consider utopias rather than historical solutions of world problems.”

international landscape whatever the organization of the new world order. But such regional arrangements, he insisted, “must not run counter to the basic fact that the economic and political life of the nations is integrated in world, rather than regional, terms.”²⁰

In offering these organizing principles for the United Nations Niebuhr acknowledged the importance of flexibility without compromising the requirements of basic justice. He also reminded Christians of the resources of faith in meeting their responsibilities in establishing the new world order:

A profound Christian faith knows something of the recalcitrance of sin on every level of moral and social achievement, and is, therefore, not involved in the alternate moods of illusion or disillusionment which harass the world of idealists and secularists. It knows something of the similarity between our own sin and the guilt of others; and will therefore not be pitiless if ideal possibilities are frustrated by the selfishness of others. But it also hears the divine command in every new historical situation. The Christian ought to know that the creation of some form of world community, compatible with the necessities of a technical age, is the most compelling command of our day.²¹

It is easier to concur with Niebuhr’s estimate of the resources of faith for building a post-war community than with the plausibility of his particular outline to achieve it. Despite his insightful if overly general dissection of the respective approaches of idealists and realists, and his rather jolting endorsement of an imperial center of power, there is an unmistakably wistful air to his proposals. Perhaps this wistfulness simply reflects Niebuhr’s reticence in undertaking a venture so haunted by the carcasses of idealistic and utopian failures. He nevertheless embraced what he saw as the idealists’ creative contribution to addressing the problems of international community. At the same time he feared that the political realists would simply revert to some international balance of power scheme that he believed, in light of the technical nature of modern warfare, could no longer maintain a reasonably just international peace. What is clear is that Niebuhr understood the enormous political

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

impediments that would have to be overcome were a plan such as his ever to reach fruition.

The cornerstone upon which so much depended and one in which the attitudes of humility were so directly relevant is American responsibility for building community among the great powers. Yet if American power and wealth are essential to creating such community among the great nations such power also promotes the national pride and selfishness that imperils international community. Only if its tasks are illumined through the attitudes of humility could America meet its essential responsibilities in building a more just and stable post-war order. Only from this perspective can Niebuhr's plan be seen as achieving the multi-national concentration of power he saw as essential to maintaining world order while promoting a more just international community.

All, he believed at the time, depended upon the great powers finding some point at which their national and mutual interests would converge. The trust and mutuality essential to this convergence would have to be built upon their shared wartime experience and agreements regarding post-war aspirations. Doubtless the wistful tone that emerges from Niebuhr's outline in "Plans" reflects his realist's understanding of how difficult reaching such agreements would be. The temptation of the victorious powers to resort to security arrangements based principally upon spheres of influence would be immense and, he thought, gravely dangerous to any post-war peace. It, in fact, would mirror the European situation following WWI.²²

A more permanent peace lay with some "working accord" in which the victorious powers would assure mutual security while avoiding spheres of influence. The victorious Allies would have both the power and the responsibility for reaching such an agreement. The question was whether they had the will.²³ Because of its

²² "Russia and the Peace," *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1942): 8.

²³ "The German Problem," *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 23 (January 10, 1944): 4. That the Russians saw territorial buffers as essential to their national security was an historical truism. Catherine the Great had joined with Prussia and Austria in a partition of Poland in 1772; the 1939 German-Soviet

predominant power and wealth, the US would have the greatest responsibility. In reflecting upon likely post-war Soviet territorial claims Niebuhr saw a major indicator of whether the US would meet its international responsibilities. The US, he wrote, “cannot resist such demands without being willing to enter into a system of collective security which makes this kind of security by territorial expansion unnecessary.” After WWI, Niebuhr observed, America had faced this same question. Then it took the moral high ground against spheres of influence but refused to take its share of responsibility for alternative means of mutual security among the nations of Europe.²⁴

Little wonder, then, that there is more than a note of wistful urgency in Niebuhr’s writing on post-war world organization. If he believed that the nature of wartime cooperation offered the best hope for formulating the post-war peace he also knew there were no guarantees that it would do so. He knew as well that the Allies’ wartime focus on defeating a common foe would not itself eradicate their significant cultural and political differences regarding the organization of the post-war world. Indeed, as the war drew on it became increasingly clear to Niebuhr that the US and the Soviet Union would emerge as the two dominant world powers. That they were so dissimilar in their economic, political and cultural perspectives struck at the heart of Niebuhr’s hopes; that each tended toward moral self-righteousness exaggerated these differences and mutual suspicions. Niebuhr, moreover, was clearly aware of Russia’s historical determination to seek security through territorial buffers, a tendency only exacerbated by Stalin’s paranoia regarding the motives of the western democracies.

Because the requisites of trust and commonality among the great powers did not materialize in wartime Niebuhr’s vision of a post-war world organization failed to

non-aggression pact ceded Polish territories that, ironically, Stalin saw as a buffer against a Nazi attack. See Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 338-349.

²⁴ “Russia and the Peace,” 8. Niebuhr believed reaching agreement regarding the post-war world would entail meeting some Russian territorial demands in Poland, Finland and the Baltic States. Though no agreement could justify meeting all Russian demands, Niebuhr thought some appeared “plausible enough” in light of the mutual mistrust and ideological conflict between Russia and the West. “Russia and the Christian World,” *The Christian News-Letter*, supplement no. 189 (August 25, 1943): 1-2.

become a reality. True enough, the United Nation's charter ratified in October, 1945 by the five permanent members of the Security Council--China, France, USSR, UK and the US--reflected each of the elements Niebuhr saw as indispensable to any plan for world reorganization. The problem was that neither wartime experience nor peacetime imperatives succeeded in building a community of trust among the great powers, most critically between the US and the Soviet Union, essential to making Niebuhr's vision work. As he repeatedly observed, only communities comprised of "organically" related elements can forge practically effective constitutions and legal systems. Where such elements as common culture, language and mutual interests are lacking no constitution will create community out of whole cloth.²⁵

The American constitutional experience was not the clear exception to this rule that some idealists claimed, he had warned in 1942. The colonies that became the United States had shared the exigencies of a long and often desperate war; these States recognized the need for a stronger central government only after their failed experience under the Articles of Confederation. Many Americans even then opposed or reluctantly embraced the federal Constitution that imposed a strong central government. Niebuhr reminded the world constitutionalists, that the issue of Federal versus State sovereignty was resolved finally only after a civil war that devastated the American south and claimed 500,000 lives.²⁶ He thus had few illusions about the immense difficulty of establishing an international community in which powerful nations would relinquish sufficient sovereignty to make his plan to maintain a just peace workable.

He called for wartime "agreements" on Allied war aims, i.e., agreements among the Allies regarding the geographical and political shape of the post-war world. These agreements would provide the foundation of peace negotiations with the defeated

²⁵ "Plans," 4.

²⁶ Ibid. See also Niebuhr's "The Illusion of World Government," *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 3 (April 1949): 381. Serving in Paris during the Constitutional Convention Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, and eventually third President of the US, wrote that provisions in the new Constitution "stagger all my dispositions to subscribe to it." One such provision was the creation of the office of the President that struck him as "a bad edition of a Polish King." *John Adams*, David McCullough (London: The Free Press, 2002), 379-380.

enemy and the incentive for the victorious powers to accept responsibility for enforcing the terms imposed. A failure to reach such a wartime agreement, or “an agreement to disagree” among the allied powers, would mean the division of Europe into spheres of influence, as in the event happened.²⁷ In the shorter term it would render any eventual peace negotiations with Germany chaotic, short-sighted and vindictive.

Opposed to the Allies’ demand for unconditional surrender, Niebuhr believed that the total destruction and humiliation of the defeated foe would simply continue the cycle of hatred that inevitably presaged new conflict.²⁸ A policy of unconditional surrender, he wrote, “means that the victors make their will and self restraint the only basis for justice.” Nor, he thought, did this policy serve the Allies’ best interests in the field. In the midst of the fierce fighting of January 1945, he asked if the Germans would be fighting so desperately “had we stated conditions of peace which would have held out some hope of health and security to them.”²⁹ Thus Niebuhr’s insistent and often strident demand for wartime agreement among the Allies, and his formulation of an international body capable of enforcing those agreements, sought to ameliorate the pride of the victorious powers. These steps would reduce national self-righteous and ultimately self-destructive vindictiveness against a fallen foe. They would serve as well the essential function of “exploiting the concurrence between self-interest and our sense of obligation to the total community.”³⁰

²⁷ “World War III Ahead?” *Nation* 158, no. 13 (March 25, 1944): 356.

²⁸ Niebuhr thought that the allied policy of unconditional surrender, promulgated by Roosevelt and Churchill at Casablanca in January, 1943, “stupidly” deprived anti-Nazi Germans of any incentive to overthrow the Nazi regime. “We are in Peril,” *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no 17 (October 18, 1943): 2. Kissinger asserts that this policy was due in part to Roosevelt’s fear that peace negotiations with Germany would be divisive. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 405. This policy in fact did not preclude the June, 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler led by Count Stauffenberg and in which Bonhoeffer was implicated with tragic consequences.

²⁹ “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no.2 (February 19, 1945): 2. “As a general rule,” observed Kissinger, “countries striving for stability and equilibrium should do everything within their power to achieve their basic peace terms while still at war. As long as the enemy is in the field, his strength indirectly enhances that of the more peaceful side.” *Diplomacy*, 405.

³⁰ “From Victory to Peace,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1943): 36.

Recognizing “The Limits Set by Man’s Recalcitrance”

“We can have nothing that we need,” Niebuhr wrote in early 1945, “if the core of the world community is not established in the mutual trust of the great powers.”³¹ Yet the trust between the West and Stalin’s Soviet Union essential to Niebuhr’s vision became a more distant possibility even as victory approached. He had never been naïve regarding the possibilities of agreement between the two colossal powers emerging from the war. In addition to the flaws he discerned in communism itself, he was a formidable critic of Stalinist paranoia and well aware of Russia’s historic quest to expand or buffer its European borders. He knew, too, that the communist parties operating within the western democracies were tools of the Soviet state.³²

Yet his prophetic voice was raised more often against the economic injustice of America’s libertarian capitalism at home and abroad, its propensity for self-righteousness, and its history of isolationist irresponsibility. While urging vigorous prosecution of the war he constantly reminded his fellow Americans of their shared responsibility for the injustices at the core of international conflict. In meeting its responsibilities within the world community America would have to resist its enduring temptation to isolationist escapism, on the one hand, and on the other the “impulse to dominate the world” prompted by its great power.

To be sure our power is not great enough to give us security, even as our isolation is not complete enough to guarantee it. But our temptation lies in the fact that we have just enough power to make the policy of seeking security by an unmutual [*sic*] expression of power seem plausible.³³

For Niebuhr the attitudes of humility are essential to overcoming these conflicting temptations. Christian humility requires that America meet the responsibilities

³¹ “Russia and the Peace,” *Social Progress* 35, no. 5 (January 1945): 23.

³² “Russia and the West, Part II,” *Nation* 156, no. 4 (January 23, 1943): 125.

³³ “American Power and World Responsibility,” *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 5 (April 5, 1943), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 203.

commensurate with its power and wealth; there could be no retreat into egotistical and irresponsible isolationism. But humility also requires an acknowledgment of the limits to power and the ability to control events. When both responsibility and limits are acknowledged the nation more clearly discerns its own interests and, through patience and toleration, the interests of other nations.

Greater humility about their lack of experience on the world stage would also allow Americans to see what Niebuhr believed was Great Britain's essential role in building trust among the Allies. The British were uniquely positioned to play this role because of their long experience on the world stage and an economic system Niebuhr saw as midway between libertarian capitalism and socialism. The realism and moral understanding the British brought to the table would have a salutary effect on both the "adolescent" great powers.³⁴ Moreover, Niebuhr hinted, Great Britain's historical attachment to realism in international affairs created a certain kinship with Russian *Realpolitik*; indeed, the British might see Russian power as a necessary counterweight to American power; even the imperial power center Niebuhr envisioned within the new world order required some internal balance of opposing forces.³⁵

We have touched upon several of the reasons the wartime agreements that Niebuhr had insisted upon as essential to the new world order failed to materialize. At heart was the failure of the great powers to reach agreement on the political and economic organization of the post-war world, and on arrangements necessary to enforce that agreement. "Order will have to be maintained for some time to come by the organization of preponderant power," he wrote in 1943. "There is no other way of overcoming the anarchy of rival national sovereignties."³⁶ While certain wartime agreements regarding the post-war world were reached there was no agreement

³⁴ "Great Britain's Post-War Role," *Nation* 157, no. 2 (July 10, 1943): 39.

³⁵ "Russia and the West, Part II," *Nation* 156, no. 4 (January 16, 1943):125. It is clear that Niebuhr underestimated the degree to which the war had left Britain too physically and fiscally exhausted to play so dominant a role between the two great powers.

³⁶ "The Possibilities of a Durable Peace," *Christianity and Society* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1943): 9-12, reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 196.

regarding the core problem of overcoming what Niebuhr called rival national sovereignties. Kissinger offers his view of what was and was not accomplished by these agreements and why.

“Roosevelt’s refusal to discuss the shape of the post-war world while the war was in progress threw America’s vast influence behind an outcome which lacked such crucial elements as a balance of power or any criteria for political solutions. In all matters to which the Wilsonian assumptions of an underlying harmony were relevant, Roosevelt played the major role in shaping the post-war world. Under his aegis, a series of international conferences elaborated blueprints for the cooperative components of the post-war world; for what became the United Nations (at Dumbarton Oaks), for world finance (at Bretton Woods), for food and agriculture (at Hot Springs) for relief and rehabilitation (in Washington), and for civil aviation (in Chicago). But he was adamant in his refusal to discuss war aims, or to risk disagreement with the Soviets on that subject.”³⁷

Here irony abounds. Niebuhr had criticised Roosevelt as too narrowly realistic and as too inclined to assert American power unilaterally without much regard for the interests of other nations.³⁸ But Roosevelt had used his power to establish the “cooperative components of the post-war world order” and affirm new US commitments to the international community, including a commitment to what would become the United Nations. Indeed, the UN Charter ratified in October, 1945 reflected the major elements Niebuhr had written in his “Plans for World

³⁷ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 405. The British, at least, realized that Stalin was the chief beneficiary of this refusal. “We are going into a decisive conference,” Anthony Eden complained to Harry Hopkins at Malta, “and had so far neither agreed what we would discuss nor how to handle matters with a Bear who would certainly know his own mind.” *The Reckoning: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 592. Roosevelt may have been counting on his ability to charm Stalin into satisfactory agreements after the war but Schlesinger insists that the President had an alternative plan for “a great army, a network of overseas bases, plans for peacetime universal military training and the Anglo-American monopoly of the atomic bomb,” should things go wrong in US/Soviet relations. “Roosevelt and U.S. Foreign Policy,” an unpublished speech before the *Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations*, Vassar College, June 18, 1992, 18.

³⁸ “From Wilson to Roosevelt,” *Christianity and Crisis* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1943): 3.

Organization.”³⁹ It created a General Assembly in which all member nations could participate and a Security Council, comprised of five permanent members, along the lines of Niebuhr’s center of power in which power and responsibility were to be commensurate. Ten non-permanent members appointed by the General Assembly could participate and vote in Security Council matters but any permanent member had an absolute veto over certain matters considered binding upon UN members. These latter matters, under Chapter Seven of the Charter, include the power to impose sanctions or take armed action against “threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, or acts of aggression.”

Thus the UN became a component of the post-war order along the organizational lines Niebuhr had outlined. But there had been no essential agreement among the victorious powers regarding the political and geographic nature of the new world order. It seems likely that, even with the kind of agreements Niebuhr had envisioned, the UK, the US and the Soviet Union each would have demanded some kind of veto power in the Security Council. Given the preponderance of western powers on the Security Council the Russians would not have acceded to the UN charter without the veto. And despite a newly developed sense of international responsibility, as reflected in Roosevelt’s commitments to a UN, etc., it is highly improbable that the US would have been willing to sign the charter without a Council veto power. The point underscored here is that the UN that emerged from the wartime experience may have reflected the organizational form Niebuhr had envisioned for it, but it lacked the imperial power center he believed necessary for a more just post-war order.

In his essay “Plans for World Reorganization” Niebuhr had struggled to find the coalescence of political realism and creative idealism he believed necessary for a

³⁹ Exactly how much Niebuhr’s ideas influenced the formation of the United Nations is beyond the scope of this paper. But given the internationalist inclination of his intellectual circle it is scarcely surprising that his organizational ideals are consistent with those that eventually found their way into the UN Charter. It will be remembered that Niebuhr’s acquaintances included John Foster Dulles whose brother Allen was a central figure in WWII intelligence circles; Allen nominated Niebuhr to membership on the Council on Foreign Relations in 1948. We know, too, of Niebuhr’s close relationship with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a “New Dealer” who dedicated the first volume of his work *The Age of Roosevelt* to Niebuhr. Schlesinger noted that Niebuhr was drawn earlier to Roosevelt’s foreign policy than he was to New Deal economic principles. See “Niebuhr’s Role,” in Kegley and Bretall, 146.

lasting peace and a more just international order. He hoped that wartime exigencies would create a sense of community among the Allied powers upon which the post-war world order would be based. This community of trust among the great powers was the prefatory condition of the organization Niebuhr had envisioned. Without it there could be no real agreement on any effectively cooperative use of power necessary to maintain a more just world order against recalcitrant forces. Essentially, what Niebuhr's vision required was that each of the great powers relinquish sufficient national sovereignty and short-term self-interest to create a truly international power center; indeed, that the great powers would perceive that their own long term interests would be served by doing so. That this "realistic" ideal did not prove possible for a variety of reasons, some of which Niebuhr had foreseen and some not, was for him a great disappointment. Once again the egotistic flaw in human nature had been magnified by collective pride and an historic opportunity for enlarging the community of mankind was tragically lost. Yet, he insisted, Christians must "in all humility, deal with the realities of human nature, as well as the ideal possibilities." Their humble responsibility is "to establish a tolerable community within the limits set by man's recalcitrance."⁴⁰

Although the global organization he had envisioned eluded the ideologically bifurcated world of 1945, Niebuhr nevertheless believed that the UN served important purposes within the international community. It could, in fact, provide a forum in which all nations could be heard and the world's troubles discussed. It could bring international resources to bear upon the health, educational and development needs of poor nations. And as the Cold War divided the victorious allies, the UN could serve as a political bridge between two increasingly implacable camps. Although the UN lacked the power to maintain world order, "some frictions between the powers will be mitigated here which might otherwise produce intolerable tensions."⁴¹ These functions, Niebuhr believed, are in themselves important and encourage the patience and foster the tolerance upon which world community might be built.⁴² Yet he insisted that the UN could best serve its important purposes if its

⁴⁰ "World Community and World Government," *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 3 (March 4, 1946): 5.

⁴¹ "The United Nations," *Christianity and Society* 12, no.1 (Winter 1946): 3

⁴² In September, 1949 Niebuhr served as a member of the US delegation to the Fourth Conference of UNESCO in Paris. While he believed that UNESCO was attempting too much and made unrealistic

limitations were acknowledged. It was essential that UN deficiencies not occasion escape into idealistic schemes for world government while reality demands responsibility for a suffering and starving world. Those who would have better solutions to world problems than the UN offered must work to create the conditions upon which such solutions rest, i.e., building trust and community among the great powers. That the UN lacked the kind of power center Niebuhr had envisioned heightened US responsibilities within the international community. He called upon America to meet those responsibilities with creativity and imagination, a task requiring patience, toleration and a continuous acknowledgement that,

The peace of the international community is not secured by the logic of constitutional authority, even as no logic of law can maintain the peace of a national community, if more potent factors make for conflict. If we understand this we may give ourselves to our daily responsibilities with the greater devotion.⁴³

Reflected here is Niebuhr's fear that frustration with the UN might occasion yet another case of American "schizophrenia." If America's daily responsibilities for international community are more burdensome than the modest results sometimes appear to justify, America's idealists may be tempted to "dream up pure answers for difficult problems." One such scheme was to abolish the veto in the UN Security Council, ignoring the reality that neither the US nor the Soviet Union would agree to such a measure. American cynics frustrated by the veto, on the other hand, "may make our name odious by the irresponsible exercise of our power." The schizophrenia Niebuhr feared could best be avoided by creative and practical measures to relate US wealth and power, i.e., its national interests, to the needs and wider interests of the international community. If we fail in this responsibility, he wrote, "we shall have proved that we know how to resent, but not to allay, the world's fear of our power."⁴⁴ American support for and use of the UN presented

claims regarding its immediate and direct relevance to world peace, he wrote that its program in general could be of "tremendous significance" in integrating the world community. "The Theory and Practice of UNESCO," *World Organization* 4, no. 1 (February 1950): 3.

⁴³ "World Community and World Government," 6.

⁴⁴ "The Myth of World Government," *Nation* 162, no. 11 (March 16, 1946): 314. At this time the US was debating loans to the impoverished British government and considering ways to somehow "internationalise" its then-monopoly on atomic secrets. The former was achieved, the latter not.

significant opportunities, in Niebuhr's view, to relate US interests to the international community and to allay its concerns for America's great power.

UN and the Cold War: Old Realities and New Responsibilities

Though Niebuhr's incidental writing over the decade 1942-1952 reflected the daily events of this most tumultuous era of the 20th century, certain essays are prophetic milestones in this body of his work. In analysing Niebuhr's thinking on the postwar world his 1942 "Plans for World Reorganization" is one such milestone. There, as we have seen, Niebuhr prescribed the political considerations and resources of faith necessary to meeting what he perceived to be "the most compelling command of our day." Yet in the event the trust and political agreement among the great powers essential to his vision of the UN did not materialize. Neither wartime experience nor the fear of another even more destructive conflict had built community between the two great powers; indeed, their deep ideological differences, distrust and insecurity divided the world into two hostile camps. The victorious powers had cobbled a UN but it was not the world organization he envisioned when the US entered the war in 1942.

Niebuhr's prescription for a more just and peaceful international community had been refused. The pathology he had diagnosed was prideful and self-interested irresponsibility among the nations; his prescriptive cure was humility and its attitudes, given practical effect in the willingness of nations to relinquish some degree of national sovereignty in the interests of building international community. That this remedy was refused to a significant degree by all his patients did not alter his view that it remained the right and most hopeful prescription for building a more just world community. Yet for Niebuhr the attitudes of humility are always resources of faith that sustain hope and discern new possibilities amid missed opportunity, tragedy and disappointment.

Written a decade after "Plans," and in the early years of a quite different kind of war, Niebuhr's "Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations" is another of his

prophetic milestones.⁴⁵ Here Niebuhr provides something of a bookend for his views on the UN and American responsibility to the world community. If it treats with substantially the same problems raised in 1942, its perspective is very much grounded in the international realities of 1952. It provides a sober, almost steely assessment of these realities so tragically different than those he had envisioned a decade earlier. In this essay there is little of the wistfulness that seemed to lurk just beneath the surface of “Plans,” wherein so many incalculable ifs had to accumulate. Here, rather, is a renewed call for American responsibility in light of the new realities. There is here an air of disappointment but not despair, of irony but not cynicism, of hope but not escapism.

America’s commitment to the UN had been something of a dramatic conversion from the illusion that isolationism preserved its national innocence and from an “ignoble irresponsibility” within the world community. The fervour of this conversion, Niebuhr believed, lent a distinctly spiritual dimension to America’s moral commitment to the UN. Indeed, this resolute commitment met the first of William James’ two basic tenets for any great moral undertaking; the second being what Niebuhr described as “a whole series of specific acts of loyalty to give historical body to the commitment.”⁴⁶ Yet the spiritual nature of the commitment tended to distort realities regarding the UN and the international community. Some idealists were inclined to pretend that the UN was in fact the kind of global system that Niebuhr had envisioned in 1942. Others, though rightly recognizing that it was not, thought it possible to give the UN a more constitutional order by removing the great power veto in the Security Council. These latter idealists erred in not recognizing that the UN as structured was the best that could have been achieved at the time. In this light it could be said that the UN had exceeded realistic expectations.

It was a system of cooperation among the nations designed not for ideal possibilities but for the actualities of the present situation. Therefore, it could not only help us to take a resolute first step [James’ first requirement for any great moral undertaking] in the direction of

⁴⁵ “Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations,” *Motive* 16, no. 1 (October, 1955): 17-20. This essay was originally published in *The Hazen Pamphlets*, no. 29 (1952).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

world order, but it could also be the vehicle for all those acts of fidelity in an ongoing relation, which give body to the initial resolution [James' second requirement].⁴⁷

As in the marital relationship, Niebuhr offered, America's initial resolute commitment to the UN must be sustained by "daily acts of fidelity and forbearance." Niebuhr believed these acts assumed greater significance in light of the abstract nature of America's idealism and the fact that the UN had become a central device through which it was seeking to organize the non-communist world.

American commitment to the UN had to take realistic account of the schism between the communist and non-communist powers following the ratification of the UN charter in 1945. If wartime exigencies had failed to achieve community between two ideological worldviews, Niebuhr cautioned against overly investing in hopes that UNESCO cultural exchanges or grand summits would resolve those differences. The two sides may use the same words but they express different ideas; communist ideology, he thought, was so dogmatic that it had no way of truly engaging with other systems of thought. "It is dogmatic without qualification. It may ultimately yield to the pressure of world history but it is not likely to be beguiled by any international conference."⁴⁸ But just here America's resolute commitment to the UN served to preserve it by helping adapt its organization to the tragic realities of the bifurcated world. Through the Security Council the UN provided at least a minimal bridge between the two great power centers while the General Assembly served to integrate the nations of the free world.

These, it must be said, are modest achievements in world community compared to those he might have expected had the organization he envisioned in 1942 reached fruition. But events foreseen and unforeseen required him to affirm his own understanding regarding sinful human nature and the unpredictability of human freedom. The creative freedom to build world community that he had urged upon the wartime powers was unable to overcome collective egotism, self-righteousness and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

mutual suspicion. Speaking perhaps as much to himself as to his readers, Niebuhr obliquely appeals here to the humility that enables us to see new possibilities and new realities amid the wreckage of our hopes; humility that helps us accept the possible rather than selfishly insisting on our own ideal; humility that frees us from the prideful all or nothing mentality that denigrates those daily, patient, and perhaps humble acts of fidelity required to sustain our spiritual commitment to any moral striving.

These attitudes of humility underscored the significance of the UN to America's responsibility for avoiding war while opposing the spread of communism. The US commitment to the UN demonstrates that, while difficult, the duties to avoid war and prevent communist expansion were not incompatible. For Niebuhr, the UN provided a bridge between the two camps and offered an international forum before which they could make their respective cases. It provided an opportunity for America to allay suspicions and refute misrepresentations regarding its commitment to avoid war. Indeed, it offered the opportunity to patiently perform those daily acts of fidelity that affirm commitment to building international community. As the Cold War set in, Niebuhr saw that programs such as UNESCO built community within the free world and strengthened it against communist encroachment in non-military ways. Conversely, if the veto power restricted the Security Council's actions against overt aggression, the US appeal to the UN following North Korea's invasion of South Korea demonstrated America's commitment to at least the non-communist camp of the international community.⁴⁹ Appeal to the UN was, in Niebuhr's view, an important way of showing US patience and lack of hysteria in fulfilling its responsibilities for avoiding war while opposing communist expansion.⁵⁰ A fruit of humility, patience served to illumine the practical necessities in meeting those responsibilities.

⁴⁹ At the time of the North Korean invasion the Soviet representatives were boycotting the Security Council, while the European nations dominating the General Assembly were anxious to support US resolve against Soviet encroachment on the Continent. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 249.

⁵⁰ "Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations," 19.

If Niebuhr insisted that US power was essential to preserving what was then called the free world, he clearly believed that it was in America's interest to work through the UN to relate US power and wealth to an impoverished world. He feared that the disparity of wealth inevitably would create hostility between the US and the rest of the free world. He fretted that many Americans had little idea of the reach of their nation's power and wealth, particularly its economic power. "Power and weakness," he observed, "do not march easily in the same harness. It tempts the holders of power to pride and it tempts the weak to envy and resentment."⁵¹ In the course of fulfilling its international responsibilities the US inevitably would make the mistakes and misjudgements attendant upon all human endeavours. But because its power "impinges everywhere in the world, far beyond our conscious striving" its mistakes and misjudgements would be writ large internationally.

In many parts of the world, moreover, the US had inherited resentments created by centuries of Western exploitation and domination. In this respect the US should accept the UN as a constructive though not absolute check upon the use of its power and as a mechanism to align its national interests more justly with those of the broader world community. For Niebuhr, the attitudes of humility should enable Americans to discern between just and unjust resentment of US power, and to bear envy with patience and forbearance. Commitment to the UN gives practical expression of these and others of the attitudes of humility essential to the responsible use of American power.

From such loyalty will spring policies, which we must refrain from calling generous because they will be in our own long-term interest; but they will be wise in the sense that they will help to cement the unity of the free world.⁵²

For Niebuhr, US loyalty to the UN was integral to meeting its international responsibilities. The failure of wartime exigencies to create the international community he had hoped for underscored the immense difficulty of the task, a task

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

made seemingly impossible so long as the world community was divided into two opposed ideological camps. But the UN could provide a bridge between the two camps and, just as important, underscore US commitment to building community at least within the non-communist world. Such a community, Niebuhr wrote, “must gradually grow through acts of mutual loyalty” and the UN provided a great international stage upon which such acts could be performed.⁵³ In this regard commitment to the UN and, perhaps as importantly, policies in such areas as tariffs, trade, immigration and economic development assistance form “a whole series of specific acts of loyalty to give historical body” to US responsibility within the international community.

Conclusion

Niebuhr nevertheless insisted that the imperfections and weaknesses apparent in the UN had always to be recognized. Even these, he thought, held lessons in humility for those willing to learn them. Most importantly America, so quickly thrust into world leadership, had much to learn in its new role. Its ascendance to world leadership, compared to that of past global powers, occurred in what he described as “quick and easy strides.” The US was unused to the “frustrations of history” through which past hegemonic powers had matured. In its infancy and youth America was inclined to solve its problems by increasing its strength. Unprepared by its own experience, America as leader of the free world faced elements “beyond the control of any single agency or power.” America, Niebuhr insisted, had to learn that its relationship with the world is not a matter resolved simply by power and that, conversely, not everything that goes wrong is its fault. Each of these attitudes is a manifestation of an egotism that obscures self-understanding and delimits new possibilities for community. The attitudes of humility teach that there are circumstances that we cannot control.

We can deflect, harness and beguile the historical forces of our age
but we cannot ignore, defy or annul them. Perhaps no lesson is more

⁵³ Ibid., 20.

important for a nation as powerful as we, than the truth that even powerful nations cannot master their own destiny: for they are in a web of history in which many desires, hopes, wills and ambitions, other than their own, are operative.⁵⁴

Thus the attitudes of patience, forbearance, and acknowledgement of the limits of power illumine the important place of the UN in US international responsibility. For Niebuhr, the attitudes of humility had always to illumine the reality from which responsibility was to be discerned.

Yet it cannot be said that Niebuhr identified US international responsibility with loyalty to the UN. He was wary lest idealists invest the UN with an authority and power it did not possess, thereby jeopardising world order and tempting America to escape the responsibilities of its power. The reality of the post-war international community was that power was not concentrated in the single, preponderant center he had envisioned as essential to a more just world order. The United Nations that emerged from the war could not provide such a power center. Rather, the post-war world was characterized by concentrations of power within two ideologically hostile camps, each with its own vision of how the world ought to be organized. The UN could serve as a bridge between these camps but it could not resolve their ideological and political differences. It could serve to build community among the nations of the free world but it could not provide the power essential to deflecting communist encroachment and aggression; for this, the US and not the UN would have to bear primary responsibility.⁵⁵ In 1952 Niebuhr believed the US must be committed to a cooperative world community but that its commitment had to be less concerned with loyalty to the UN “in the abstract” and more concerned with dealing realistically with the concrete issues of the day. But, he cautioned, “In some of these issues a powerful nation will be inclined to disregard the wishes of weaker allies. In some of them a proud nation will be inclined to resent criticism of envious or resentful friends.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

For Niebuhr it is precisely here, where weakness tempts power, that the attitudes of humility illumine and circumscribe US responsibilities for justice within the international community, including its responsibilities to and through the United Nations.

Chapter Seven

Humility and International Economic Responsibility: The Marshall Plan

A little more justice now would obviate the necessity of charity later.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

This case study does not attempt an exhaustive history of the Marshall Plan. Rather, it offers an analysis of developments within Niebuhr's experience and public theology that convinced him such a program was essential to US post-war responsibilities. This task follows the contextual approach integral to his Christian realism that always discerned Christian responsibility through the attitudes of Christian humility. He insisted that America's post-WWI errors offered essential lessons for meeting its post-WWII responsibilities. These lessons included the long-term consequences of ignoring the economic despair and physical suffering that always follows in the wake of armed conflict. For Niebuhr the vindictive pride evident in the Treaty of Versailles had obscured such lessons to political realists who too narrowly defined their long-term national interests. Niebuhr wanted Americans to understand that military success alone could not produce the more just international community necessary for US security.

Although the US emerged from the war the world's dominant economic and military power Niebuhr believed that the responsible use of economic power was the key to meeting the nation's post-war international responsibilities. While he supported a policy of US firmness he viewed military force alone as a negative and ultimately unavailing program against Soviet intentions in Western Europe. What was required,

¹ "The Fight for Germany," *Life* 21, no. 17 (October 21, 1946): 67.

he told his *Christianity and Crisis* readers, was a “positive economic and political” program to mobilize American wealth to address the economic vacuum that made Western Europe politically vulnerable to Soviet encroachment.² Niebuhr believed that some convergence of humility and self-interest would be required for the kind of positive defence he thought essential. On a political level, it would require Americans to recognize their self-interest in such a program. On a spiritual level, it would require sufficient humility to recognize their privileged place in, and responsibility for, an impoverished world. Following true self-interest informed by the attitudes of humility America could assume its economic responsibilities within the world community. For Americans such a program would be integral to what George Kennan described as “the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.”³

Post-WWI Lessons in Economic Irresponsibility

The youthful Niebuhr grew bitterly contrite over his support for war in 1918 because of injustices subsequently inflicted upon Germany by the victorious democracies at Versailles. A 1923 visit to the Ruhr had convinced him further of the economic injustice of the Treaty of Paris in which, he later wrote, “one nation was asked to enslave itself to the Western world for several generations.”⁴ Under the terms of the treaty Germany was required to indemnify British and French civilians for all wartime damages and to pay pensions to war victims and compensation to their families. These were open-ended debts that future generations of Germans were obligated to pay. At the same time Germany was assessed an immediate payment in cash or in kind of \$5 billion and its foreign assets of about \$7 billion were seized. As compensation for its naval losses to German submarine warfare, Britain received a significant share of the German merchant fleet. Germany’s major waterways were internationalised and its powers to raise tariffs curtailed. Finally, German patents

² “Positive Defense,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 7 (April 29, 1946): 2.

³ George F. Kennan (“X”), *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July, 1947): 578.

⁴ “Perils of American Power,” 91. At Versailles France originally demanded the dismemberment of Germany, specifically the separation of the Rhineland, the nation’s industrial heart. The economic penalties imposed were, in part, compensation for being denied this demand.

were seized, an action that continues to have economic consequences: “Thanks to the Versailles Treaty,” Kissinger notes, “Bayer Aspirin is an American, not a German product.”⁵ To the German people, whose pre-war industrial production and exports had led both Britain and France, these draconian provisions of the treaty were politically motivated:

They inflamed German nationalistic passions: Germans felt that their country had not only been crippled and humiliated but had been made the victim of economic enslavement and spoliation.⁶

Niebuhr rebuked himself and other moral idealists like Wilson who supported the war while failing to prevent the vindictiveness that drove the “peace” of Versailles. “Of course,” he wrote, “we really couldn’t know everything we know now. But now we know. The times of man’s ignorance God may wink at, but now he calls us all to repent.”⁷ That there was much cause for repentance among the western democracies would become increasingly clear. The economic and political frailty of Weimar Germany was a proximate cause of the rise of Nazism and another war that would destroy much of Europe. As the scholar of Nazi history Detlev Peukert observed, “The German crisis had become the German catastrophe; its ultimate result was to be the devastation of Europe.”⁸

When Germany failed to meet its reparation payments in 1922 French forces occupied the Ruhr. On the heels of this occupation and Germany’s impending financial collapse, American banker Charles G. Dawes headed the Reparations Commission whose brief was to design a workable repayment plan and to provide Germany with American credit essential to meeting the rescheduled payments. The

⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 240.

⁶ Detlev J.K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. Richard Deveson, (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 267.

⁷ *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 42.

⁸ Peukert believes that though the economic crisis destabilized the Republic it was not alone sufficient to destroy it. (267) He writes that the political and psychological effects of reparations were more onerous than their economic effects. (197) The Republic failed because of the world depression of 1929 and because it had lost support of moderate political parties while under constant pressure from anti-republican and authoritarian elites who lent their support to Hitler in the electoral crises of 1932.

Dawes plan was accepted by the German government in 1924 and was renewed in 1929 with some alterations by the so-called Young plan. The immediate effect of the Dawes plan was to remove the French pretext for occupying the Ruhr and to lift a significant burden from the German economy. "The Dawes Plan," Peukert wrote, "was a victory for financial realism."⁹

But in 1931 Niebuhr had a decidedly different perspective regarding this demonstration of American international financial responsibility. In the Dawes and Young plans he espied the pride and presumption that he associated with American capitalism. "Their supposition was that a politics-ridden Europe was unable to find a solution for this vexing problem until unbiased American businessmen essayed the task."¹⁰ Here Niebuhr appears to ignore the fact that Britain saw the need to assist Germany and that the Dawes Commission had been proposed by the German government and accepted by the French. Fresh from his battles with Henry Ford and embarking upon a decade of radical socialism, Niebuhr may have interpreted the facts to suit his own ideological prejudices and to sooth his own guilty conscience regarding his support for the war.

Niebuhr's polemics do not diminish the clarity with which he saw the ominous political reality being masked by efforts to lessen the burden of German war debts. The reparations were themselves unjust in Niebuhr's view; that the 1929 Young Plan extended reparation payments well into the 1980s would poison generations of Germans with that injustice. Here Niebuhr reflected upon what he considered the peculiar tendency of American businessmen to disregard "the human factor" in international affairs. A greater awareness of this factor might have illumined the more critical problem underlying the payment of reparations, i.e., that the reparations were themselves unjust. "It was the obsession of Americans with business codes," he wrote in 1931, "which prevented a real solution of the reparations problem."¹¹ Moreover, he saw that behind the issue of reparations was the issue of war debts

⁹ Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 195.

¹⁰ "Perils of American Power," 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

owed by France to US lenders; that the unjust reparations were a vehicle for the repayment of French war debts. By 1931 both the political and economic consequences were evident. The extension of reparations payments had proven particularly odious to the political right in Germany and prompted such slogans as “Three generations of forced labour!” On the economic front,

A vicious circle developed, as American credits were followed by German reparations payments, which led to French credit repayments, primarily to the Americans, which in turn were followed by new American credits. In late 1929 this whole overblown system collapsed, and the countries involved were sucked into the world-wide recession.¹²

Niebuhr saw America’s inability or unwillingness to discern the organic relationship between its political and economic responsibilities as a political failure in meeting its international responsibilities. “But the real difficulty lay not with our leaders,” he wrote, “but with the rank and file of American citizens, who insisted on a simple formula for a complex situation.”¹³ It was essential that the average citizen, upon whom international policies ultimately rests, understand the effects of their nation’s great power and wealth upon the rest of the world. Americans, he believed, tended to measure their nation’s power in military and political terms; they did not seem to understand its power in terms of wealth. They would need to disentrall themselves from their libertarian ideal of laissez-faire economics if they were to understand the global impact of American wealth. In short, they would have to learn what Niebuhr thought in 1939 was a clear lesson of the Great Depression: that economic democracy is essential to maintaining political democracy.¹⁴

Responsibility and Impatient Humility

Though for Niebuhr patience was one of the attitudes of humility that usually

¹² Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 196.

¹³ “Perils of American Power,” 91-92.

¹⁴ “Ten Years That Shook My World,” 545.

characterized responsible action it had always to be applied in a particular context. Complacency and delay in the face of imminent disaster and human suffering must not be masked by pious appeals to patience. In this regard Niebuhr in his prophetic mode was seldom patient.

The chaos and injustice of Versailles led to Niebuhr's insistence that the Allies of WWII reach wartime agreements regarding the post-war world prior to any peace conference. There were highly touted meetings between Allied leaders but there was never a true meeting of their minds of the kind that Niebuhr believed essential to provide a stable and reasonably just peace.¹⁵ Even when Roosevelt and Stalin used similar words in the agreements that were reached-- e.g., "free elections"--each had a distinctly different understanding of what those words meant. In the end, the political geography of Europe was decided far more by occupying armies than by any political agreement among the victorious powers.

Niebuhr personally witnessed German misery after WWI that he believed engendered the hatred and Nazi madness leading to WWII. Avoidance of similar mistakes after victory over Nazi Germany was crucial to ending the circle of hatred that fed European conflict. Given the desperation and incalculable suffering of the struggle this would be a daunting undertaking that would require the discernments of faith and the attitudes of humility. Contemplating the Allied victory over Germany in May, 1945 Niebuhr wrote:

It is well that we should be shocked into sobriety by the magnitude of historical events and should be prompted by humility and piety by a contemplation of the tasks which still confront us. All of them are really beyond our best wisdom.¹⁶

¹⁵ "The Basis of World Order," *Nation* 159, no. 17 (October 21, 1944): 489. The need for such an agreement was a mantra of Niebuhr's during the war. This article, written after the Dumbarton Oakes conference in 1944, reflects his growing pessimism regarding an overall agreement despite the progress toward a UN-style organization.

¹⁶ "Soberness in Victory," *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 9 (May 28, 1945): 1. In recounting the cost of the war, however, Niebuhr also reminded his readers what had been at stake in the conflict. "As the victorious armies liberated one concentration camp after another and unearthed the hideous cruelties which were practiced in them, they gave us some hint of what the dimensions of total slavery are like, from which we escaped by a total war."

In May 1945, amidst national elation over victory in Europe, Niebuhr called for American “Soberness in Victory.” As he had counselled humility in the responsible conduct of the war he now counselled it in the responsible conduct of the peace. While confirming the necessity of waging the war, he noted the Carthaginian nature of Germany’s defeat and the responsibility that it cast upon the victorious powers. Certainly humble self-criticism would illumine the errors of vengeful self-righteousness. It would help America to perceive its self-interest in ameliorating the cycle of hatred that perpetuates international conflict. He reminded his *Christianity and Crisis* readers that humility teaches that the victors’ pride easily becomes the chief impediment to the foes’ repentance.¹⁷ Here again we discern the organic relationship Niebuhr posits between the attitudes of humility and identifying the responsibilities concomitant with true self-interest.

An immediate and inescapable responsibility in this regard was to prevent starvation in war ravaged Europe. Shortly after the German surrender Niebuhr observed that, “Whether this wealthy nation will have the grace to reduce its dietary standards for the sake of feeding a starving Europe will be one of the great moral and political issues of the coming months.”¹⁸ The necessity of meeting this immediate responsibility was a matter to which Niebuhr often turned, and often critically. Initially welcoming the US Army’s commitment to provide a daily ration of 1500 calories in its occupation zone, he subsequently discovered that this represented a starvation diet on which no one could sustain physical labour. He noted the resultant low birth weight and high death rate of German children.¹⁹ He asked Americans to consider their average daily diet of 3300 calories and to compare it with the self-sacrifices of the British people who continued on food rationing while helping feed starving Europeans.²⁰ When plans by the US Army to distribute food and candy to

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁹ “I Was An Hungered and Ye Gave Me No Meat,” *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 23 (January 7, 1946): 5

²⁰ Niebuhr consistently saw the British government and people as more compassionate about starvation in Europe than their American counterparts. He noted that the British, still under stringent wartime rationing, were sending private food parcels to Germany. “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 1 (February 3, 1947): 2.

German children over the 1945 Christmas season were quashed by the commanding general, Niebuhr ironically found his outrage best expressed by the militantly isolationist *Chicago Tribune*:

There is no lack of hate in the world today and no lack of men so stupid as to believe that peace can be born of hate. That we knew, but we were not prepared to hear that the blood feud was to be pursued in all its vindictiveness against little children by order of an American General. We did not expect that Christmas in the American Zone of occupation was to be devoted to teaching American boys that everything they learned in their homes and churches was a lie and to teaching German children that everything the Nazis told them about Americans was gospel truth.²¹

As he had after WWI, Niebuhr travelled to Germany in the fall of 1946 and reported back to his readers.²² Surveying the wreckage of war and the chaotic nature of the occupation Niebuhr wrote that, “the contrast of power and weakness is as fruitful of arrogance as the contrast of poverty and wealth is of self-indulgence.” Noting that some occupation officials believed the American public favoured a hard peace for Germany, perhaps he shared with them the *Tribune* editorial. We don’t know that he did but he wrote confidently that were the American people aware of the suffering of the German people “they would arise to the challenge.”²³

Niebuhr’s impatience with American relief efforts appears at times to ignore the complexity of the immediate post war situation in Europe. His May 28, 1945 call for soberness was certainly an appeal for the attitudes of humility to illumine the victors’

²¹ “I Was An Hungered,” 6. “We do not often quote the *Chicago Tribune* to praise its sentiments! Even that low type of journal finds the prospects of this policy in Germany so bad that its editorial about General McNarney [Eisenhower’s successor] is entitled: ‘Another Beast in Germany.’” Otherwise, Niebuhr appeared to despise the *Tribune*.

²² Professor John Baillie, who had invited Niebuhr to deliver the 1939-40 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, visited Germany the summer of 1946. Although Baillie’s initial observations regarding the food situation there are not as stark as Niebuhr’s, his diary of the visit confirms Niebuhr’s fears that the victorious powers were making the same mistakes as after WWI. “Report on Germany: Excerpts from a Personal Diary—June-July 1946,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 16 (September 30, 1946): 3-7.

²³ Untitled notes on the relief situation in Germany, *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 17 (October 14, 1946): 1.

policies. But reality was that Japan remained unconquered and estimates on the time and casualties required to do so were themselves sobering. While Niebuhr was impatient with American efforts to feed and house hungry Germans the Army was attempting to organize an occupational government in fractious coordination with its wartime allies.²⁴ Moreover, many of the troops who had participated in the liberation of Europe were preparing to ship out to Asia for a final push against Japan. If it is true that the nascent Truman Administration had been “reluctant to recognize our full responsibilities” it is also true that those full responsibilities may have required more than even American power and wealth could deliver at that time.²⁵ In Niebuhr’s understanding of the relationship between Christian humility and responsibility there is no place for complacency. So much is true. But there will always be competing demands and moral requirements in any given situation. Seldom are there resources sufficient to meet every demand. Those entrusted with responsibilities in such situations may not always reach the decisions we think right; but it does not necessarily follow that they are either callous or stupid, as Niebuhr at times implies.²⁶

A Prophetic Prologue

Niebuhr’s approach to responsible action emerges from the dialectic of prophetic faith and experience. And, as always in his work, the attitudes of humility illumine the proper course of action while pride, in its many guises, imperils true responsibility. Christian humility does not eliminate distinctions between greater and lesser evils in history: it did not require Americans to deny the relative justice of their cause against the Nazis. What humility does require is a God’s eye view of all human conflict and a profoundly prophetic understanding of the God in “whose sight no man living is justified.” Here, Niebuhr believed, is the great lesson for America in

²⁴ “The Conflict Between Nations and Nations and Between Nations and God,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 14 (August 5, 1946): 2-4.

²⁵ “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no.3 (March 4, 1946): 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.* In early 1946 Niebuhr noted that President Truman’s decision to conserve American wheat to boost efforts to feed Europe was “long overdue” and was concerned that mail service had not been restored in Germany. In January, 1946 Niebuhr had complained that the lack of mail service from outside Germany was preventing the receipt of urgently needed food parcels from abroad. “I was An Hungered and Ye Gave Me No Meat,” 6.

Hebrew prophetic tradition: nations who serve as instruments of God's justice are not exempt from God's judgement. "Jesus," Niebuhr wrote, "was later to justify the seeming perversity of the severer judgment upon the righteous with the words, 'To whom much hath been given, of him much shall be required.'"²⁷ Pride blinds power to this Biblical truth and to the injustice that inevitably results from the disparity between abject weakness and great power.

In his caustic August, 1946 essay "The Conflict Between Nations and Nations and Between Nations and God," Niebuhr surveyed the wreckage of Europe and feared that American power and ideological pride would issue in irresponsibility. The work of statesmen in meeting America's seemingly overwhelming responsibilities, he believed, would have to be characterized by the attitudes of humility. Here the witness of the Christian church was essential in reminding the nation that "the primary engine of injustice in victory is still the pride of victors who have no idea of the fact that the judgment of God is upon them as well as upon their foes."²⁸ Here, too, the Christian witness of humility perceives the practical nature of responsibilities drawn from this truth. For Niebuhr this required America to recognize that the kind of democracy and economic organization possible in an impoverished world might be quite different from the type of democracy "that only a wealthy nation can afford."

Niebuhr's impatience with US efforts to feed and house the German people sprung from both his great compassion and his understanding of human nature. He had observed first-hand the suffering following WWI and knew that the war just ended had inflicted far heavier destruction on the German people. An essential lesson to be learned from the earlier war was that in human suffering the seeds of new conflict are nurtured. For Niebuhr the care and feeding of ravaged Germany would be an early test of US post-war responsibility. Indeed, it would be a test of Allied propaganda regarding the provision of food and security for post-war Germany. This task was in fact prefatory to what Niebuhr saw as an enlarged and continuing American

²⁷ "The Conflict Between Nations," in *Love and Justice*, 161-162.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

responsibility for world stability. Such a responsibility had been implied by the August, 1941 Atlantic Charter signed by Roosevelt and Churchill in August, 1941, even before the US had officially entered the war. Niebuhr was disillusioned by what he saw as a failure to meet these promised or implied obligations. "Our leaders wrote in the Atlantic Charter assurances which pledged us to actions which a horrified Europe now sees are not forthcoming."²⁹ Thus while Niebuhr was impatient with US efforts to care for the surviving victims of the war, his broader concern anticipates the massive US commitment required to salvage future generations of Germans and thereby the future of Western Europe. The political and economic turmoil of post-war Europe, meanwhile, was exacerbated by growing tensions between a frustrated West and an increasingly intransigent Soviet Union.

Yet amid this uncertainty Niebuhr found hope in the renewal of Germany's spiritual life. While recognizing the historic failures of both Protestant and Catholic traditions in the rise of Nazism, Niebuhr saw contrition and repentance in the churches' assumption of responsibility for the victims of the war. He saw hope in the increased cooperation between Protestants and Catholics on the political scene, particularly in their awareness of the dangers of religiously sanctified political parties. Believing socialism to be the best form of economic organization in recovering Europe, Niebuhr saw this as a particularly promising development. In this resurgent spiritual life Niebuhr thought he saw the truth and power of the gospel in action. In the one remaining intact church of ruined Stuttgart Niebuhr was stunned by the powerful preaching of the young Helmut Thieliicke:

The gospel was given the most precise and helpful relevance to the daily life a harassed and sorely tried people. If the world would give Germany half a chance (which it may not either out of stupidity or malice) much grace will flow to all of us from this new life.³⁰

²⁹ "I Was An Hungered," 5. The Atlantic Charter enlarged upon Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" of speech, worship, hunger and fear. The joint statement of the two leaders, notes Kissinger, "reflected not a statement of traditional war aims but the design of a totally new world bearing America's imprimatur." Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 390-391.

³⁰ "Report on Germany," *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 17 (October 14, 1946): 6. Though he had commended Karl Barth's warning against religiously sanctified political parties, Niebuhr could not resist a swipe at Barth whom he suspected as being naïve regarding communist intentions. "In a now famous address in Stuttgart, he [Barth] declared: 'The Christian faith can be maintained even in a well

In the humility of the powerless Niebuhr encountered the contrition and repentance in which hope illumined by faith created new possibilities for community. He saw these fragile possibilities being thwarted by the pride and complacency of US power. Of all the great powers engaged in WWII, only America escaped devastation in its homeland. It emerged from the war with the greatest industrial and economic capacity the world had yet seen. Though its sacrifice in human life and suffering was great, its civilian and military casualties did not approach the appalling percentages of Europe. Niebuhr's prophetic voice refused to let the powerful forget Christ's judgment that "to whom much is given, of him much shall be required."

Discerning a Positive Defense

Niebuhr's incidental work nearly always addressed the contemporary situation. Certainly his insistence upon post-war American economic responsibility reflected the political and economic framework of prostrate post-war Europe. The often fractious relationship between the western democracies and the Soviet Union had essentially disintegrated. Europe was being divided into two camps, with the struggling western democracies under the umbrella of America power facing Soviet encroachment from without and communist agitation from within. Though he counselled firm resistance to Soviet power, Niebuhr believed that the dismal economic situation presented the greatest threat to the European democracies. In April, 1946, as much of Europe sank further into chaos, Niebuhr wrote in *Christianity and Crisis* of what he called a "Positive Defense."³¹ While proposing no detailed plan Niebuhr called for a "positive and affirmative program for possessing the field." The greatest threat to Western Europe was the vacuum created by its ruined economies and it was into this vacuum that Russian power would inevitably flow. What was required was a new and positive political strategy that recognized this reality. "Unless we support our political policy with an adequate economic policy," Niebuhr wrote a few months later, "Soviet

regulated band of robbers.' To which one of the leaders of the struggle against Nazism replied: 'Such a judgment is more easily made by one who has little direct experience of the robber band from which we have been liberated.' " "Report on Germany," 7.

³¹ "Positive Defense," *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 7 (April 29, 1946): 1

ideology will cross our strategic barrier.”³² On the part of the victorious powers such a political policy would require sufficient humility to acknowledge their self-interest in an economically viable Germany.

It is not possible to spell out every detail of a positive economic and political policy for western Europe. But only such a policy can prevent the spread of communism upon the continent. It would not obviate the necessity of standing firmly against Russia on certain issues. But such firmness would not consist merely in threatening the weight of our military power. We would not try by our might to keep Russia out of a chaos and a vacuum. Rather we would make western Europe healthy enough to resist the totalitarian alternative to its ills.³³

Niebuhr continued this line in his essay “The Fight For Germany” appearing in the October 21, 1946 edition of America’s popular *Life* magazine.³⁴ He outlined the bleak situation in Germany and its relationship to the struggle against Soviet power in Europe. He supported the Truman administration’s policy of firmness with the Soviets and its commitment to continued responsibility in European affairs and rejected the view of some American liberals that such a policy was provocative. “Russian truculence,” he wrote, “cannot be mitigated by further concessions.” His recent travels convinced him that the Russians were “seeking to extend their system over the whole of Europe.”³⁵ There must be no illusions about those ambitions nor amnesia regarding the policies of appeasement that had failed to stop Nazi aggression. It was right to contain Russian power to prevent its reaching the point that it believed it could dominate Europe. Should that point be reached, Niebuhr

³² “Will Germany Go Communist?” *Nation* 163, no. 14 (October 15, 1946): 372.

³³ “Positive Defense,” 1.

³⁴ “The Fight For Germany,” *Life* 21, no. 17 (October 21, 1946): 65-72.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65. In September, 1946 American Secretary of State James Byrnes had assured anxious Europeans that US troops would remain in Germany to deter further Soviet encroachment. Niebuhr was present for Byrnes’ Stuttgart speech and wrote that it was supported by “everyone except the Communists.” Days later at a New York City rally the radical liberal Henry Wallace, Truman’s Secretary of Commerce who had served as vice president in Roosevelt’s third term, minimised the Soviet threat in Europe and criticised the Byrnes speech as provocative. See Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 127-8. Truman fired Wallace. In his 1948 presidential campaign Wallace was supported by the US Communist party, of which Niebuhr was a leading liberal critic. He believed that Wallace’s Communist support was aimed at electing a conservative Republican thereby providing grist for the Soviet propaganda mills in Europe. “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 24 (January 19, 1948): 2.

averred, the West's survival instinct would make war inevitable, as had happened with Nazi Germany. "The way to avoid war is not to allow this expansion."³⁶

Although Niebuhr supported Truman's firmness he nevertheless was critical of American policies in Europe. His criticism went beyond the oft-voiced bitterness at what he saw as inadequate US relief efforts.³⁷ "In addition to political firmness we need an economic strategy." This was particularly true in Germany where the Soviets had insisted upon four occupation zones while thwarting efforts to unify the German economy. Indeed, German economic disunity and its resultant misery were precisely suited to the Soviet strategy for subduing Germany ideologically. While Soviet terror tactics had discredited Communism in much of Germany and Europe, the West's failure to acknowledge the critical role of economic assistance, in Niebuhr's view, was an increasing source of disillusionment among anti-Communist and pro-democratic forces across the continent.³⁸

Because German socialist parties were in the forefront of anti-Communist opposition, Niebuhr was particularly incensed by American hostility to what was viewed as "undemocratic" socialist planning. "Amidst the shambles of the German cities," Niebuhr fumed, "such notions of 'free enterprise' are as irrelevant as Communism is noxious."³⁹ In his view America's economic libertarianism was a prideful impediment to political groups, especially the German socialists, who knew that Soviet strategy played upon economic misery. This was true of the desperate situation across Europe, Niebuhr observed. "There is no possibility of saving freedom in Europe except by the support of political forces that stand to the left of

³⁶ "The Fight For Germany," 67.

³⁷ Despite Niebuhr's criticism that humanitarian aid to post-war Europe was insufficient, the US effort was considerable. US food aid to Europe after 1945, and administered under UN auspices, cost \$9 billion. Harvey Sicherman, "America and the West: Lessons from the Marshall Plan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (January 1998): 1-3.

³⁸ "The Fight for Germany," 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68. The Socialist and Christian Democratic parties in Bavaria inserted in their draft constitution a provision calling for a central planning commission. The US military government rejected the provision as "incompatible with democracy."

American liberal thought.”⁴⁰

American firmness, if expressed in military presence alone, was insufficient to save Europe. The American people had to understand that a clear policy of economic reconstruction was required if Europe was to resist further Communist encroachment. German and European industry needed to be rebuilt even as humanitarian efforts were increased. “A little more justice now,” Niebuhr wrote in the autumn of 1946, “would obviate the necessity of charity later.”⁴¹ A humble understanding of the limits of American political and military power would illumine the practical requirements of the justice that the new situation required. Humility would help Americans accept the limited relevance of their economic and democratic ideologies to a prostrate Europe. Even as America affirmed its “outer defences” the attitudes of humility would help “make our political and economic life more worthy of our faith and therefore more impregnable.”⁴²

It would be error, of course, to think that Niebuhr alone perceived American self-interest being served by economic aid to Europe. Even as he was laying before his readers the desperate situation in Europe, US officials were digesting George F. Kennan’s “Long Telegram” of February of 1946. This document was the basis of his equally famous essay, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” published in the July, 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.⁴³ Kennan did not here provide an economic analysis of the needs of Europe nor detail US responsibility for meeting those needs. But in calling for a US policy of containment he underscored the economic fragility of the Soviet Union, a fragility masked by the “primitive political vitality” of Communist ideology. Soviet Communism, Kennan wrote, could export “its enthusiasms...[but was] unable to back up those articles of export by the real evidences of material power and prosperity.” Countering and moderating Soviet behaviour would be a “test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations,” Kennan

⁴⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 72.

⁴³ George F. Kennan (“X”), *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947): 566-82.

observed. The security of the American people would depend upon “their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.”⁴⁴

The Limits of a Military Solution

Meanwhile events on the edge of Europe were forcing the issue of US financial responsibility. In the winter of 1946-47 Great Britain’s economic straits rendered impossible its continued military support for the beleaguered governments of Turkey and Greece. In early 1947 President Truman, Secretary of State George Marshall, and his deputy Dean Acheson met with Congressional leaders to make the case for US assistance to the two nations. Both Marshall and Acheson outlined the nations’ relevance to US national interests but, according to Kissinger, it was the usually urbane Acheson’s apocalyptic rhetoric that carried the day.⁴⁵ “We are met at Armageddon,” he began:

Like Apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the East. It would also carry infection to spread through Asia Minor and Egypt, and to Europe through Italy and France...The Soviet Union was playing one of the greatest gambles in history at minimal cost... We and we alone were in a position to break up this play.⁴⁶

The immediate result of this seminal meeting was the so-called Truman Doctrine, announced by Truman in an appearance before a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 578.

⁴⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 451-52.

⁴⁶ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: 1969), 219; cited in Patterson, 127. Following Acheson’s dramatic performance, a converted Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg advised Truman to “make a personal appearance before Congress and scare the hell out of the American people.” Fred Siegel, *Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1984), 39-40; cited in Patterson, 128. Truman obliged.

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free people to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.⁴⁷

In addition to these sweeping statements of principle, Truman asked Congress for \$400 million in military aid for Greece and Turkey. Despite criticism that the plan was imperialistic, was ambiguous,⁴⁸ that it bypassed the UN and that its cost represented 1 percent of the \$40 billion Federal budget, it easily passed both houses of Congress some months later. Among the groups supporting the plan was the recently formed Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal anti-communist organization of which Niebuhr was a founding member and moving force. Like Truman, Niebuhr urged a political “middle ground” between conservative and radical anti-interventionists and supported “the development of a healthy democratic program, embracing both foreign and domestic policy and both economic and political problems.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, while Truman confirmed an ongoing US international commitment to the kind of patient firmness that Niebuhr supported, the immediate purpose of the plan was to provide military assistance to Greece and Turkey. The urgent economic requirements of Western Europe upon which its long-term recovery depended, as Niebuhr and others knew, could not be met by military assistance alone.

If the Truman plan was a right decision, in Niebuhr’s view, it was but a “token” of the commitment required for European recovery. His June 9, 1947 essay, “American Power and European Health,” doubtless written before Marshall’s June 5 speech at Harvard University, supported Acheson’s earlier call for a \$5 billion annual

⁴⁷ Harry S Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, N.Y: 1956), 129-130; cited in Patterson, 128.

⁴⁸ Kissinger concurs with those critics who made the point at the time: “It was an ambiguity that refused to go away, generating debates about American purposes in nearly every crisis that have not ended to this day. Ever since, American foreign policy has been obliged to navigate between those who assail it for being amoral and those who criticise it for going beyond the national interest through crusading moralism.” *Diplomacy*, 453.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, “The Organization of the Liberal Movement,” *Christianity and Society* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1947): 10.

peacetime lend-lease program and interest free loans for Europe. Such a national commitment would not be a matter of pure generosity.

Nations as nations are incapable of such generosity. We could rise to such a policy only if we were wise enough to understand that generous, interest-free loans would not merely save the economy of western Europe but would also insure our own economic health.⁵⁰

Recognizing that such a program would be a matter of responsibility *and* self-interest was important as a practical matter. For Niebuhr it was essential that this be clearly understood. Otherwise what would begin as responsible action--the action discerned through the attitudes of humility--could become a vehicle of self-congratulatory pride falsely affirming the national virtue. As a practical matter, in Niebuhr's view, such pride would impede European recovery by insisting that economic aid be tied to America's particular notions of free enterprise and libertarian democracy. "If we insist upon them Europe may be wrecked even though we meet all other tests."⁵¹

A Nation "Conscious of Our Responsibilities": The Marshall Plan

Even as Niebuhr's June 9, 1947 essay was reaching its *Christianity and Crisis* readers, Secretary of State General George C. Marshall used the occasion of Harvard University's June 5 commencement to announce the plan that would bear his name. Given the proposal's sweeping international context Marshall was an inspired choice to announce it. Famously non-political and the highest-

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, "American Power and European Health," *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 10 (June 9, 1947): 1. Another American depression was a ghost that haunted Niebuhr's early post-war years. If Europe needed American economic aid to restore its economic health, America needed a viable European economy to maintain its own economic strength. "The Russians are speculating daily on the possibility and imminence of this depression," he warned his readers.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* In the November, 1946 Congressional elections Republicans won control of Congress. Niebuhr appeared certain that this presaged a return to pre-New Deal economic conservatism that, in his view, could not distinguish between European democratic socialism and Communism. Great Britain was by then under a socialist government and the strongest anti-Communist elements in Germany and much of Europe were the socialist parties.

ranking American general of WWII, his prestige far exceeded Truman's. Indeed, for Truman, Marshall was "the greatest living American, and for Churchill, "the greatest Roman of them all."⁵² Though not an historian, Marshall had fought in WWI and had been a thoughtful observer of US policy failures following that conflict. In October, 1945 he warned against America returning to a "state of disinterested weakness" and failing to meet its international economic and political responsibilities. As both soldier and diplomat he was determined that these mistakes should not be repeated. Public opinion, however, seemed inclined toward a new isolationism. In the Fall of 1946, the Republican party, calling for tax cuts, economic nationalism, and downsized government, had captured majorities in both Houses of Congress. In February, 1947, as the situation in Europe continued to deteriorate, Marshall appeared at Princeton University and reminded the American people of their responsibilities as citizens of a world power.⁵³ Meanwhile, Marshall's staff was preparing a new initiative for the massive aid that those responsibilities would entail.

In his brief June 5 speech at Harvard Marshall did not present a master plan for the massive US aid he said would be required if Europe were to be restored to economic and political health. One wonders whether Acheson's "We are met at Armageddon" approach might have best served the occasion, but hyperbole was not Marshall's style. He first outlined the need in his typically dispassionate manner.

In considering the requirements for the rehabilitation of Europe the physical loss of life, the visible destruction of cities, factories, mines, and railroads was correctly estimated, but it has become obvious during recent months that this visible destruction was probably less serious than the dislocation of the entire fabric of European economy. For the past 10 years conditions have been highly abnormalMachinery has fallen into disrepair or is entirely obsolete...Long-standing commercial ties, private institutions, banks, insurance companies and shipping companies disappeared, through the loss of capital, absorption through nationalization or by simple destruction...The breakdown of the business structure of Europe was

⁵² Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 100.

⁵³ "The Marshall Plan," marshallfoundation.org, 3.

complete...the rehabilitation of Europe quite evidently will require a much longer time and greater effort than had been foreseen.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, he reminded Americans, what few resources remaining to the governments of Europe were required to feed and clothe desperate and displaced populations. While Marshall couched his appeal in humanitarian language, he wanted Americans to understand that far more than humanitarian assistance was necessary to salvage Europe.

The truth of the matter is that Europe's requirements for the next 3 or 4 years of foreign food and other essential products--principally from America--are so much greater than her present ability to pay that she must have substantial additional help, or face economic, social and political deterioration of a very grave character...The remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole.⁵⁵

If Marshall believed that Americans were peculiarly drawn to altruistic appeals he also knew, like Niebuhr and other realists, that any sustained recovery program required an essential element of US national self-interest. As Niebuhr had observed in his June 9 essay, no program capable of salvaging the European economy could be "a matter of pure generosity." Nations, he wrote, are not capable of such generosity. Only if Americans have the wisdom to see that an economically healthy Europe insures their own economic health, "could we rise to such a policy."⁵⁶ It was only after cataloguing Europe's economic ills and couching his appeal in humanitarian terms that Marshall made this essential point to his Harvard University audience.

Aside from the demoralizing effect on the world at large and the possibilities of disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned, the consequences to the economy of the United States should be apparent to all. It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "American Power and European Health," 1.

economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace.⁵⁷

Ironically, for all of Niebuhr's railing against the moral blindness of US businessmen, the intellectual father of the Marshall Plan was the wealthy commodities trader, William Clayton. Clayton, serving as Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, saw Europe not as an admixture of national interests but as a huge market. It was Clayton who saw that Europe's economies could be restarted only if its industries were rebuilt. This, Clayton argued, would require US dollars to purchase American retooling exports and technical assistance to modernize both industry and agriculture. It was Clayton, moreover, who insisted that the program should be administered by Europeans.⁵⁸

Though Clayton appears to be precisely the type of business figure he often demonised, Niebuhr recognized the significant political strength that Clayton's approach lent to the entire enterprise. "It is highly significant," Niebuhr wrote in the Fall of 1947, "that motives of self-interest thus come to the support of a policy which generosity alone might well prompt." In the heat of the Congressional fight for the plan's enabling legislation, Niebuhr observed that, "it is because motives of national self-interest converge upon motives of generosity, that we have a right to hope that the Marshall Plan will be accepted, no matter how the isolationists may rage."⁵⁹

In concluding his brief address Marshall underscored that the purpose of his proposal was to "provide a cure rather than a mere palliative" for Europe's economic crisis. The program would be open to all the nations of Europe, including the Soviet Union and the Eastern European nations that were increasingly under its political control.

⁵⁷ "Marshall Plan," 7-8.

⁵⁸ Sicherman, 1. Marshall's Harvard speech, however, was not drafted by Clayton but by a leading State Department Kremlinologist Charles Bohlen using memoranda by Clayton and studies by George F. Kennan and his Policy Planning Staff. Niebuhr became a consultant to the Policy Planning Staff in 1949. "The Marshall Plan," 6.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, "The Marshall Plan," *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 17 (October 13, 1947): 2. Kissinger, however, writes that in gaining the plan's approval "a global crusade against hunger and despair was found to be more persuasive to Americans than appeals to immediate self-interest or the balance of power." *Diplomacy*, 454.

At the same time Marshall warned that nations, political parties, and other groups that seek to undermine economic recovery “will encounter the opposition of the United States.”⁶⁰ He called for those governments that wished to participate in the plan to outline their needs and agree upon an organization to administer whatever program Congress might eventually approve.

Reflecting the desperate situation reaction to Marshall’s speech in Europe was favourable and immediate. Most European nations, including the Soviet Union, appeared at a June 17 conference in Paris to prepare the outline of need and administrative organization that Marshall requested. The Soviet delegation, however, was quickly recalled by Moscow and left the conference inveighing against American economic imperialism. Neither the Soviet Union nor its satellite nations would participate in the Marshall Plan. Clearly Stalin would not have seen a resurgent Western Europe as furthering Soviet interests. Perhaps, too, he was not prepared to share the revealing financial and economic data that would be required to participate in the program. Indeed, some who are sceptical regarding the intent of the Marshall Plan believe this requirement was written to discourage Soviet participation. But as a practical matter, the Soviet withdrawal from the Paris conference and its increasing truculence in Europe was a political plus: in the eyes of the American people and their Congress, the plan was more attractive without Soviet participation.⁶¹

For Niebuhr the Soviet walkout at the Paris conference had significance beyond participation in the Marshall plan. What was increasingly apparent had become real. The Soviet decision not to participate in the plan, in his view, signalled the “final division” of Europe into opposing ideological and political camps. Even so, if the plan would be unable to rebuild all of Europe it nevertheless did what the Truman

⁶⁰ Marshall here refers to both the Soviet Union and to the apparent reactivation of the Comintern that had been dismantled during the war as a concession to the Allies. The new organization of worldwide communist parties, called the Cominform, was announced in September, 1947. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 443.

⁶¹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 131. Niebuhr agreed. “By withdrawing they assured the support of the American nation for a plan that which may mean billions of dollars in aid to Europe.” “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4, 1947): 2.

plan could not do: it offered Western Europe new hope for economic recovery, “without which military resistance (as envisioned by the Truman plan) is in vain.” Moreover, the departure of the Soviets enabled Britain and France to design the cooperative European program requested by Marshall. Although Niebuhr saw that the “final division” meant a divided Germany for the foreseeable future, the Marshall plan offered the opportunity to rebuild the economy of the western sector of Germany, a step Niebuhr thought essential to a stable Europe.⁶² Thus, as with his hopes for the UN, Niebuhr’s hopes for the Marshall plan had to adjust to the realities of a politically bifurcated Europe.

After the Soviet walk-out at Paris the western European nations led by Britain and France moved with celerity to submit the proposal requested by Marshall. Their initial proposal of a four-year, \$29 billion program reached Washington in late August 1947. This figure was not politically feasible and was eventually reduced to \$17.8 billion over four years. Although there was political opposition in the Republican-controlled Congress, some conservative Republicans supported the plan and some liberal Democrats, following Henry Wallace, opposed it on various grounds, including the fact that it bypassed the United Nations. In retrospect, however, the national debate fell short of Niebuhr’s glum prediction that it would “undoubtedly plumb some sodden depths of American stupidity.”⁶³ Moreover, events favoured passage. Members of Congress who visited Europe confirmed its dire conditions. Most Americans were optimistic about their own future and thought the nation could afford to help. And, like Truman, the American people had come to distrust the man they had called Uncle Joe Stalin during the war. As Congress was considering the plan’s enabling legislation, rigged elections in 1947 installed a pro-Soviet government in Hungary and in early 1948 there was a communist coup in

⁶² “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 13 (July 21, 1947): 2. Niebuhr recognized that while the Marshall plan aimed at rebuilding the economies of Western Europe, it would also encourage East-West trade and thereby provide another of his “bridges” between the two camps. “The Federation of Western Europe,” *Christianity and Crisis* 8, no. 3 (March 1, 1948): 17.

⁶³ “American Wealth and the World’s Poverty,” *Christianity and Society* 12, no. 4 (Autumn 1947): 3. At times it is difficult to distinguish between Niebuhr’s prophetic anger and his partisan political leanings. But in this case those occupying the “sodden depths” included the Republican controlled Congress which he saw as isolationist and anti-New Deal, as well as Wallace and his left-wing Democrat following who opposed what they mocked as the “Martial Plan.” See Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 131.

Czechoslovakia. This coalescence of events spurred Congressional action. The enabling legislation authorizing \$14 billion for four years was passed in March 1948. In April Congress appropriated £6.8 billion for the first fifteen months of the Marshall Plan, with \$5.3 being spent in the first year.⁶⁴

Though Niebuhr had expended considerable energy in urging the kind of massive European aid program embodied in the Marshall Plan, its passage and subsequent implementation are not prominent in his incidental work. Initially this appears odd in light of his commitment to a program he considered essential and that, even before its passage, he had called a “turning point in postwar history.”⁶⁵ Certainly he would later acknowledge that the economic assistance provided by the plan was critical to Western Europe.⁶⁶ But beyond that the Marshall plan, for Niebuhr, signalled America’s acceptance of its significant international responsibilities. “There is,” Niebuhr wrote, “a genuine impulse of responsibility in our gesture of aid.”⁶⁷ By such guarded praise he wanted to discourage the idea that the plan was simply an extraordinary act of national generosity and to preclude any self-congratulatory arrogance for doing only what the responsibilities of American power and wealth required. In this regard it was essential to recognize that the Marshall Plan served America’s long-term self-interests. Moreover, as passage of the plan became more likely Niebuhr renewed his prophetic criticism of what he considered an idolatrous attachment to the “American way of life,” i.e., for Niebuhr, the identification of democracy and freedom with libertarian economic policies and the idolatrous belief that America’s wealth is a proof of its virtue.

Conclusion

If the Marshall Plan signalled American acceptance of responsibility, Niebuhr would

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 131-32. “This was equivalent to \$80 billion today, and was 3% of the U.S. GNP then, but, most significantly, over 10% of the federal budget in a bad year for the U.S. economy.” Sicherman, 2.

⁶⁵ “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4, 1947): 2.

⁶⁶ “Hybris,” *Christianity and Society* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1951): 4.

⁶⁷ “The Glories of ‘Free Enterprise’,” *Christianity and Society* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1948): 7.

iterate that true responsibility always entailed the attitudes of humility. He wanted his nation to comprehend the great disparity between its wealth and the poverty of the world; to understand that while America emerged from the war a far wealthier nation, its Allies had been impoverished by it. Americans needed to perceive the desperate situation through the lens of humility.

Europe as a whole, though grateful for the provisions of the European recovery program, cannot view our generosity with quite the same enthusiasm as we are inclined to regard it. Its provisions are still in the category of crumbs which fall from Dives' table.⁶⁸

If Americans had expected of their allies an "equality of sacrifice" during the war it was now clear that some had sacrificed far more. In this regard, even generous wartime lend-lease arrangements and Marshall Plan assistance left America "far short of the goal of equality of sacrifice." Humbly accepting this reality should prompt generosity in meeting American responsibilities for helping rebuild Europe. Humility, in illumining what equality of sacrifice requires, should as well reduce our expectation of gratitude from the nations assisted. These nations, Niebuhr reminded Americans, are poor not because they don't work hard or because they don't understand competitive capitalism. They are poor, rather, "partly because they sacrificed more in a common struggle than we; and partly because they have not been favored by nature as much as we."⁶⁹

Although Niebuhr saw the Marshall Plan as America's most creative venture in international affairs, his praise was sparing.⁷⁰ For him the attitudes of humility would help Americans put the Marshall plan into perspective. If they could accept Churchill's assessment that it was the most unsordid act in history humility would remind them of their self-interest in performing that unsordid act. If the Marshall Plan did great good, as it clearly did, humility cautioned against exaggerating its impact while diminishing the remarkable role the recipients themselves played in

⁶⁸ "The Morality of Nations," *Christianity and Society* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1948): 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ "Ten Fateful Years," *Christianity and Crisis* 11, no. 1 (February 5, 1951): 2.

their own recovery. Niebuhr would likely agree with the late 20th Century American historian who wrote that compared to the “selfish reaction of the United States to the plight of Europe after World War I, the Marshall Plan represented a remarkably enlightened effort.”⁷¹ But that seems as far as Niebuhr’s understanding of true responsibility would allow him to go in praise of the Marshall Plan. “If we waste very much time in self-congratulation,” Niebuhr observed in the Fall of 1950, “we will not be prepared for the continuing responsibilities which we must bear.”⁷²

Niebuhr recognized the meretricious appeal to Americans of once-and-for-all solutions to incalculably complicated problems. In his caution against self-congratulatory satisfaction regarding the Marshall Plan Niebuhr addresses a basic concern regarding America’s ongoing responsibilities within the international community. His wartime insistence on post-war planning and agreements reflected his rejection of the popular idea that military victory marked, as it largely had in WWI, the limits of American responsibility. He strongly encouraged commitment to the UN because it could illumine American responsibilities in building world community. At the same time he rejected the notion that commitment to the UN was absolute and marked the limits of American responsibility for a more just world. Likewise, while Niebuhr welcomed the economic commitment the Marshall Plan represented he knew that undue pride in its achievements would obscure America’s ongoing responsibilities. He knew enough of human nature to know the temptations of self-righteousness and pride, particularly when we believe we are doing “good.”

⁷¹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 133.

⁷² “The Conditions of Our Survival,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 1950): 483.

Chapter Eight

Humility and International Responsibility: Democratic Self-Criticism

The best chance of our own powerful nation meeting the great responsibilities of which history has given us too brief a preparation, lies in abjuring every temptation to regard our power and our favoured position among the nations as proof of our superior virtue; and in listening patiently to the mounting criticism of our life (even though envy may partly prompt it) in the hope that it may make us wiser in the exercise of our power and more prudent in the discharge of our responsibilities.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

In an early work Niebuhr wrote that “the truly religious man does know himself as no one else does.”² Grounded in the acceptance of our finite and sinful condition before an infinite and perfect God, self-knowledge is the first fruit of Christian humility. Gained in the profound experience of God, humble self-knowledge comprehends the great impediment that pride, in its various guises, poses to the relationship with God that properly orders all human relationships. Only through the self-knowledge of humility do we apprehend and accept the finitude of the creaturely existence we share with all human beings. Through humble self-knowledge we apprehend the chimerical nature of the security we seek through false self-esteem and pride, and contritely perceive the danger egotism poses to our relationship with God and with others. Thus Niebuhr could write that humble self-knowledge is the “wisdom by which we deal with our fellow men, either as comrades or competitors.”³

¹ “America’s Precarious Eminence,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 23, no. 4 (Autumn 1947): 490.

² *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 90.

³ *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 16.

Niebuhr believed that its power, wealth and sense of national particularity made the US especially prone to the pride that impedes responsibility. A contrite and humble recognition of our limitations, our nation's natural blessings and our self-interest issues in the democratic self-criticism essential to national responsibility. The attitudes of humility open us to the criticism and claims of others who must look to us for justice. Just here the humble spirit of democratic self-criticism militates against confusing American power with moral authority and right action.

This case study is more broadly contextual than the previous three. It entails an examination of democratic self-criticism as it emerges from Niebuhr's understanding of Christian humility reflected in his incidental work. To discern the importance Niebuhr assigns to American self-criticism it is necessary to describe, briefly, America's historic self-image. Within this context Niebuhr's prophetic role comes into sharper focus and illumines the true nature of Christian patriotism. The study then examines the relationship between democratic self-criticism, Christian love and the requirements of social justice. Finally, the study examines the role of self-criticism in discerning the moral authority upon which responsible power must rest.

A Prophetic Vocation and the New Jerusalem

Niebuhr unquestionably loved America yet was one of its harshest, if insightful, critics. This critical stance formed the core of a prophetic vocation that he consciously patterned after the implacable Hebrew prophet, Amos. In Amos Niebuhr found "a conception of a universal history, over which the God of Israel presided as sovereign but of which the history of Israel was not the centre and end."⁴ Amos' transcendent God had universal designs in which He might use or reject Israel, according to His own purposes. The prophets of an infinite God who stood both within and above history were thereby set against any nationalistic or exclusive appropriation of their God for finite human purposes. Amos' God is the Lord of all

⁴ Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 106.

peoples; His purposes will be accomplished with or without the instrumentality of Israel or any other nation or people. In the caustic anti-nationalistic oracles of Amos, Niebuhr observed, “history is seen not from the perspective of a nation but as a universal whole.”⁵ Niebuhr’s prophetic vocation attempts a God’s eye view of America’s place in this universal history.

He was called to this vocation within a nation shaped by a sense of its own particularity, “called out by God to create a new humanity.”⁶ The young nation, blessed by immense natural resources, was formed just as technological innovation facilitated their development. Although it could not escape entirely the social upheavals of Europe, America’s geography insulated it from the political turmoil of the Continent while it developed its self-understanding as a uniquely libertarian democratic society. Following Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Americans developed a sense of rightness and innocency regarding their national destiny. And, like Jefferson, many Americans came to believe that they had shed the prejudices and vices of the Old World to offer mankind a new beginning. When a late 18th Century American divine preached of the United States as “God’s American Israel” he voiced the sentiments of many of his countrymen.⁷ The Jeffersonian poet Freneau gave popular expression to America’s sense of national particularity.

Here independent power shall hold sway
And public virtue warm the patriot’s breast.
No traces shall remain of tyranny
And laws and patterns for the world beside
Be here enacted first.
A new Jerusalem sent down from heaven

⁵ Niebuhr, *Destiny*, 24.

⁶ Niebuhr, *Irony*, 24-25. “The idea that America is the focal point of a providential plan appears early in the nation’s religious history.” See Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 45, n.28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

Shall grace our happy earth.⁸

In *The Irony of American History* Niebuhr identified a “deep layer of Messianic consciousness” among Americans regarding the “allegedly universal values which we hold in trust for mankind.”⁹ This Messianic self-consciousness as the “darling of divine providence” also sanctified the secular Jeffersonian ideal of American political innocence. This sense of innocence became a filter through which Americans viewed their national power. America’s purposes would be achieved principally through example and the mysterious workings of divine providence. This did not preclude, of course, a role for human action in furthering the national destiny. Yet most Americans saw themselves not as masters of the world but as “tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection.”¹⁰ Here Niebuhr found that America’s sense of particularity produced not a lust for power but rather a sense of naïve innocence among ordinary citizens regarding their nation’s use of power. This innocence coupled with the moral pride that tempts all notions of particularity, Niebuhr warned, are ironical hazards to achieving America’s “new Jerusalem.”

Our moral perils are not those of conscious malice or the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn to vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently. The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 27. Jefferson, Niebuhr notes, had suggested that the seal of the United States depict “the children of Israel, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.” *Irony*, 70. Not all the Founders, of course, shared this popular and sentimental view of national destiny and innocence. John Adams, an intellectual and moral force among America’s founding fathers, and the nation’s second president, reminded Jefferson of the underlying reality of human nature and the corruption of power. “Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws.” *Irony*, 21.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Ibid., 133.

Niebuhr calls for the degree of national self-examination possible only through the lens of humility. This requires that a rich and powerful nation possessed of a profound sense of its particularity not be the ultimate judge of its own case; that it measure its merit as the “tutor of mankind” not against the failures of other systems but against the failures of its own. For Niebuhr the attitudes of humility enable a self-criticism essential to true self-understanding. Because it opens us to the critical views of others humility enables us see ourselves as others see us. But most fundamentally, the attitudes of humility acknowledge the ultimate judgment of God upon all human endeavours and pretensions. If Americans believe that God has called their nation to special responsibility humility requires that they seek a God’s eye perspective of their virtues and achievements. Americans, Niebuhr insisted, must remember that the same divine will from which they discern their nation’s particularity also judges their historical stewardship of the gifts bestowed. From the perspective of prophetic faith a nation that fashions itself as the New Jerusalem must always remember the lessons of ancient Israel: that those charged with a divinely ordained mission remain under divine judgment. This essential lesson could be discerned only through “humility born of faith”¹²

Certainly Niebuhr believed that America, as a nation blessed among nations, was called to responsibility commensurate with its power and wealth. Its particularity, for Niebuhr, entailed the use of its great resources in the pursuit of more equal social justice both at home and abroad. His prophetic judgment followed when, in his view, America’s divinely bestowed blessings were used selfishly and unjustly; when his nation presumed that its power and wealth were “the fruit and proof” of its virtue; when, like ancient Israel, the nation presumed that divine favour exempted it from divine judgment.¹³ Because pride in its various guises was the great hazard to America’s special responsibility he insisted that the attitudes of humility had always to be concomitants of US power. In the context of liberal democratic tradition

¹² Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 136.

¹³ *Irony*, 46. “If we are to have prophetic criticism of the statesmen, “ Niebuhr had written in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, “may they be prophets who know what kind of world we are living in and learn how to place every type of statesmanship under the divine condemnation.” 121.

Niebuhr believed that a balance of social forces and democratic self-criticism formed the “structural contrition” mete for collective humility.¹⁴

A contrite recognition of our own sins destroys the illusion of eminence through virtue and lays the foundation for the apprehension of “grace” in our national life. We know that we have the position we have in the world today, partly by reason of factors and forces in the complex pattern of history which we did not create and from which we do not deserve to benefit. If we apprehend this religiously, the sense of destiny ceases to be a vehicle of pride and becomes the occasion for a new sense of responsibility.¹⁵

This reflects the essence of Niebuhr’s prophetic vocation. Behind the often biting criticism of the pretensions of a nation he loved was his profound belief that without the grace of humility there could be no responsible use of power; that, indeed, his nation could lay no claim upon a Christian’s patriotism. If in his incidental work he occasionally offered words of encouragement and solace, he more often spoke in the mode of the implacable Amos. Speaking with prophetic authority he could challenge, shame, condemn and offend. Though his personal humility was seldom questioned, Niebuhr speaks in a prophetic voice that is often angrily audacious. If his understanding of Christian humility entailed the attitudes of patience and toleration he could appear unreasonably impatient and his tendency to generalise opposing views in pejorative language can ring a decidedly intolerant note. Yet at the heart of his prophetic oracles against what he saw as American pride and irresponsibility is a calling to help shape a nation worthy of its God-given gifts and mission, a nation worthy of a Christian’s love and devotion.

There could be no question, of course, of where a Christian’s ultimate love and obedience lie. A persistent criticism within Niebuhr’s work is the tendency of people and nations to confuse finite and partial values with God’s ultimate and universal truths. This confusion reaches demonic proportions when religion lends divine sanction to the state’s partial and limited goods. Thus prophetic judgment at times

¹⁴ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 124.

¹⁵ “Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility,” *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 16 (January 30, 1943): 3.

must critique religion to deny the state's claim to absolute truth or to the Christian's ultimate loyalty. But while Niebuhr understands that Christian patriotism can be problematic he also posits a Christian responsibility to participate in the shaping of a national life whose finite goods make it worthy of Christian love. Nevertheless, by its very nature Christian loyalty is shaped first and foremost by the love of God. All human loves and loyalties, including those owed one's country, must be ordered by the love of God and through faithful obedience to Him.

For Niebuhr, the aura of innocency derived from America's sense of a divinely ordained mission always tempts national self-righteousness and pride that he believed are the very essence of sin. Compounded by national wealth and power, this sin always issues in national irresponsibility. His prophetic vocation was a continuous call to account for American stewardship of its natural blessings and the divinely ordained mission it claimed for itself. This calling to account is critical and often devoid of the language of love. But its inspiration is always the divine love that orders all loves including the love of one's country. Like Jeremiah, he condemned as false the prophets who assured his fellow countrymen, "who walketh after the imagination of their own heart, No evil shall come upon you."¹⁶ Indeed, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* Niebuhr observed that patriotism is a piety born of limited imagination that "may be expressed by savants as well as saints."¹⁷ For Niebuhr, any understanding of patriotism and of the claims it may make upon the Christian can be discerned rightly only through the self-critical lens of Christian humility.

The best chance of our own powerful nation meeting the great responsibilities of which history has given us too brief a preparation, lies in abjuring every temptation to regard our power and our favoured position among the nations as proof of our superior virtue; and in listening patiently to the mounting criticism of our life (even though envy may partly prompt it) in the hope that it may make us wiser in the exercise of our power and more prudent in the discharge of our responsibilities.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jeremiah 23:17, quoted in "The Validation of the Christian View of Life and History," *Theology Today* 6, no.1 (April, 1949): 43.

¹⁷ *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 66.

¹⁸ "America's Precarious Eminence," 490.

Humility and Discerning the Requirements of Justice

Although patience and toleration are fruits of humility essential for any democratic society, Niebuhr called his fellow citizens to their responsibility to make difficult, even tragic, choices among conflicting claims.¹⁹ Patience and toleration cease to be fruits of Christian humility if they mask irresolution and complacency; humility does not license retreat from responsibility by apportioning moral equivalency among competing claims. Such feigned humility, Niebuhr observed, obscures the essential issue of justice involved in all political decisions.²⁰ At what point in collective behaviour the distinction might become clear cannot be calculated with precision. But for Niebuhr the requirements of more equal justice in any given situation provide the most important markers in democratic decision-making. That these requirements are themselves often difficult to discern ironically reflect the attitudes of humility. In some circumstances justice unquestionably requires compassion, patience and toleration while in others justice and compassion are served through criticism and resolute action.

Niebuhr consistently affirmed the law of love as the ultimate law of Christian faith.²¹ But he as consistently criticised what he saw as liberal Christianity's tendency to be irrelevant to the daily and practical requirements of justice because it presented "the law of love as a simple solution for every communal problem." He rejected the sentimental assumption that the law of love that in personal relations issues in sacrificial self-giving operates similarly in collective relationships. "Nations, classes,

¹⁹ "Justice and Love," *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1950), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 27.

²⁰ "Christian Faith and Political Controversy," *Christianity and Crisis* 12, no. 13 (July 21, 1952): 98.

²¹ "Hazards and Resources," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1949): 200. "All law, whether historical, positive, scriptural, or rational, is more tentative and less independent in its authority than orthodox Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, supposes, even as it is more necessary than liberal Protestantism assumes. The final dyke against relativism is to be found, not in these alleged fixities, but in the law of love itself. This is the only final law, and every other law is an expression of the law of love in minimal or in proximate terms or in terms appropriate to given historical occasions." "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 9, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1952): 95-111; reprinted in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 173.

and races do not love one another. They may have a high sense of obligation to one another,” but “they must express this sense of obligation in the desire to give each one his due.” In collective relationships the law of love critiques and illumines the requirements of justice but it does not abrogate the “specific and detailed definitions of rights and duties” essential for more equal social justice.²² For Niebuhr enforced rights and duties are essential in collective relationships because sentimentalised notions of Christian love seldom recognize the persistent power of self-interest.

It is because self-interest is not easily overcome in even the life of the “redeemed” that most of the harmonies of life are not the perfect harmonies of fully co-ordinated wills but the tolerable harmonies of balanced interests and mutually recognized claims.²³

Thus America’s sense of a divinely gifted particularity ironically obscures the essentiality of these practical requirements for social justice. In its innocence regarding the goodness of its own purposes America is too easily beguiled by sentimental notions of the law of love to critically assess the potential injustice that individual and collective self-interest entails. The law of love that always demands of the Christian more than justice requires is subverted when the self-knowledge gained in humility is impaired by egotism. Philanthropic love demonstrates this point. In philanthropy, Niebuhr observed, love is expressed toward those who “make no claims against us, who do not challenge our goodness or disinterestedness.” Self-interested philanthropy accordingly may serve to confirm the power we hold within the social structures that sustain social injustice. “An act of justice on the other hand,” Niebuhr wrote, “requires the humble recognition that the claim that another makes against us may be legitimate.”²⁴

The egotism of human nature may so sentimentalise the law of love that it becomes irrelevant to social justice. Love’s requirements are expressed in such transcendent

²² “The Spirit of Justice,” *Christianity and Crisis* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1950), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

ideals that it assumes an ethereal quality too easily susceptible to our self-interest. Here the law of Christian love may be set in opposition to the mundane laws of social justice that entail both rights and duties. In the sentimental, self-serving expression of love corrupted by egotism only un-coerced goodness is seen as real goodness; that which we do in accordance with the coercing laws of justice assumes the quality of “second-rate” goodness. Such a perfectionist view of Christian love, Niebuhr insisted, obscures the fact that justice and social harmony require a great deal of the “second-rate goodness” required of us by law.

We have to have a taxation system that demands more of us than we are inclined to give voluntarily; and we may maintain a social security system that holds us responsible for the security of other families than our own beyond our natural inclination. We cannot preserve the health of the free world without American aid to other nations that must go far beyond the utmost limits of voluntary philanthropy.²⁵

In his 1950 essay “Justice and Love” Niebuhr identified two errors in the efforts of what he called moralistic Christianity to address the problems of justice in the context of the early Cold War.²⁶ The first error, he wrote, is the perfectionist view that complete and consistent selflessness is a simple possibility. This error follows from the finite and partial perspective of human nature. Even the least self-interested persons assay the common interest from a limited perspective that can never be entirely free of ambition and self-interest. The self-criticism required of Christian humility illumines the nature and degree of self-interest in the choices before us. But the notion that individuals, much less human collectives, are capable of achieving perfect self-interestedness is a delusion. “If complete selflessness were a simple possibility,” he wrote, “political justice could be quickly transmuted into perfect love; and all the frictions, tensions, partial co-operations, and overt and covert conflicts could be eliminated.”²⁷ The requirements of love always stand in judgment of our efforts to achieve justice, but human nature and history militate against the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Justice and Love,” reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 27-29.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

idea that love, particularly in human collectives, may simply substitute itself for the laws of justice.

Moralistic Christianity's second error, according to Niebuhr, is to set self-interest in simple opposition to common interest. This error ultimately becomes one of omission because it leads us to ignore the great majority of society's ethical issues. Such issues, he observed, "are concerned not so much with the problem of the self against the whole as with problems of the self in its relation to various types of 'general welfare.'" Is self-interest set against that of family, community or nation? Which of these collective goods should have the greatest claim upon the Christian's conscience? If the choice is between family and nation, for example, must the choice be for the larger community? If the choice is between my nation and another, "must preference always be for the other nation on the ground that concern for my own nation represents collective self-interest?" Here moralistic insistence that Christians always place the collective interest of another community or nation above that of their own may resolve conflict but not serve the cause of justice. Niebuhr's case in point was Christian pacifists who argued that it was principally the "selfish concern for our own civilization" that fomented Cold War tensions between the West and the Soviet Union.²⁸ "Thus," he wrote, "disloyalty and irresponsibility toward the treasures of an historic civilization becomes equated with Christian love."²⁹

Here we encounter something of a paradox in discerning Christian responsibility for social justice. Christian responsibility entails a critical recognition of self-interest in judging others' claims for social justice, indeed in all the moral choices before us. But the critical analysis of self-interest entails as well the consideration of our own claims for justice. If the disavowal of our own claim to social justice is made a moral absolute of love, Niebuhr insists, there is no true justice. As Lovin observed, the moral legitimacy of any political arrangement reflects the recognition that

²⁸ Ibid. The arguments here reflect those Niebuhr had used in his break with Christian and Socialist pacifists over the course of the 1930s and particularly with the onset of WWII. See *Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940), reprinted in *Christianity and Power Politics*, 1-32.

²⁹ "Ten Fateful Years," *Christianity and Crisis* 11, no.1 (February 5, 1951): 1.

“everyone has *some* claims that deserve to be honoured by any community.”³⁰ Resistance to Nazi and Communist aggression by the Western democracies was an assertion of such claims and was undoubtedly self-interested. There may be what Niebuhr calls an “ecstatic” form of agape that makes one capable of selflessness to the point of martyrdom. But this ideal as an absolute social norm does not define the requirements of the daily struggles for social justice and harmony.³¹ But while the love commandment cannot produce perfect justice among human collectives, as an “impossible possibility” it stands in ultimate judgment upon all human attempts at justice.³² In the daily exigencies of social life love and justice cannot be equated but they are inextricably related in prophetic faith. “In so far as justice admits the claims of the self, it is something less than love. Yet it cannot live without love and remain justice. For without the ‘grace’ of love, justice always degenerates into something less than justice.”³³

Thus if justice allows that our own claims be entertained it also requires that the seductive power of self-interest always be resisted. Christian responsibility for social justice never escapes this tension because the egotism of human nature stands opposed to the demands of love: “There is a law in my members which wars against the law that is in my mind,” Niebuhr reminds us from St. Paul.³⁴ It is the grace of love, rather, that enables us to distinguish between self-interest and the cause of more equal justice. But because of the law in our members that follows human nature, Niebuhr nevertheless insists, any realistic system of social justice does not assume the power of love but rather the power of self-interest. It must further assume that,

³⁰ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 245.

³¹ This discussion has its antecedents in “The Ethic of Jesus,” a chapter in Niebuhr’s *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. “The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life—the problem of arranging some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces. It has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics, nor of the necessary balances of power which exist and must exist in even the most intimate social relationships.” *An Interpretation*. 23.

³² *An Interpretation*, 71.

³³ “Justice and Love,” 28.

³⁴ *An Interpretation*, 71.

This power will express itself illegitimately as well as legitimately. It must therefore be prepared to resist illegitimate self-interest, even among the best men and the most just nations. A simple Christian moralism counsels men to be unselfish. A profounder faith must encourage men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness.³⁵

Because of its sense of particularity and divine mission Niebuhr's America was inclined to count itself among these most just nations. Its sense of innocence regarding the use of its power and wealth abroad was heightened by victories over manifestly evil regimes in WWII and by its subsequent Cold War leadership of the West against yet another tyrannical power. "What could be simpler," Niebuhr asked, "than to play the role of moral hero when the villains, who act as a foil for our virtue, are so obviously evil?"³⁶ The nature of the evils against which US power was arrayed, coupled with America's tendency to view itself as the democratic ideal, served to instill a sense of virtue regarding the use of its power. These factors combine to discourage the self-critical attitudes that serve to make American power more just, an essential element in sustaining its moral authority. America's self-image as God's favoured nation militates against the attitudes of humility reflected in the political self-criticism that retards self-righteousness. The frequent result, Niebuhr observed, is an inflexible self-righteousness that impedes harmonious relations with other nations.³⁷ "Powerful men and nations are in greater peril from their own illusions than from their neighbors' hostile designs," he wrote in 1947. While power may protect the privileges and possessions of nations, "it does not protect them from their own follies, which are indeed aggravated by the privileges of power."³⁸

Genuine self-criticism is a fruit of humility that deflects self-destructive pride and safeguards others against our self-righteousness. It illumines the point at which self-interest and the requirements of justice for others converge; it thereby opens us to the

³⁵ "Justice and Love," 28.

³⁶ "American Pride and Power," *The American Scholar* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1948): 394.

³⁷ "The Conditions of Our Survival," *The Virginian Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 1950): 482-3.

³⁸ "American Pride and Power," 393.

creation of ever-enlarging communities within the human family. While all human efforts at social justice stand under the judgment of God's perfect love, Niebuhr's Christian realism knows that social justice always requires the use, or threatened use, of power. At the same time Christian realism recognizes that all power entails evil consequences even when employed by "good" people for "good" purposes. For this reason prophetic faith always critiques power, most especially power employed in the name of justice.

It reminded the rulers and princes, the powerful and influential, that they were never as just as they deemed themselves to be, but encouraged them nevertheless to exercise their power contritely and with "firmness in the right," as God gave them to see the right."³⁹

Self-Criticism and Discerning the Moral Authority of American Power

Niebuhr cast a critical eye upon his own nation because he sought a God's eye view of the great responsibilities attached to its power and wealth. In doing so, he rejected expressions of the Christian faith and political idealism that seek God "too simply as the truth which supplements historic truth but does not stand in contradiction to it; which completes human virtue but does not judge it."⁴⁰ From this perspective, Niebuhr reminded his fellow citizens, the most powerful of nations are as "drop in the bucket and are counted as small dust in the balances."⁴¹ The God's eye perspective illumines the essential relationship between the contrite self-criticism of humility and the moral authority of American power. Only those persons and nations who recognize the finitude and limits of their power may claim any divine instrumentality for good. But such a claim always remains tenuous and subject to the prophetic criticism that the God's eye view belongs to God alone.⁴² The limited and partial perspective of all human understanding means there can be no Christian use

³⁹ "America's Precarious Eminence," 489.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴¹ *Irony*, 150.

⁴² Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 22.

of great power with an easy conscience.⁴³ An ever-present hazard to true Christian responsibility, from the perspective of prophetic faith is the self-righteousness that egotistically equates our cause and our imperfect use of power with the perfect love and will of God.

The love of Christ thus always stands in a double relation to the strivings and achievements, the virtues and wisdoms of history. Insofar as they represent developments of the goodness of creation it is their fulfilment. Insofar as they represent false completions which embody the pride and the power of individuals and nations, of civilizations and cultures, it is their contradiction.⁴⁴

If Niebuhr's prophetic criticism was ranged against false completions of Christian responsibility his purpose was to illumine the impossible possibilities of love amid the mundane struggles for social justice. He believed democracy to be the form of government most capable of the balance of conflicting demands of freedom and order out of which more equal justice may emerge. Where democracy seeks ever increasing degrees of social justice it is worthy of Christian devotion and loyalty. But this loyalty always remains conditional and under the ultimate judgment of God. Niebuhr's vocation was to speak this judgment to a powerful nation prone to confuse its form of democracy with God's perfect will.⁴⁵ To make a political absolute of our particular democratic ideal is an idolatry that he attacks with prophetic vitriol. His frequently caustic pronouncements could offend Americans of all political persuasions. Quite likely, for example, Niebuhr was among those intellectual elites that Richard Nixon would brand the "Blame America First Crowd."⁴⁶ To the extent that Niebuhr's prophetic vocation set him in opposition to the injustices of power masked by both liberal and conservative ideologies, this accusation has a decidedly ironical ring to it. Where American power and self-righteousness converge there is a

⁴³ "Hazards and Resources," 201.

⁴⁴ "The Validation of the Christian View of Life and History," *Theology Today* 6, no.1 (April 1949): 31.

⁴⁵ "Democracy as a Religion," *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4, 1947): 1.

⁴⁶ Nixon was "the *bete noir* of most Democrats and ADA liberals like Niebuhr, whose leaders he had long accused of being soft on Communism." Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 212. That Niebuhr and Schlesinger, both founding members of the ADA, were staunchly anti-communist did not make them immune from the charge.

prophetic obligation to denounce the false completion of national responsibility. It is through the humble acceptance of prophetic criticism that the nation discerns the truer completion of its responsibilities.

For Niebuhr the truer completion of American responsibility entailed the use of its power and wealth to participate in creating a more just world community. Because power also imperils responsibility its use must be illumined by a humility that transcends our perceptions of national self-interest. Prophetic faith recognizes that self-interest may lay moral claims, but those claims are always subject to the requirements a divine justice discerned through the requirements of love. Just here Niebuhr's critical stance seeks to illumine the relationship between America's true self-interest and its responsibilities for building the more just international order upon which its greater national security ultimately rests.

Thus the moral authority of American power requires some convergence of self-interest and the interests of the wider community of nations. That America's power rests upon a democratic form of government does not lend it a de facto moral authority that its sense of national particularity too readily assumes. This ideal, Niebuhr observed, encourages uncritical assumptions regarding the moral authority of American power. Such assumptions reflect an arrogance that undermines American power in building world community. While responsibility rejects the escapism of attributing moral equivalence to lesser and greater injustice the fact of power does not make the moral case for assuming responsibility. Indeed, Niebuhr repeatedly warned that power engenders a prideful spirit that militates against a true assessment of moral authority. Just here, he believed, Americans are prone to endow their ideal of democracy and economic life with the ultimate values of life.⁴⁷ Consequently our claims to moral authority become confused by power, wealth and a prideful presumption of national particularity.

On a political level humility discerns moral authority through democratic self-criticism, toleration, patience and responsibility for social justice. Here the attitudes

⁴⁷ "Democracy as a Religion," 1.

of humility allow “the constant interpenetration of ideas and ideals” that discern “mutually supplementary moral values” among competing claims. The attitudes of humility serve as midwife to the inclusive moral values “requisite for the spiritual and moral integration of civilization.”⁴⁸ In the context of US international responsibility Niebuhr thus relates moral authority and political influence. Absent the attitudes of humility pride, most particularly national pride, militates against the moral authority that is an essential concomitant of responsible political power. Pretension to universal truth in political organization and action thus masks the moral ambiguities reflected in all social structures and all use of all power. The result is the diminished moral authority that issues in diminished political influence without which power alone cannot maintain order and justice.

The more we indulge in an uncritical reverence for the supposed wisdom of our American way of life, the more odious we make it in the eyes of the world, and the more we destroy our moral authority, without which our economic and military power will become impotent. Thus we are undermining the reality of our power by our uncritical pride in it.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This case study reflecting on humility and moral authority in Niebuhr’s incidental work, unlike the earlier studies on the conduct of war, the United Nations and the Marshall Plan, is less contextual and more broadly cast. If each of the previous case studies affirms the essential role of humility for Christian responsibility in particular contexts, this study seeks to affirm humility as the lens through which Niebuhr is most meaningfully read in any context. Humility is affirmed as indispensable to all Christian responsibility and use of power. The moral authority of responsibility rests on discerning the truth that prophetic faith always speaks to power.

⁴⁸ “Hazards and Resources,” 201.

⁴⁹ “American Pride and Power,” 394.

Both as prophet and Christian realist Niebuhr urged the powerful to gauge the limits as well as the possibilities of power. As a practical matter this responsibility requires that all factors in a given situation be given due consideration. An essential factor is the moral authority claimed by those who possess power. True moral authority cannot rest upon self-serving claims to ultimate truth that simply mask power. It rests, rather, upon the humble and self-critical recognition that there is an ultimate truth beyond the truth that we ourselves may claim; that we must critically weigh our truth claims against the claims of others; and that we are responsible to our fellows and ultimately answerable to God in light of His ultimate truth. "This," Niebuhr wrote, "is why every historic judgment must be charitably and humbly subjected to the 'last judgment' which is not ours."⁵⁰

The ultimate truth of this last judgment humbles the powerful and empowers the powerless. Grounded in the profound experience of God, this truth is the source of the grace that continuously shapes our relationship with Him and with others. This is the grace of humility that is power beyond human power and "operative only when human powers recognize their own limits."⁵¹ Thus discerning moral authority essential to responsible power requires searching self-criticism before God and the humble acceptance of the criticism of our fellows. Niebuhr's prophetic eye accordingly was cast most often on what he saw as the pretension, hypocrisy and injustice of his own nation. He insisted that the moral authority of American power requires ever-greater achievement of the ideals of justice, equality and freedom that underpin its sense of particularity.

If we succumb to the temptation of hypocrisy and claim too pure a virtue for our international politics, we shall merely invite the world's derision and contempt. This derision will be forthcoming the more readily because powerful nations are not generally popular. Moreover, we shall also relax our own moral restraints too much by such procedure. Power ought always to be exercised with a certain uneasiness of conscience. When the conscience becomes easy, self-

⁵⁰ "Ten Fateful Years," 4.

⁵¹ Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 118-19.

righteousness aggravates the moral weakness of the wielder of power.⁵²

⁵² "Hazards and Resources," 203.

Part III

Reading Niebuhr for Today

Look with mercy upon the peoples of the world, so full both of pride and confusion, so sure of their righteousness and so deeply involved in unrighteousness, so confident of their power and so imprisoned by their fears of each other. Have mercy upon our nation, called to such high responsibilities in the affairs of mankind. Purge us of the vainglory which confuses our counsels, and give our leaders and our people the wisdom of humility and charity. Help us to recognize our own affinity with whatever truculence or malice confronting us that we may not add to the world's woe by the fury of our own resentments.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

¹ A prayer for nation and community in *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 97.

Chapter Nine

American Power and Iraq: A Retrospective

The paradox of American power is that world politics is changing in a way that makes it impossible for the strongest world power since Rome to achieve some of its most crucial international goals alone.¹

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Introduction

The degree to which the attacks of September 11, 2001 affected the Bush Administration's understanding of American power and its role in the international community was reflected in its October 2002 *National Security Strategy* (NSS). As the strategy was being analysed by the international community the Administration launched a diplomatic campaign to disarm Iraq of suspected weapons of mass destruction. Concomitant with these efforts was a build-up of US forces in the Gulf region. Not unexpectedly much of the international community viewed Iraq as the first major test of the new US security strategy.

The purpose of this chapter is to present a brief history of the relationship between American power and Iraq since the first Gulf War in 1990-91. This material provides the immediate historical context in which Iraq became a focal point of the G.W. Bush Administration's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. With this material in mind I turn to Chapter Ten and a Christian realist's analysis of key elements in the *National Security Strategy*.

¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "U.S. Power and Strategy After Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no.4 (July/August 2003): 72.

The First Gulf War

The new world order heralded by President George H.W. Bush in 1989 appeared to promise a more hopeful era characterized by the peaceful building of international community. Discouraging US and Western triumphalism over the Soviet collapse the President envisioned a new world order that “would feature increased US-Soviet cooperation, a more effective United Nations and multilateral responses to threats of that order.”²

We have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order, a world order where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle governs the conduct of nations...an order in which a credible United Nations can use its peacekeeping role to fulfil the promise and vision of the UN’s founders.³

Such hopeful declarations gained credence with the serial eradication of thoroughly nasty East European despots. If the August 2, 1990 Iraqi invasion of neighbouring Kuwait revealed the ephemeral nature of hopes for the new world order it also affirmed America’s commitment to multilateral strategies. Saddam’s forces had barely crossed Kuwait’s borders before the President initiated the first of the eighteen resolutions that circumscribed and in the view of many nations, legitimised those strategies.⁴ Some observers believed that Bush had encouraged the UN to function as it was designed to function in building international consensus. Others such as Arthur Schlesinger wrote that Bush had forcefully engineered a “multilateral façade

² Stanley R. Sloan, “The United States and the Use of Force in the Post-Cold War World: Away from Self-Deterrence?” *A Congressional Research Report for Congress* (January 6, 1997): 6.

³ President G.H.W Bush, “The Liberation of Kuwait Has Begun.” Speech of January 16, 1991, in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (New York: Random House, 1991), 349-50.

⁴ See “U.N. Resolutions: The Complete Texts” in *The Gulf War Reader*, 137-156. Within days these resolutions imposed on Iraq the most rigidly enforced sanctions in history; with some adjustments over the years these sanctions, which had always excepted food and medical supplies, remained in place until lifted following the destruction of Saddam’s regime. See Kimberly Elliot *et al.*, “Sanctions Work: The Historical Record,” in *The Gulf War Reader*, 256.

for a unilateral U.S. war.”⁵ And while some observers believed that the first President Bush had established a multilateral paradigm for US leadership in the post-Soviet era others, among them Henry Kissinger, believed that circumstances admitting the high degree of international cooperation in the Kuwait crisis were too unique to serve as that paradigm.⁶

Hindsight confirms this view. The coalition arrayed against Saddam in late 1990 succeeded, with broad international cooperation coalescing around US/UK arms, in ousting Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But, as Johns Hopkins’ Fouad Ajami observed, “it was idle to think that the broad coalition cobbled together during an unusually perilous moment in 1990-91 would stand as a permanent arrangement.”⁷ Indeed, Saddam confirmed his grasp on power even as his forces were routed from Kuwait whose oilfields were left aflame. Quickly withdrawing his most loyal and best-equipped Republican Guard divisions to pockets of opposition within Iraq, Saddam left poorly trained and vulnerable conscripts to their fate on “the highway of death.” The rout was an international debacle for Iraq but it “relieved Saddam of the most troublesome part of his army and preserved the most loyal divisions.”⁸ Within weeks he was ruthlessly destroying internal opposition, most viciously the Kurdish

⁵ Schlesinger, “White Slaves in the Persian Gulf,” in *The Gulf War Reader*, 267. This response was puzzling on several levels. Doubtless the President did engage in political arm-twisting at the UN. Yet observers of the UN far less experienced in its ways than Schlesinger recognize that the organization of the Security Council favours inertia. His ire at Bush’s approach to the UN reflected Schlesinger’s belief that Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait threatened only US financial interests. Britain, France and other allied nations who had clear security and financial interests at stake would be puzzled to learn they were fighting a “unilateral U.S. war.” For Schlesinger, at least, this was not a case in which UN imprimatur bestowed moral authority on multinational military action.

⁶ Kissinger, “How to Cut Iraq Down to Size,” in *The Gulf War Reader*, 462.

⁷ “The Sentry’s Solitude,” *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 (November/December, 2001):10.

⁸ Faleh A. Jabar, “Why the Uprisings Failed” in *The Iraq War Reader*, ed. Micah L. Silfrey and Christopher Cerf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 112. Iraq’s estimated 50,000-100,000 losses in the 1991 Gulf War would have been substantially greater had President George H.W. Bush not halted the aerial destruction of those fleeing, largely conscript forces. “We would have been castigated for slaughtering fleeing soldiers after our own mission was successfully completed.” George [H.W.] Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *The Iraq War Reader*, 101. Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst and member of the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration, observed that initial intelligence reports of slaughter along the Highway of Death were greatly exaggerated: “The vast majority of the Iraqis fled their vehicles when the first aircraft appeared, and only a few dozen bodies were found among the hundreds of wrecked vehicles.” Moreover, many of the 800 Iraqi tanks that survived Desert Storm were being used by elements of the Republican Guard against Saddam’s internal opposition. “How Saddam Misread the United States,” *The Iraq War Reader*, 84-5.

people of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁹ These actions prompted UN resolution 688 that condemned Saddam's brutal repression and, for the first time, asserted a right of interference within the internal affairs of a member state.¹⁰ Subsequently a Kurdish safe-haven was established and secured by US/UK/French air forces; a second no-fly zone was established to protect the Shiite majority in the south of Iraq. Neither of these zones maintained by US, UK and French forces had specific UN authorization.¹¹

Desert Storm re-established a precarious balance of power in the Middle East and, consistent with its UN mandate, restored an independent Kuwait. But the Kurdish and Shiite safe-havens were preserved only by US/UK air forces deployed without any specific UN mandate.¹² That this force was used for a demonstrably moral good appears to militate against arguments that only UN approval bestows moral authority on the use of force. This is not to argue that the UN should not be a sources of moral authority in international opinion. But experience reflects the truth that the organizational structure of the UN and the interests of Security Council nations lend it, like all human constructs, a moral ambiguity.

The Gulf War gained broad international legitimacy under the aegis of the United Nations but behind Bush's clear commitment to a multilateral approach was the near certainty of a unilateral alternative. As admirers and critics agree US diplomatic and military leadership was essential to the undertaking. Without cynically dismissing White House rhetoric of regarding the rule of law and the right of self-determination,¹³ American and Western interests in the Gulf rendered it

⁹ The gassing of thousands of Kurdish people rightfully shocked the world. Lesser outrages, such as the 1992 hanging of 42 of Baghdad's leading businessmen accused of "profiteering," also deserve remembering. See Kanan Makiya, "How Saddam Held on to Power" in *The Iraq War Reader*, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ Sarah Graham-Brown and Chris Toensing, "A Backgrounder on Inspections and Sanctions" in *The Iraq War Reader*, 167. France withdrew from participation in the no-fly zone protecting Iraqi Kurds in 1996 and from the southern zone in 1998 in protest over President Clinton's Desert Fox initiative. Graham-Brown and Toensing observe that the U.S and Britain "regularly resorted to military action to enforce Security Council resolutions on Iraq without express U.N. approval."

¹² Fouad Ajami, "Iraq and the Arabs' Future," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 8.

¹³ Populist right-wing columnist Patrick Buchanan, who later challenged Bush in the 1992 presidential primaries, labelled the President's international vision as "Wilsonian gobbledygook." "Have the

inconceivable that any US President would allow Saddam to control most of the world's proven oil reserves. Many nations, including Arab states, acknowledged the liberation of Kuwait as a significant good that served their interests and those of the broader international community. In maintaining continuity with America's post-WWII multilateral strategies the first Bush successfully cobbled a community of common interest that could coalesce around US power.

Service as America's ambassador to China and to the UN provided Bush a diplomatic experience and familiarity with world leaders unmatched by any 20th Century US president. Firmly rooted in the post-WWII internationalist wing of the Republican party Bush could appeal to many Democrats for whom UN approval is the *sine qua non* of moral authority in the use of US military force. Bush nevertheless was made answerable to criticism that past US involvement with the Saddam regime morally disqualified America from ousting him from Kuwait. While US policy was directed at securing significant US interests in the Middle East in no immediate sense did it ameliorate the historical grievances that date (at least) from the region's colonial heritage. In the end US attempts to moderate Saddam, in Bush's own words, "didn't work."¹⁴ In the words of Christopher Hitchens, it was "a game gone tilt."¹⁵

The Gulf War was a success in the immediate sense that Saddam was ousted from Kuwait. But the first major military crisis of the New World Order teems with the ironies of good intentions gone awry. Even as Saddam suffered a humiliating defeat he destroyed internal opposition and further entrenched his regime. Economic sanctions, initially imposed as a "peaceful" alternative to military action but which remained in place to thwart re-armament, predictably hit the most vulnerable Iraqis

Neocons Thought This Through?" in *The Gulf War Reader*, 213-215. New York Senator Daniel P. Moynihan believed that Bush's use of US military power on behalf of a "nasty little country invaded by a littler but just as nasty country," rendered him "a menace to his own people." "A Return to Cold War Thinking," in *The Gulf War Reader*, 284-286.

¹⁴ See "The Glaspie Transcript: Saddam Meets the U.S. Ambassador," in *The Gulf War Reader*, 122 passim.

¹⁵ Christopher Hitchens, "Realpolitik in the Gulf: A Game Gone Tilt," in *The Gulf War Reader*, 107-118.

hardest. Thus hatred that rightly might have been directed at Saddam was directed instead at the US and the West.¹⁶ The US troops stationed in Saudi Arabia remained to insure against recalcitrance and to encourage cooperation with UN-imposed disarmament inspections. It was the “haughty and arrogant” presence of these troops on soil sacred to Islam that so enraged Osama Bin Laden who has directed serial attacks on US and Western interests, most disastrously to date those of September 11, 2001.¹⁷

With the Soviet collapse much of the world’s *preponderant* power devolved, at least temporarily, upon the United States. Bush sought multilateral strategies to make the preponderant power necessary for world order the *collective* power necessary for a more just world peace.

The Post-Gulf War “Peace”

President Clinton faced an array of humanitarian crises in Haiti, Africa, and the Balkans. The Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims, mostly non-combatant civilians, would have appeared an urgent matter for European and UN humanitarian intervention. But just as France (e.g., Iraq) and the US (e.g., Israel) routinely protected friendly countries from Security Council action, Russia’s patronage of Serbia precluded the authorization of UN-sanctioned forces sufficient to prevent

¹⁶ A Harvard University study reported that in the first year of the sanctions infant deaths in Iraq increased more than 350 percent and of all children under age five, more than one million were malnourished. See *The Nineteen-Ninety One Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1991), 454. Sanctions may cause innocent suffering at least as indiscriminately as military action. Noting the possibility of economic sanctions against Japan in 1932 Niebuhr observed that “workmen who have the least to do with Japanese imperialism would be bound to suffer most from such a discipline.” *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 241. Stanley A. Renshon notes that dictators, unlikely themselves to suffer from sanctions, need not fear being voted out of office. They may indeed strengthen their regimes by controlling the distribution of food and medicines while blaming the shortages on those imposing the sanctions. “The Gulf War Revisited: Consequences, Controversies, and Interpretations,” in *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 337.

¹⁷ “Haughty and arrogant” are Bin Laden’s words to describe what he saw as American triumphalism following the collapse of the Soviet Union. See Walter LaFeber’s “The Post September 11 Debate Over Empire, Globalization, and Fragmentation,” *September 11, Terrorist Attacks and U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Demetrios J. Caraley (New York: The Academy of Political Science, 2002), 20.

atrocities against the Muslim populations of Bosnia and Kosovo. The insertion of a few ill-equipped Dutch troops to police UN “safe zones” may have eased the international conscience but it failed to prevent the massacre of 7000 men and boys in Srebrenica.¹⁸ Despite the presence of UN troops, Sarajevo was bombarded into near-oblivion by Serb forces.

UN peacekeepers were not mandated to break the siege of Sarajevo, stop the bombardment of civilians or prevent ethnic cleansing. The UN troops were only allowed to protect humanitarians seeking to distribute relief to endangered populations. This style of humanitarian intervention met its Waterloo at Srebrenica....¹⁹

The Serbian pogrom was curtailed only when a reluctant Clinton Administration led hesitant European allies to put NATO combat forces into the field and air. No Security Council resolution authorized the use of these arms against Serb forces.²⁰ That the UN was meanwhile able to create an ad hoc tribunal in the Hague to prosecute suspected war crimes struck an ironically perverse note with some observers: “The world would not stop war crimes while they were actually happening, but it would prosecute them afterward.”²¹

Iraq-related problems early plagued the Clinton presidency. Allegations of an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President Bush in the Spring of 1993 festered until on June

¹⁸ Adam Lebor, “Clark Links Milosevic to Srebrenica,” *The Times* (December 19, 2003): 15. This “safe area” was under the protection of 110 “lightly armed Dutch peacekeepers who offered no resistance when the Bosnian Serbs stormed in. Requests for air-strikes were somehow lost or delayed by bureaucracy. The failure of the international community to come to the rescue of Srebrenica is one of the darkest stains on the history of late 20th century Europe.”

¹⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Light: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosova and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003), 58.

²⁰ Michael Glennon, “Why the Security Council Failed,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 24. Clinton may have been hesitant to act but his role was a decisive factor nevertheless. Essayist/journalist/polemicist Christopher Hitchens, avowed nemesis of Henry Kissinger and all his works, observed that without this exercise of American power and will, “the European provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo would now be howling wildernesses....” *Regime Change*, 32.

²¹ Gary J. Bass, “Milosevic in The Hague,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 84. For an intriguing analysis of the tragedy in Bosnia, see “The Kitty Genovese Incident and the War in Bosnia,” in Phillip Bobbitt’s ambitious historical survey of warfare, *The Shield of Achilles* (Penguin: London, 2002), 411-467.

26th Clinton launched 23 Tomahawk missiles against Iraqi intelligence agencies in Baghdad. The *New York Times*' Seymour Hersh noted that Clinton's Desert Fox strike was defended as consistent with provisions of Article 51 of the UN Charter that recognize any nation's right of self-defence against armed attack. Hersh claimed that the Clinton Administration failed to acknowledge, "that most legal authorities note that the threat must be instant and overwhelming and leave no moment for deliberation."²² Nevertheless, in a speech that evening Clinton told the nation that the attack was directed against a regime that "had repeatedly violated the will and conscience of the international community." The plot against former President Bush, he said, "was an attack against our country and against all Americans." The following day President Clinton told reporters gathered outside the Foundry Methodist Church that, "I feel quite good about what transpired. I think the American people should feel good."²³

In 1998 Saddam ejected UN inspectors from Iraq. In May, Clinton signed into law PL 105-174, authorizing \$5,000,000 to fund an "Iraqi democratic opposition" and to compile information in anticipation of war crime prosecutions. In August 1998 Clinton signed PL 105-338 declaring the Government of Iraq to be "in material and unacceptable breach of its international obligations." It urged the President to "take appropriate action, in accordance with the Constitution and relevant laws of the United States, to bring Iraq into compliance with those obligations."²⁴ On October 31, 1998 Clinton signed *The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*, sponsored by Democratic Senators Lieberman (the party's Vice Presidential nominee in 2000) and Kerrey (of Nebraska), passed without a dissenting vote. This Act expressed the sense of the Congress that,

It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and

²² Seymour M. Hersh, "Did Iraq Try to Assassinate Ex-President Bush in 1993? A Case Not Closed," *New Yorker* (November 1, 1993), reprinted in *The Iraq War Reader*, 146-147.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See PL 105-338, Section 2 (11) and (12).

to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.²⁵

This policy appeared to elicit little international anxiety regarding potential American unilateralist action even though Clinton had neither sought nor received explicit UN sanction for the use of US armed forces deployed against Somalia, Afghanistan, Serbia and Iraq. Clinton's 1995 declaration that US security and world peace was best secured by the advance of human rights and "democracy elsewhere," articulated ideals nestled firmly in the 2002 *National Security Strategy*.²⁶ His appeals to human rights were characterized by some as arrogant interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. When one offended prime minister complained of Clinton that, "no one confirmed this right on this crusading President," he was articulating the views of US friends as well as foes. As one Washington observer noted, "Wilsonian Presidents drive them crazy-and have done ever since the days of Woodrow Wilson."²⁷

On December 16, 1998 after Saddam failed to comply with UN inspection resolutions, Clinton launched "Desert Fox", a series of joint US/UK air strikes against military targets in Iraq. The President defended his actions in a nationally televised address that evening.

If Saddam defies the world and we fail to respond, we will face a far greater threat in the future. Saddam will strike again at his neighbors;

²⁵ Ibid., Section 3, "Sense of the Congress Regarding United States Policy Toward Iraq." The act authorized up to nearly \$100 million in military and other assistance to democratic opposition groups and urged the President to provide humanitarian aid (under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961) to Iraqis living within areas controlled by such organizations. But Section 8 reads: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize or otherwise speak to the use of United States Armed Forces (except as provided in section 4 (a)(2) in carrying out this Act." If some observers saw this as a significant indication of a toughening stance toward Saddam others, such as Christopher Hitchens, thought the Act provided US policy makers the opportunity to blow diplomatic smoke without inhaling the political carcinogens of direct US military action. As Hitchens observed, the Iraq Liberation Act "committed the United States to support the removal of Saddam Hussein by the exercise of any force but its own." *Regime Change* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 46.

²⁶ British political scientist Christopher Coker characterized Clinton's foreign policy as "multilateral if possible, unilateral if necessary." Cited in Kagan, "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," 72.

²⁷ Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.

he will make war on his own people. And mark my words, he will develop weapons of mass destruction. He will deploy them and he will use them. Because we are acting today, it is less likely that we will face these dangers in the future.²⁸

The connection of Iraq to global terrorism was assumed but not certain. Al Qaeda had made its first attack upon the World Trade Center, participated in the killing of 18 US troops in Somalia in 1993 and in 1998 bombed two US embassies in Africa. In response Clinton launched missile attacks against suspected al Qaeda positions in Afghanistan and Sudan that proved ineffective and, in the case of Sudan, mistakenly destroyed a pharmaceutical plant. Although unable to find and eradicate bin Laden Clinton, like his successor, believed it necessary to suppress regimes “suspected of supporting and supplying the al Qaeda network—above all, Iraq.”²⁹ This conviction, not simply the need to enforce UN resolutions, was almost certainly a factor in Clinton’s 1998 missile attacks on suspected weapons of mass destruction installations in Iraq. Subsequent investigations indicate that the intelligence relied upon in this regard was largely wrong. At the time, however, it was widely believed by US/UK agencies, most international intelligence agencies and the UN that Iraq possessed or had the ability to produce such weapons.

America and Iraq Post-9/11

The issues of terrorism and Saddam hovered over the White House as Governor George W. Bush of Texas took up his controversy-ridden residence in January 2001. Though possessing the educational credentials of his Eastern establishment family (Yale Skull and Bones, Harvard MBA) Bush led a desultory if not profligate lifestyle in Texas that apparently ended with a dramatic religious conversion. Following some success in the oil industry and as owner of a major league baseball franchise,

²⁸ President Bill Clinton, “The Costs of Action Must Be Weighed Against the Price of Inaction,” a televised address to the nation, December 16, 1998. As noted above, operation Desert Fox occasioned withdrawal of French forces from the Southern no-fly zone essential to protecting the majority Shiites Saddam had viciously suppressed after the Gulf War.

²⁹ LaFeber, 21. LaFeber is apparently among the foreign policy analysts who believed US and Western intelligence sources regarding Iraq’s WMD programs and its role in supplying international terrorism.

he entered politics and was twice elected governor of Texas. A popular governor, Bush was devoid of foreign policy experience. His presidential campaign indicated an Administration more narrowly directed at US national interests and less oriented to the human rights activism that characterized the previous White House. Some Republicans, such as myself, believed that Governor Bush would reflect some of the diplomatic skill and internationalist traditions of his father. In this regard, during the presidential campaign Governor Bush's call for a "humble" projection of US power appeared to reflect his father's anti-triumphalist stance following the Soviet collapse.

Bush's major appointments were largely from the so-called neo-conservative wing of his party. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had each served as secretaries of defence in earlier Republican administrations, Cheney notably during the 1990-91 Gulf War. Rumsfeld, his Deputy Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, Chairman of the Department's key Defense Policy Board, were among the conservative activists and intellectuals associated with the Project for the New American Century, an organization devoted to the promotion of "American global leadership." They had signed a well-publicized Project letter to President Clinton in January, 1998 calling for regime change in Iraq. The current policy of containment and diplomacy regarding Iraq "is clearly failing," they wrote; "a willingness to undertake military action" was essential. The removal of Saddam "now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy."

Although we are fully aware of the dangers and difficulties in implementing this policy we believe the dangers of failing to do so are far greater. We believe the U.S. has the authority under existing U.N. resolutions to take the necessary steps, including military steps, to protect our vital interests in the Gulf. In any case, American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the U.N. Security Council.³⁰

³⁰ "Remove Saddam from Power," an open letter to President Clinton, January 26, 1998. Reprinted in *The Iraq War Reader*, 2000. As noted above, Congress passed and Clinton signed the *Iraq Liberation Act* in October, 1998. Also among the signatories of this letter was historian Francis Fukuyama. He recently said that "When the letter talked about regime change, what it was supporting was the INC [Iraqi National Congress] and exiles and possibly destabilising the regime, all of which the Clinton Administration ultimately signed on to do." "Why I won't Vote for George Bush," Andrew Billen interview with Francis Fukuyama, *Times* (London), July 12, 2004, 12-13. This post-invasion perspective is difficult to square with the actual wording of the letter which urges upon Clinton "a

Eleven of the eighteen signers of this January 28, 1998 letter to President Clinton became senior members of the George W. Bush Administration. Bush's image abroad as an inarticulate and somewhat dim "cowboy" of questionable presidential legitimacy strengthened the perception that he was captive to the "regime change" unilateralists who dominated his administration's foreign policy establishment. This perception was not dispelled by the appointment of Colin Powell as Secretary of State. Powell, a soldier-diplomat rapidly promoted during the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, fell well within the conservative multilateral tradition of post-WWII American foreign policy. Foreign as well as domestic observers committed to America's multilateral traditions hoped that Powell would bring some balance to Administration foreign policy. Early Administration forays into foreign policy and salient international issues, however, projected a decidedly unilateralist stance.³¹

Despite candidate Bush's call for the humble projection of US power the initial attitudes of his Administration impressed many in the international community, including allies, as "arrogantly unilateral."³² The new administration moved with celerity to confirm suspicions regarding a distinctly unilateralist makeover of America's traditionally multilateral foreign policy strategies:

willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing." "Remove Saddam from Power," *The Iraq War Reader*, 200.

³¹ Joseph S. Nye describes the "neo-conservatives" surrounding Bush as divided into "Wilsonians of the right" and "Jacksonian unilateralists." The former, according to Nye, emphasize the use of American power on behalf of democracy and human rights and, though they obscure Wilson's belief in the role of international institutions, see these desirable objectives as assuring international support for the use of force. The Jacksonian unilateralists, Nye holds, focus too narrowly upon military power to achieve the spectrum of desired American foreign policy and security objectives. While military power is unquestionably crucial in this regard and "pure multilateralism" impossible, Nye believes that the unilateralists err in under-estimating the multi-polar distribution of global economic power and in failing to appreciate the chaotic distribution of power among the state and non-state players that impact US policy objectives. Nye sees both the Wilsonians and Jacksonians as "pitted against the more multilateral and cautious traditional realists...such as Brent Scowcroft and James Baker," the former G.H.W. Bush's National Security Advisor and the latter his Secretary of State, both of whom worked closely with Colin Powell. "U.S. Power and Strategy After Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4. (July/August 2003): 63-64. Colin Powell was seen to fit comfortably within this multilateral cadre of "cautious traditional realists."

³² Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, 156.

Among the multilateral treaties and agreements that the administration opposed in its first six months were the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the ABM Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, a small arms control pact, a biological weapons protocol, and an OECD measure to control tax havens.³³

Whatever substantive and national-interest concerns it might have raised against these and other international agreements, the Administration unnecessarily invited hostile world opinion. That the Senate had unanimously rejected the proposed Kyoto Protocol during the Clinton Presidency rendered the Bush Administration's repudiation gratuitous; similarly, its declaration as "null and void" President Clinton's signature to the International Criminal Court Treaty which Congress had never ratified. The Administration's insistence that all European Union members sign a waiver exempting US citizens and soldiers from the Court's jurisdiction was, in James Rubin's view, political overkill: "The idea that the ICC would ever have forced a European country to imprison an American citizen over the objections of the U.S. government is not only hypothetical in the extreme, but also politically unthinkable."³⁴ While some of these examples are reminders that Congress, not the President, has final approval of binding US international agreements, these actions focused negative international attention upon a President already suspect in world opinion. For some it was as though President Bush had "contrived to prove his own theory that arrogance provokes resentment for a country that, long before his arrival, was already the world's most conspicuous and convenient target."³⁵

The unilateralist tone of the nascent G.W. Bush administration served to obscure decidedly unilateral actions of the Clinton administration. Christopher Hitchens notes that Clinton had bombed targets in Sudan and Baghdad "without demanding inspections, without resorting to the United Nations, without consulting

³³ Ibid., 205. Former Clinton administration State Department official James Rubin, somewhat hyperbolically, charged that "early in its term, the Bush administration declared war on all outstanding international treaties." "Stumbling into War," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no 5 (September/October 2003): 58.

³⁴ Rubin, "Stumbling into War," 58.

³⁵ Roger Cohen, "Arrogant or Humble? Bush Encounters Europeans' Hostility," *International Herald Tribune*, May 8, 2001, 1.

Congress....”³⁶ If Clinton did not fully inhale unilateralist toxicants his air strikes nevertheless produced clouds of unilateralist smoke. Apparently eager to dismiss Clinton and all his works, Bush failed to recognize that his strategies regarding terrorism and Iraq might have gained broader support by emphasizing their continuity with the Clinton administration. But as John Waterbury observed, the unilateral tenor of the pre-9/11 White House appeared a sharp departure from America’s post-WWII multilateral approach to international leadership.³⁷ This approach affirmed the international community’s increasing wariness of US hyper-power.

While a self-professed Christian presidential candidate had spoken of the need for humble leadership, the early attitudes and actions of his Administration did not reflect the attitudes of Christian humility discerned in Niebuhr’s incidental work. Nor did the Administration reflect the political realism of Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan who had urged “modesty” and the guidance of a “cosmic humility” in asserting American interests and power. Rather, so-called hyper-power appeared to obscure the vision of imputed political realists to the limits of all human power, to the humble self-knowledge that allows us to see ourselves as others see us, and the reality that US security ultimately rests on building an international community of shared interests. From the perspective of a relevant Christian realism candidate Bush rightly acknowledged the necessity of humble American leadership. Yet the actions of his Administration even before 9/11 reflect a realism of national interest and a worldview distorted by prideful power. In this regard a relevant Christian realism for today will echo the voice that spoke relevant truth to American power decades ago.

The more our economic power is supported by military strength, the more we shall be inclined to solve our problems by intransigence and

³⁶ Hitchens, *Regime Change*, 35. In 1998, President Clinton announced his Desert Fox attacks on Baghdad in his speech, “The Costs of Action Must be Weighed against the Price of Inaction.” In August, 2002 Vice President Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars that “The Risks of Inaction are Far Greater than the Risk of Action.” See *The Iraq War Reader*, 205-209; 298-300.

³⁷ John Waterbury, “Hate Your Policies, Love Your Institutions,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1. (January/February 2003): 58.

defiance of world opinion, and the more we shall multiply animosities against us in the world community.³⁸

Prelude to War

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks the US enjoyed the support of most long-time allies. “We are all Americans now,” announced a leading French newspaper on September 12. Remembering America’s fifty-year commitment to safeguarding Germany the German government quickly rallied round. India, China and Russia each of which faced terrorists insurgencies expressed solidarity. For the first time in its history NATO invoked Article 5 of its charter that declared that an armed attack on any member “shall be considered an attack on them all.”³⁹ Two UN resolutions approved the use of force against al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan as consistent with a “campaign of self-defense against armed attack.”⁴⁰

America’s initial attack against al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan garnered the overt or covert support of 70 countries worldwide.⁴¹ Broad international support for US action in Afghanistan did not signal support for an increasingly clear US intention to oust Saddam. Some nations which at least tacitly supported the US led campaign against al Qaeda and their Taliban hosts found the Afghan campaign consistent with, or at least not inimical to, their own interests. According to Fouad Ajami the Taliban, being distant from the Gulf and other Middle East flashpoints, were “the Khmer Rouge of this era and thus easy to deal with.” Moreover while military force in Afghanistan might eradicate a parasitic host it would not ameliorate anti-American resentment among the Muslim populations that looked with satisfaction upon the “soot and ruin in New York’s streets.”⁴²

³⁸ Niebuhr, “Perils of American Power,” 95.

³⁹ Rebecca Johnson and Micah Zenko, “All Dressed Up and No Place to Go: Why NATO Should Be on the Front Lines in the War on Terror,” *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly* (Winter 2002-03): 49.

⁴⁰ UNSC Res. 1368, September 12, 2001; UNSC Res. 1373, September 28, 2001. See Ruth Wedgwood, “Al Qaeda and American Self-Defense” in Caraley, 166.

⁴¹ *Progress Report on the Global War on Terrorism*, The White House, September, 2003, 5.

⁴² Fouad Ajami, “The Sentry’s Solitude,” 15.

As the Taliban was being dislodged other issues troubled some long-time American allies. Generally alarming to them was the unilateralist tenor of the Bush Administration. Another was its increasingly militant intentions toward Iraq. Yet another was the treatment of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan and interned at Guantánamo Bay. These issues were shaping the international community's assessment of America as hyper-power even as the Bush Administration announced its September, 2002 *National Security Strategy*.

Chapter Ten

The *National Security Strategy* and Iraq: Reflecting on the Relevance of Humility to American Responsibility in Context

*To be sure our power is not great enough to give us security, even as our isolation is not complete enough to guarantee it. But our temptation lies in the fact that we have just enough power to make the policy of seeking security by unmutual expression of power seem plausible.*¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

As a presidential candidate in 2000 George W. Bush articulated a prescient understanding of the necessity of humility in illuminating the uses American power.

Our nation stands alone right now in the world in terms of power. And that's why we've got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that protects freedom....If we are an arrogant nation, they'll view us that way, but if we're a humble nation, they'll respect us.²

How the “humble nation” envisioned by candidate Bush has come to be regarded by so many as an “arrogant nation” under President Bush is the underlying question examined in this chapter. The focus here is upon the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) promulgated by the Bush Administration in September 2002. Five elements of the NSS are analysed through the lens of humility: the nature of the peace the NSS envisions; America's relationship with the UN; the concept of “pre-emptive” war in

¹ “American Power and World Responsibility,” in *Love and Justice*, 203.

² “2nd Presidential Debate Between Gov. Bush and Vice President Gore,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2000, A20, cited in Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Oxford University Press paperback, 2003), 156.

pursuit of US national security interests;³ the role of intelligence; and the significance of human dignity in the projection of American power. Of concern are the NSS's implications for America's post-WWII multilateral traditions. Where do the multinational organizations America nurtured assiduously during the Cold War and the 1991 Gulf War fit into the NSS response to a new kind of global threat?⁴ If the Iraq war exemplifies US action pursuant to the NSS what do related events reveal regarding the moral authority of US power as it is projected in Iraq? In this regard, does US strategy serve to build the inclusive community of interest that Christian realism finds essential to a more just and secure world? Conversely, as Niebuhr asked in his own day, are traditional American ideals being subverted to provide "a screen or rationalization for our interests?"⁵ Most essentially, have US actions pursuant to the NSS reflected the humility of Christian realism without which there is no Christian responsibility?

Overview of the *National Security Strategy*

The *National Security Strategy* was announced by the White House in September 2002 as the world was assessing America's response to the terrorist attacks of the previous year. This assessment was being formulated even as the international community contemplated the emerging realities of history's first hyper-power. That the Bush Administration produced a national security document is unremarkable inasmuch as an annual national security report has been required since passage of the *Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986*. Successive presidents since have produced such reports largely intended to provide internal policy guidance for defense and intelligence agencies. But the September 2002 document was not primarily a security blueprint for US military and intelligence agencies. Rather, as viewed through the lens of 9/11, the document was received as a "comprehensive

³ The NSS uses the word "pre-emptive" but as will be discussed it has conflated this doctrine with preventative war doctrine.

⁴ As Robert Kagan observed, questions regarding the roles of international law and institutions predate the second Bush presidency, but its unilateral tone and the Iraq war "deepened and hardened the transatlantic drift." "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 66.

⁵ Niebuhr, "Hazards and Resources," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 1949): 199.

statement of the Administration's view of the world and the American role in it."⁶ Appearing on the cusp of America's year-old war on terrorism and with the Administration's increasingly hard line on Iraq, the *National Security Strategy* was clearly intended for the broadest possible international audience.

The NSS proposes policies the Bush Administration believes necessary to address the threat to international order posed by "catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few." In this new reality policies designed to address relations between states are seen as inadequate to deal with organizations that have access to weapons formerly available only to states. Thus traditional deterrent policies that assume states have a "return address" at which security threats can be answered may no longer apply. Where "rogue" states are seen as aiding and abetting terrorism by providing sanctuary and weapons, deterrence may not work either. This is particularly true where rogue states possess or intend to possess weapons of mass destruction potentially available to terrorists. Because such states are typically in the grip of tyrannical regimes resistant to internal democratic opposition or international economic pressure, US policies must include the option of pre-emptive/preventative force to effect regime change. America will lead with economic and political policies that address the underlying causes of terrorism and will seek international support in its pursuit of these objectives. But it is prepared to use its "unprecedented" power to act unilaterally when it believes US interests require. That their objective is to promote human dignity by replacing terrorist-friendly rogue states with democratic regimes provides the underlying moral authority of US policies.

Why then was a document that commends "a spirit of humility" widely viewed an arrogant proclamation of American hegemony, if not empire?⁷ The initial

⁶Ivo H. Daalder, "Brookings Scholars Evaluate and Analyze President's National Security Strategy Paper," Brookings Institution (Washington: October 4, 2002): 1. National specialist Edward Bruner describes President Clinton's December, 1999 *National Security Strategy of a New Century* as a "policy agenda guide to U.S. officials. Bush, on the other hand, seems to be addressing an audience of American and world citizens in plain English and sharply expressed themes." "Comparison of National Security Strategies Published by Presidents Bush and Clinton," a *Congressional Research Service Memorandum* (September 24, 2003): 1.

⁷NSS, 25. If the NSS is not a proclamation of empire Robert Jervis believes it "calls for something very much like an empire." "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 365.

explanation is in the language of the document: America today “possesses unprecedented--and unequalled--strength and influence in the world.” Its military power will remain beyond challenge: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States.”⁸ In its focus on contemporary challenges to America power the Administration appears to have ignored relevant lessons offered by past realities. One such lesson, as Niebuhr often noted, is that American power like all great power inevitably creates suspicion, jealousy and resentment. As Robert Jervis affirmed shortly after the 9/11 attacks, “Powerful states are always hated, even if they exercise their power relatively benignly.”⁹

That America’s emergence as global superpower would attract such resentment, fairly or unfairly, appears an historical certainty. It is true that the US had been a global military power for six decades. But during most of that time the opposing threat of powerful totalitarian states served to obscure the resentments inevitably generated by US power. The first President Bush recognized this hazard when he called on the nation to reject triumphalist attitudes following the Soviet collapse. It is puzzling then that even prior to 9/11 an Administration governed by political realists would take unnecessarily provocative stands on issues certain to grate on international nerves. Its pronouncements on the Kyoto accords and the International Criminal Court, issues of particular interest to Europe, are salient examples. That both issues had been rejected during the previous Administration made further action gratuitous and appeared to reflect an underlying change in American attitudes toward international opinion. One need not agree with the substantive content of Kyoto or the efficacy of the ICC to interpret the Administration’s attitudes as an arrogance of hyper-power.

Whether the Administration reflected America’s traditional sense of innocence regarding its power, its apparent failure to recognize or to ignore predictable responses to great power tainted the atmosphere in which the NSS was received. It

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Robert Jervis, “An Interim Assessment of September 11: What Has Changed and What Has Not?” *September 11, Terrorist Attacks, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, in Caraley, 186.

appears unlikely that the humility Candidate Bush urged in October 2000 would have prevented the devastation of September 2001. But had the Administration of President Bush reflected the attitudes of humility, the necessary assertion of American power following 9/11 might have strengthened rather than diminished international support for NSS policies.

The Assertion of American Power: Commensurate Responsibility or Hegemony?

The *National Security Strategy* asserts the unprecedented--“and unequaled”-- nature of American power and the Administration’s intention to maintain and extend it. But it recognizes that with this unique position of power comes “unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity” to “promote a balance of power that favors freedom.” It suggests that a time characterized by international terrorism is also a time of opportunity for America to “translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty” for itself and the world. The sweeping character of this decidedly audacious document proclaims a “distinctly American internationalism” whose aim is “to help make the world not just safer but better.” Pursuant to this objective, the US will undertake to:

--Champion aspirations for human dignity

--Strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends.

--Work with others to defuse regional conflicts.

--Prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction.

--Ignite a new era of economic growth through free markets and free trade.

--Expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy.

--Develop agendas for cooperative action with other main centers of power--
Transform America’s national security institutions to meet the challenges and

opportunities of the twenty-first century.¹⁰

Brookings Institution Fellow Ivo Daalder finds the 31-page document best summarized in the President's cover letter. Here the overarching assumption of the NSS is that "the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence." While the document proclaims America's strategic objective to be a "safer and better" world and elaborates the eight constituent goals, Daalder along with John Gaddis suggests that these eight goals cluster around three comprehensive responsibilities or tasks that flow from American power. These are identified as defending the peace, preserving the peace, and extending the peace.¹¹ Given the essential relationship between humility and responsibility in Christian realism the NSS invites examination through an analysis of these three responsibilities that flow from American power.

Defending the Peace. America will "defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants." According to the NSS the salient threat to American security, and by extension the security of "freedom loving people across the globe," is posed not by national powers such as Russia and China but by a nicely alliterative three "T"s: *terrorists* (evil people and evil organisations opposed to freedom and universal human values), *tyrants* (rogue states) and *technology* (weapons of mass destruction). Defending the peace will require prevention (diplomacy, arms and export controls, and dealing with failed states), pre-emption (the use of force to thwart "imminent" threats, which include the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists or rogue states) and defence (entailing a missile defence system and the development of civil defence systems able to manage and mitigate the impact of catastrophic terrorist attacks).

Preserving the Peace. The NSS calls on America to "preserve the peace by building

¹⁰ NSS, 1.

¹¹ President's cover letter to The National Security Strategy (The White House, September 17, 2002). This discussion closely follows Daalder's summary in the Brookings Analysis, 1-3. See John Gaddis, "A Grand Strategy of Transformation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (November 1, 2002): 3.

good relations among the great powers.” The assumption here is that terrorism and the possession of weapons of mass destruction by rogue states or terrorists create a commonality of interests among the major powers. This appears analogous to Niebuhr’s hope that a common cause in WWII would unite the allied powers in a post-war peace. The NSS expresses the belief that the common threat of terrorism will forge an international community in which “great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war.” Better US relations with Russia and China form the cornerstone of the cooperative international community that can be forged in their common cause against terrorism. In the case of each power, the document assumes that open markets will inevitably produce political liberalisation.¹²

Extending the Peace. America will “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.” As was shown in the case of Afghanistan failed and militarily weak states can threaten the security of the world’s most powerful nation. Because such states create conditions in which terrorist and fanatical ideologies can take root dealing with them is a strategic US requirement; and because human rights abuses and suffering fester in such states, America has as well a moral responsibility to act.

A world where some live in comfort and plenty while half the human race lives on less than \$2 a day, is neither just nor stable. Including all the world’s poor in an expanding circle of development--and opportunity--is a moral imperative and one of the top priorities of U.S. international policy.¹³

This element of extending the peace is addressed at various points in the NSS document. “Human dignity,” an expression the document appears to equate with human rights, and the promotion of democracy are given increased importance in US bilateral relationships. It is assumed that US promotion of free trade will serve to open markets for economically failed states. Finally, and significantly, over the next

¹² Daalder, 3. Questions raised by international observers regarding the 2003 Russian parliamentary elections appear to weaken this assumption, or at least to illumine the distance between the present and the preferred.

¹³ NSS, 21.

three years the US will increase by 50% its financial aid aimed at assisting failed and poor states to “become part of the larger group of market democracies.”¹⁴

National Security Strategy and the Nature of a Secure Peace

As Christian realism contemplates the peace that the *National Security Strategy* seeks to defend, preserve and extend, Augustine reminds us that pride obscures and perverts our most cherished ideals of peace.

For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in place of God’s rule. This means that it hates the just peace of God, and loves its own peace of injustice.¹⁵

Here we know that human finitude and egotism render “our” peace antithetical to God’s peace. If it can be said that there is “no man who does not wish for peace,” it is because like all creatures human beings seek a peace in which they and their own kind are made secure.¹⁶ Thus a nation’s ideal of peace inevitably reflects its own interests and security needs. When any nation seeks to endue its particular ideal of peace with universality it invariably impinges upon the peace of others and acts unjustly. Ironically, pride thereby makes our ideal of peace hateful both to others and to the just peace of God.

Similarly, Niebuhr had few illusions regarding the imperfect nature of worldly peace and the imperfect means by which it was achieved. He accepted with Augustine that earthly peace is often gained in conflict.¹⁷ Lasting peace, true community and real security, Niebuhr insisted, rest on establishing more equal social justice.¹⁸ A just

¹⁴Daalder, 3.

¹⁵ *City of God*, 19.12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.4.4.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Power Politics*, 28.

peace in and among human collectives entails some balance of power. The powerful might proclaim peace but for the powerless deprived of justice there is no peace. In reflecting on *The City of God* Jean Elshtain observes that the Romans had created a desert of injustice at Carthage and called it peace. A victor's peace of order without justice is disorder; and a disordered peace may be less just than the disorder of war. "Peace and War had a contest in cruelty," Elshtain notes of Augustine, "and peace won the prize."¹⁹

Because neither the "peace" of Versailles nor the "peace" of Munich established a more just social order, neither can be considered to have produced a true peace. Rather both were bookends of an era in which injustice covertly festered until it burst with unimaginable violence upon the "peace" of those who had dictated at Versailles and surrendered at Munich. America, which had abandoned responsibility at Versailles and sought security in neutralist irresponsibility, discovered the disastrously meretricious nature of a peace that is merely the absence of overt warfare.²⁰ Power that creates the "secure" desert of an unjust peace must be opposed by power that knows true peace requires justice. Here Christian realism's recognition of the ambivalence of all power serves to inform its use and to restrain its evil consequences. But, "there is no escape from moral responsibility," Niebuhr wrote following the attack on Pearl Harbor, "and no evasion of our duty toward our neighbors in the community of nations."²¹

As in Niebuhr's time a Christian realism for today accepts the necessity of power in establishing and preserving a just peace. It knows that the possession of power does not guarantee a just peace; that, indeed, the power necessary to achieve the order required for any peace threatens the justice of that peace. It knows, too, that how power is used to secure peace shapes the peace to be secured. A relevant Christian

¹⁹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 50.

²⁰ The US Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and America did not join the League of Nations. As the western democracies faced Hitler at Munich, President Roosevelt announced that his government would "assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations." Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 314.

²¹ "We Are at War," 2.

realism rejects any formulae assuring that a wise use of power will produce the just peace of God. But even as it speaks truth to power Christian realism today understands that the peace of God “revealed in the Cross of Christ cannot be equated with the peace of detachment.”²²

1. A Distinctly American Peace

The peace the *National Security Strategy* would defend is to be pursued through “a balance of power that favors freedom.” Having abandoned or in the process of abandoning the discredited totalitarianisms of the 20th century, the world is perceived as moving toward greater economic freedom and social equality. America’s vision of the peace at the heart of a more secure international community is characterized by “political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity.” While national security entails cooperation with “other main centers” of global power, US economic and military power will be engaged to achieve and sustain a world order based upon a “distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.”²³ If, as Niebuhr noted, US foreign policy was frequently characterized by schizophrenic swings between the extremes of isolationism and moralistic crusading, the *National Security Strategy* decidedly reflects the latter attitude.

The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.²⁴

Christian realism accepts democracy as the form of government most conducive to balancing the requirements of human freedom with the requirements of equal justice.

²² Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 157.

²³ NSS, 1-2.

²⁴ The President’s September 17, 2002 letter covering the *National Security Strategy*. Niebuhr frequently criticised his fellow-Americans for positing universal value to “free enterprise” and “the American way of life.” “The Idolatry of America,” *Christianity and Crisis* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1950): 3.

Yet it knows that human experience, culture, faith traditions and natural resources produce infinite possibilities for social organization. Reflecting Niebuhr, however, it rejects the notion that any distinctly American ideal of “free enterprise” is a universally valid requirement for a justly ordered peace. Christian realism recognizes that there are varieties of economic systems, including socialism, that are compatible with democracy; that, indeed, democratic socialism may restrict economic freedoms more fully than America’s free enterprise system in order to promote more equal economic justice. Humility acknowledges that America is still labouring at this balance. The “single sustainable model” that the NSS urges upon the world appears to reflect a particularly American model. If I believe that this model has produced a great and powerful nation, as I do, Christian responsibility requires that I acknowledge its failings, attend to the criticism others offer it, and speak truths discerned in faith to its power. In this regard the distinctly American model of social organization offered by the NSS reflects an unmistakable air of triumphalism.

Nevertheless, in appealing to human dignity, liberty and justice, the NSS reflects essential requirements for a peace of just order. From the perspective of Niebuhr’s prophetic faith the strategy correctly recognizes that true peace must be based on justice *and* freedom consistent with human dignity. It calls for international cooperation (“diplomacy, arms and export controls, and dealing with failed states”), “an appreciation of others’ interests,” and promises “consistent consultations among partners with a spirit of humility.”²⁵ These points appear to reflect an understanding that international security ultimately rests, as Christian realism insists, upon building and affirming an international community of justice, trust and shared interests.

2. A Distinctly American Internationalism

But militating against this interpretation is the document’s insistence that a “distinctly American internationalism” is paradigmatic for the international

²⁵ NSS, 25.

community of shared interests necessary for peace and justice to flourish.²⁶ Moreover, the spirit of international cooperation that the strategy embraces was not reflected in the Administration's unilateral attitudes and actions immediately preceding 9/11 nor subsequently in its initial approach to the second Gulf War. As Marcus Corbin observed, "Saying the right things about collective action in this document may play well at home, but will not convince U.S. friends and allies."²⁷ Thus while the NSS calls for a humble recognition of both the limits and responsibilities of US power, Administration attitudes and actions have asserted an ideal of peace reflecting a distinctly American "one size fits all" view of the world.²⁸

Like most realists Niebuhr recognized that foreign policy had always to reflect the national interest. Yet a persistent prophetic concern was that many of America's values were based on circumstances so unique to the American experience, producing a so narrow and exclusive understanding of self-interest, that they ironically became impediments to the nation's long-term national interests. "We are tempted to regard ourselves as a beacon light of liberty," he wrote in 1950, "whose light shines so brightly that it naturally attracts all wayfarers."²⁹ Here America's sense of a divinely bestowed particularity converges with pride of power and wealth to posit its partial values as universal truth.

Recurring in the incidental work is Niebuhr's denunciation of America's libertarian ideal as the only true expression of a democratic order. The irrelevance of this ideal to the democracies of post-war Europe, should US aid be conditioned upon it, imperilled the rebuilding of that community of nations.³⁰ On few issues was he more

²⁶ "The strategy document explicitly puts the initiative in terms of the concept of American exceptionalism—that with its democratic history and strength the United States has a unique role to play in guiding the world towards a better future." Marcus Corbin, "The Bush National Security Strategy: A First Step," Washington: Center for Defense Information (September 26, 2002): 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ Dimitri Simes, "America's Imperial Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (November/December 2003): 102. Simes here criticizes the Bush Administration for following the "'one size fits all' approach to democracy promotion pursued under Clinton."

²⁹ "The Conditions of Our Survival," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1950): 486.

³⁰ "The Fight for Germany," *Life* 21, no. 17 (October 21, 1946): 68.

prophetically testy than what he perceived as America's identification of democracy with "free enterprise" and foreign policy prescriptions designed to impose an American "way of life" upon the world. Here the contemporary Russian émigré and political scientist Dimitri Simes cautions against the American ideal "that democracy is a talisman for all the worlds ills, including terrorism, and that the United States has a responsibility to promote democratic government wherever in the world it is lacking."³¹

There is much in the NSS regarding international cooperation, multinational decision-making and economic responsibility. But given the distinctly unilateralist tenor of the Administration, the clear implication is that a "distinctly American internationalism" has as its objective a distinctly America peace. As Americans we may cling to the ideal of our nation's particularity and the benignity of its power but, as Niebuhr often noted, much of the world does not. Rather, the world judges America on the reality that its actions and attitudes may impose upon other nations and cultures. It asks that American power recognize the variety of just "peaces" that are constituent elements of the international peace in which our own peace is most secure.

Few Americans would believe that their nation seeks, as Rome did, to create a desert of injustice and call it peace. But Christian realism reminds us that power and wealth do not make our peace your peace; and that we may best discern the possibilities of a common peace through the attitudes of humility. Phillip Bobbitt affirms this in his reflections on America's quest for security: "Not simply increasing American power, but persuading others of our modesty, our benign intent, our deference to the preferences of other societies will be an indispensable element in maintaining the peace."³²

³¹ Simes, "Imperial Dilemma," 97.

³² Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, 332.

National Security Strategy and the United Nations

*An economically interdependent world must in some sense become a politically integrated world community or allow potential instruments of community to become instruments of mass annihilation.*³³

Reinhold Niebuhr

Having recognized the “ignoble failure” of its post-WWI isolationism, reflected in its rejection of the League of Nations, the US attached something akin to spiritual significance to the UN and its ideals.³⁴ Though international political realities and Cold War divisions prevented its becoming the predominant power essential to secure a just international order, the UN nevertheless served important purposes. During the Cold War it provided an international forum for both great power and minor power disputes. If the UN lacked predominant power, Niebuhr believed that “some frictions between the powers will be mitigated here which might otherwise produce intolerable tensions.”³⁵ New states emerging from the colonial empires that collapsed after WWII found a voice and role in the UN. It developed significant humanitarian and peacekeeping capabilities and became increasingly important in legitimising the international actions of member states. Although the US at times acted without UN authorization (e.g., the Balkans) and occasionally ignored UN resolutions (e.g. Israel), the UN retained a prominent place in US diplomacy. Against this background the unilateral posture of the Bush Administration appeared a significant shift from America’s post-WWII multilateral foreign policy tradition. This shift is reflected in the *National Security Strategy*.

1. A Question of UN Relevance or American Pride of Power?

In his September, 2002 letter covering the *National Security Strategy* the President affirmed America’s commitment to “lasting institutions like the United Nations.”

³³ “Pillars of Peace,” 379.

³⁴ “Moral Implications,” 17.

³⁵ “The United Nations,” 3.

The document itself devotes extensive discussion to international cooperation, strengthening alliances, building new coalitions, and economic development, all to be pursued in “a spirit of humility.” Yet the NSS references the United Nations, explicitly or obliquely--and always briefly--on but four occasions. Had the President not mentioned the UN in the “lasting” company of the WTO, OAS and NATO, a cynic might well conclude that lasting institutions are not necessarily the same as useful institutions. Perhaps significantly the UN is not mentioned once in the document’s important chapter in which it outlines US strategy for cooperating with other “main centers of global power.”³⁶ This reading of the NSS implies that there is little direct role for the UN in building coalitions of “the willing and able to promote a balance of power that favors freedom.”

The oblique place the NSS affords the UN in US security policy appears to reflect the unilateralist posture evident in the early Bush administration. Writers close to the administration have described the UN as “nothing more than a collection of states, many of them autocratic and few of them as public-spirited as America.” They asked who, if not the US, will “uphold decency in the world?” Finding the UN often impotent in crisis they believe that to assert American power is to assert not pride but responsibility .

It is short-sighted to imagine that a policy of “humility” is either safer or less expensive than a policy that aims to preclude and deter the emergence of new threats, that has the United States arriving quickly at the scene of potential trouble before it has fully erupted, that addresses threats to the national interest before they erupt into full-blown crises.³⁷

Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer voices unilateralists’ frustration with the UN Security Council. This frustration is neither new nor surprising. As Niebuhr often acknowledged the operation of the Security Council itself reflects the political

³⁶ NSS Chapter VIII: “Develop Agendas for Cooperative Action with the Other Main Centers of Power,” 25-28.

³⁷ Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, “America’s Mission, After Baghdad,” *The Iraq War Reader*, 609. Kristol is associated with the “Project for the New American Century,” a group that urged President Clinton to make regime change in Iraq a focus of American foreign policy.

reality and will (or lack thereof) of the international community. It appears as unlikely today as in 1945 that *any* great power would agree to UN authority without there being some veto power in Security Council decisions. Unilateralists like Krauthammer reject the idea that the Security Council should hold a real or constructive veto over US action or that its imprimatur confers a *prima facie* moral authority.

How exactly does the Security Council confer moral authority on American action? The Security Council is a committee of great powers, heirs to the victors of the Second World War. They manage the world in their own interest. The Security Council is, on the very rare occasions when it actually works, realpolitik by committee. But by what logic is it a repository of international morality? How does the approval of France and Russia, acting clearly and rationally in pursuit of their own interests in Iraq (largely oil and investments), confer legitimacy on an invasion?³⁸

A relevant Christian realism must address these issues. Here the initial task is to refute the Kaplan/Kristol notion that equates humility with self-abnegation and “safe” policies inadequate to protect the national interest. The real issue today, they urge, is not American arrogance but the pervasiveness of American power. They recognize that such power inevitably breeds resentment but believe it is delusional to argue that a more restrained American policy would attenuate that resentment. Since resentment is a concomitant of power in any case their prescription is the development of yet greater military power, strengthened alliances and bilateral agreements with powers in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Christian realism recognizes that the use of power is necessary to an ordered world. It knows, too, that power inevitably creates resentment. But it rejects the peculiar notion that the mere accretion of power ameliorates resentment or renders resentment irrelevant to the pursuit of US national interests. Christian realism rejects the apparent underlying assumption that resentment of American power has no basis in some moral claim. It insists that all people have some claims that a just people must

³⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited: America, the Benevolent Empire,” *The Iraq War Reader*, 599.

recognize even as it knows that all power entails some injustice. In leading to greater self-understanding regarding our own resentment of injustice the attitudes of humility illumine the underlying causes of others' resentments. Christian humility requires that we distinguish between the just and unjust resentments of others because just resentment indicates an irresponsible use of power. To ignore this distinction is to abandon the moral authority on which all power must ultimately rest. The humility of Christian realism leads neither to self-abnegation nor to political impotence. Rather, it discerns the divine reality that power without justice provides only an illusion of security.

In questioning UN moral authority Krauthammer, too, raises significant issues for a relevant Christian realism. The question of the UN's role in the so-called war on terrorism did not spring full-blown from the Bush security strategy. Political realists like Niebuhr recognized from early days that the Security Council system did not reflect their vision of a benignly cooperative "imperial" power center capable of maintaining an ordered and reasonably just international community. Rather Security Council membership and voting arrangements represented the only system that could be cobbled among the victorious Allies that quickly dissolved into hostile ideological camps following WWII.

While he encouraged important and constructive roles for the UN, Niebuhr insisted on recognizing its inherent limits. Reflecting on the League of Nations experience he warned against attributing to the UN powers and authority it did not possess. Assigning responsibilities without concomitant resources and political will would, in his view, presage UN failure. Moreover, he feared that imputing to the UN power it does not possess might encourage great power irresponsibility. When the national interests of Security Council members are not at stake or when their interests clash, strong UN action is blocked, as in the case of Serbia, or delayed with catastrophic results as in Rwanda. When NATO belatedly acted to prevent further Serb atrocities against Bosnia's Muslim population it did so against Russian interests and therefore without UN authorization. It is generally accepted by the West (including France and Germany in this case) that stopping genocide bestowed a moral authority despite lack of UN authorization. Similarly, the ill-fated US intervention in Somalia carried no

UN authority but was seen as serving a humanitarian good that lent moral substance to unilateral action.

One response to Krauthammer's question regarding the moral authority of the UN is that ideals have power not necessarily because they are true but because some people believe strongly that they are true. His view to the contrary does not change the fact that this belief produces power that can affect the outcomes we may desire. In its mixture of political, moral and theological realisms Christian realism recognizes that responsible action must take the power of idealism into account. The appearance of the President and Secretary of State at the UN to argue the case against Saddam before the UN was an explicit recognition of this power. It was a recognition, too, that the populations of most democratic states, including the US, believe that UN approval *does* lend moral authority to action within the international community. Leaders must take these factors into account as they consider the means by which their national interests are to be secured. Nevertheless because Christian realism knows that no human institution can possess absolute truth it must reject claims that UN imprimatur is the *sine qua non* of just international action. It rejects as well the notion that *any* human collective or nation, however powerful, can assert the claim of absolute truth.

Christian realism stands in the King's court to rebuke the powerful when they attempt to make moral absolutes of their particular interests. It knows that the true moral authority of power ultimately lies in its just use. Discerning what is true and just lies along the paths of Christian humility. Here truth that guides our power is ever open to the divine perspective and is tested through the experience and interests of others. A Christian realism for today follows Niebuhr's insistence that just power promotes security because it builds a larger community of shared interests. The UN is one of the instruments available to the international community for this task. If the UN at times fails because of its inherent flaws humility does not require silence but constructive action. No true purpose is served by ignoring corruption or the reality that self-interested votes are cast in the Security Council. But the humility of Christian realism requires that we recognize our own self-interested use of the veto and complicity in the inherent weaknesses of the UN. It requires that we address

these problems with toleration, patience and contrition even as we know that perfection eludes all human endeavours.

2. Affirming the Relevance of the UN

The NSS also underscored the widening divergence between the US and its European allies regarding the degree to which national sovereignty should be surrendered to super-national institutions such as the UN, EU and the European Court of Human Rights. As Michael Glennon notes, Europeans increasingly find legitimacy in the will of the international community. “Thus they comfortably submit to impingements on their sovereignty that Americans would find anathema. Security Council decisions limiting the use of force are but one example.”³⁹ This growing divergence is reflected in public opinion among some of America’s traditional democratic allies. A few days before the NSS was announced a Sky news poll revealed that the British public saw George Bush, not Saddam Hussein, the greater threat to world peace.⁴⁰

International concerns regarding unilateral US power, as some of Niebuhr’s earliest work attests, are not a recent phenomenon. But in the post-Soviet world community America’s position as lone superpower intensified these concerns, even among US allies.⁴¹ The oblique treatment of the UN in the NSS, despite its detailed calls for international cooperation, appeared to confirm the unilateral direction of “a uniquely American internationalism.”

But in the event the Bush Administration appeared to recognize that the UN did confer a degree of moral authority relevant to its purposes. At home, it was clear that a majority of Americans believed UN approval important if not decisive. Perhaps more to the point, publics in Europe and Turkey made UN approval necessary for

³⁹ “Why the Security Council Failed,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no.3 (May/June 2003): 21.

⁴⁰ Cited in Krauthammer, *The Iraq War Reader*, 598.

⁴¹ Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 83 (March/April 2004): 68.

cooperation with any US-led invasion. Thus Bush appeared before the UN General Assembly to present his case against Saddam. The President pledged to work with the UN Security Council while challenging it to act in disarming Iraq; but he also reserved the right to act independently if the UN did not. Just weeks later, as the UN was debating its response to the President's challenge, Congress with comfortable margins in each body passed H.J.Res. 114, "Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002." The first paragraph posits an historical link between US national security interests and the enforcement of UN resolutions regarding Iraq. It notes that the 1991 Congressional authorization of US force against Iraq was pursuant to 12 UN resolutions and in support of UN goals. It stipulates that,

On September 12, 2002, President Bush committed the United States to "work with the United Nations Security Council to meet our common challenge" posed by Iraq and to "work for the necessary resolutions," while also making it clear that "the Security Council resolutions will be enforced, and the just demands of peace and security will be met, or action will be unavoidable."⁴²

Perhaps reflecting US public opinion, the Congressional resolution recognized an important though not decisive UN role in determining American action. Here the UN is afforded a significantly greater role in legitimating US action than is indicated in the NSS. But H.J.Res. 114 did not make the President's use of force dependent upon further UN approval. To some in the Bush Administration Congress had declared that, "we don't need the Security Council."⁴³ Nevertheless, US and UK efforts produced UN Resolution 1441 that found Iraq in "material breach" of numerous UN resolutions, called for new and unimpeded weapons inspections and, warned that Saddam "will face serious consequences as a result of its continued violations of its obligations."⁴⁴ All 15 member-nations of the Security Council supported this resolution. Renewed inspections failed to find WMD but many components remained uncounted for. Even as US and UK forces faced climate related battle

⁴² U.S. Congress. *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002* (H.J.Res. 114), cited in *The Iraq War Reader*, 380. The resolution received a 296-133 majority in the House and a 77-23 majority in the Senate.

⁴³ Glennon, "Why the Security Council Failed," 17.

⁴⁴ *UN Security Council Resolution 1441*, cited in *The Iraq War Reader*, 652.

deadlines, France, Germany and Russia demanded more time for inspections to work. Meanwhile the Administration announced its goal now included the removal of Saddam (which was made a stated objective of US foreign policy during the Clinton Administration) not simply the disarmament of his regime. After serial failures to reach agreement among Security Council permanent members, France and Germany announced they would oppose any resolution authorizing force. The Security Council was deadlocked. Diplomatic efforts for a UN solution to the crisis faded away.

Ironically, the threat of unilateral force contravenes the UN Charter but may promote actions that affirm UN moral authority. This appears true in the case of the 1990-1991 Gulf War when the aggression of a member state was checked under the aegis of the UN. It appears true as well in the build-up to the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Michael Glennon notes the unlikelihood of Iraq's having accepted the inspection regime required by UN Resolution 1441 without the threat of US unilateral force. Yet such threats themselves violate the UN Charter. Thus 1441 was a diplomatic victory for the UN largely achieved by the threat of unilateral force in violation of its charter. "The unlawful threat of unilateralism enabled the 'legitimate' exercise of multilateralism. The Security Council reaped the benefit of the charter's violation."⁴⁵ The US, on the other hand, having provided the threat of force that made the exercise of legitimate UN authority possible, heightened the level of moral reproach attached to its refusal to let inspections run their full course.

The Administration thus placed greater importance on securing a UN imprimatur for action than a reading of the *National Security Strategy* might indicate. If some observers viewed the President's appearance as merely perfunctory, others believed it offered hope for a peaceful solution in Iraq that would strengthen the UN. "We want the United Nations to be effective, and respectful, and successful," Bush told the General Assembly.⁴⁶ Still others believed that the US viewed the UN as simply one entity among others that assume its place within a "coalition of the willing" such as

⁴⁵ Glennon, "Why the Security Council Failed," 27.

⁴⁶ George W. Bush, "A Grave and Gathering Danger," a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, September 12, 2002, cited in *The Iraq War Reader*, 317.

envisioned by the NSS.⁴⁷ These views need not be mutually exclusive. Almost certainly the President's UN appeal played well at home: there remains a strong American attachment to the ideal if not the practice of the UN.⁴⁸ When President G.H.W. Bush placed the UN at the center of his diplomatic efforts in the 1990-91 Gulf War, his strategy was widely supported on Capitol Hill; indeed, the *New York Times* saw this as an indication that the UN "was functioning as it was designed to do."⁴⁹ Even those who opposed war to remove Saddam from Kuwait called for international solutions such as UN sanctions.⁵⁰ Despite the unilateral posturing of his early Administration, these lessons were not altogether lost on the younger Bush.

3. American Responsibility and Loyalty to the UN

When President George W. Bush appeared before the UN General Assembly on September 12, 2002 he pictured Saddam's regime as a threat to UN authority and his compliance with Security Council resolutions a test of UN relevance. Given the short shrift the UN receives in the NSS it is perhaps tempting for opponents of force to dismiss this view as a cynical attempt to identify US and UN objectives. But any president's appearance before the UN General Assembly, whatever the NSS might imply, is a recognition of *some* UN relevance to US objectives. It is the recognition that, at its most elementary level, the UN remains the great global forum for any power seeking international legitimacy for its policies. It is here, too, that the Security Council becomes a check on unilateral power by bestowing or withholding that imprimatur. The UN may be unable to check the actions of a great power but it can raise the strategic, economic and moral costs of defiance. A president's appearance before the UN is an acknowledgement that even a hyper-power cannot be oblivious to world opinion. Whether this was an act of necessity or of humility is arguable; necessity discerned through the attitudes of humility may perhaps be both.

⁴⁷ NSS, 25.

⁴⁸ Kagan, "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," 78.

⁴⁹ Cited in Noam Chomsky, "The Use (and Abuse) of the United Nations," in *The Gulf War Reader*, 308.

⁵⁰ See *Congressional Record-House*, January 12, 1991 for the debate on these issues as the first President Bush sought Congressional approval for the use of force against Saddam.

Yet, as Niebuhr understood, to ascribe to the UN a moral standing and a political reality it does not possess risks making it a vehicle of international irresponsibility.⁵¹ Within the past two decades the national interests of Security Council members have prevented or crippled UN action against politically engendered humanitarian disasters in Africa, the Middle East and in the Balkans. In the latter crisis the Security Council failed to authorize sufficient force to prevent Serbia's murderous anti-Bosnian pogrom. Non-UN sanctioned force was required to stop ethnic cleansing and to maintain the no-fly zones that protected Iraq's Kurd and Shiite populations. Failure to act in such cases renders UN moral authority ambiguous. It is an ambiguity that results from the limits imposed by the Security Council veto; a veto power often used in the pursuit of member-powers' unilateral interests.⁵²

The oblique position the NSS assigns the UN doubtless anticipates the role the Security Council may play in thwarting US power. It also recognizes the reality that UN power is what its strongest members choose to give it. What the NSS does not appear to recognize, or at least ignores, is that the international community is less threatened by the UN's inherent weaknesses than it is by a "distinctly American internationalism" backed by American hyper-power. In this regard the NSS may be said to reflect what Niebuhr called America's dangerous innocency regarding its use of power. The NSS recognizes that the Security Council may be a tool used by other members to balance US power and influence. Perhaps at times this balance comes at the expense of the moral and humanitarian considerations much celebrated in the NSS.

The NSS does not appear to recognize that its explicit claim to global hegemony, however it might be couched in humanitarian language and cooperation, heightens not diminishes the desire of others to thwart US power. Nor does it appear to be concerned that diminishing engagement in the UN simply provides opponents

⁵¹ Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 117.

⁵² The interests of the US (e.g. Israel), Russia (e.g. Serbia) and France (e.g. Iraq) have been reflected in their Security Council votes.

uncritical access to the world's most public diplomatic forum. As a practical matter, further American disengagement will enable nations such as France to pursue their own interests with the added advantage of their being masked by a patina of moral superiority. The unilateral attitudes of the Bush Administration, coupled with long-simmering suspicions of US ambitions, appeared to invite the cynical view that even the promotion of human dignity may be another guise that masks power. The real and perceived arrogance of the Administration—its lack of the humility urged by candidate Bush—has had the ironical consequence of masking the real and perceived flaws of the UN while magnifying fears of American power.

A Christian realism for today requires loyalty to the UN without confusing the ideal with the necessary. Its wariness of absolutes and insistence on context does not allow it to present any US/UN policy blueprint. Nevertheless when this relationship is viewed through the lens of humility we find prophetic guidance. Whereas power may tempt us to define the UN by its limits, the attitudes of humility illumine the relevance of its strengths. It is a global venue for the toleration, patience, and cooperation that relate US interests with the interests of the international community. It provides a continuing opportunity to discern the interests of others while allowing us to see ourselves as others see us. The humble spirit of Christian realism requires a self-critical assessment of the innocency that we are inclined to ascribe to our power and interests. The humble spirit knows that our highest ideals are always tainted by self-interest.

In the so-called unipolar age America's greatest spiritual challenge is to discern the limits of its power. If UN approval cannot be enshrined as a moral absolute of international responsibility, the attitudes of humility nevertheless afford the UN a rightful role in illuminating the responsibilities and limits of US power. The UN's inherent weaknesses make it a flawed instrument for that purpose but prophetic faith knows that the divine will often works through human imperfection. We cannot use the imperfections of the UN to escape the responsibilities of our power. Nor do our imperfections disqualify us from acting when the international community fails to act through the UN. But a more humble America will acknowledge that its sense of divine particularity has not eradicated its own considerable imperfections. It will

accept that the voices that speak essential truth to its power are not always friendly voices. With Augustine America will accept that it is often the quarrelsome voices that “bring us to correction.”⁵³

A humble America must patiently join with other nations in the tortuous but necessary task of reforming the Security Council to make it reflect the economic and political realities of the 21st century.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, if America would ameliorate unjust resentment of its power it must recommit itself to strengthening the UN through the “daily acts of fidelity and forbearance” that serve to promote a more just international community. In this regard a relevant Christian realism for today recalls a truth that Niebuhr spoke to power six decades ago.

Perhaps no lesson is more important for a nation as powerful as we, than the truth that even powerful nations cannot master their own destiny; for they are in a web of history in which many desires, hopes, wills and ambitions, other than their own, are operative.⁵⁵

The *National Security Strategy* and “Preemptive” War

The bold assertion of the right to strike pre-emptively against suspected terrorists and “rogue states” is the most controversial provision of the *National Security Strategy*. Reflecting what Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld called an “anticipatory self-defense,” the NSS doctrine of pre-emption posits a responsibility to discern and act upon security threats to the US, its allies and interests, “before they emerge.” Because terrorism presents a radically different challenge from those posed by nation states, the Cold War doctrines of deterrence (the threat of massive retaliation against

⁵³ Augustine *Confessions*, 9.7.18.

⁵⁴ Glennon, a critic of the current Security Council system and membership, sounds a realistically cautious note. Prospects for “devising a new institutional framework anytime soon” appear remote. And, irrespective of whatever reforms might be eventually achieved, “nations will continue to seek greater power and security at the expense of others. Nations will continue to disagree on when force should be used. Like it or not, that is the way of the world.” “Why the Security Council Failed,” 35. Thus we are reminded that however much our responsibility requires commitment to reform, reforming the UN will not change human nature.

⁵⁵ “Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations,” 20.

a state) and containment (diplomatic and economic measures against a nation state with sufficient power to control internal elements that may threaten US security) are no longer viewed as sufficient to protect against “borderless states and stateless aggressors.”⁵⁶

The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act pre-emptively.⁵⁷

The doctrine of *pre-emption*, usually and narrowly defined as a defensive first strike against “an imminent, specific, near certain attack,” is neither new nor necessarily controversial.⁵⁸ As Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observed, “the Bush preemption doctrine will prove a departure from past practice only if it is implemented in a manner that is aggressive, indifferent to precedent, and careless of the information used to justify military action.”⁵⁹ The NSS itself argues that international law has long accepted that nations need not suffer attack before they can legally defend themselves. It affirms that legal scholars and international jurists

⁵⁶ Jeremy Shapiro and Lynn E. Davis, “U.S. Army and the New National Security Strategy,” in *The U.S. Army and the New National Security Strategy* (Rand: Santa Monica, CA, 2003), 13.

⁵⁷ NSS, 15.

⁵⁸ Corbin, “The Bush National Security Strategy,” 1. Bruner cites the Cuban missile crisis as an instance in which the preemptive option was considered but not used. While some of Kennedy’s advisors, chiefly his brother, Robert, opposed a pre-emptive attack against Soviet missiles in Cuba, others including Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State and a godfather of American containment policy, was among those demanding air strikes. See Patterson, 500. In basic agreement with Bruner, Richard F. Grimmett, a CRS national defense analyst, provides a more detailed history of US preemptive force in “U.S. Use of Preemptive Military Force: The Historical Record,” Congressional Research Service, December 15, 2003. Grimmett defines preemptive military force as “the taking of military action by the United States against another nation so as to prevent or mitigate a presumed military attack or use of force by that nation against the United States.” Thus for Grimmett the many occasions in which US force has been used absent a declaration of war are viewed as “responsive” not preemptive. Thus the Clinton Administration’s strikes are not viewed as preemptive military strikes. Edward F. Bruner, “Comparison of National Security Strategies Published by Presidents Bush and Clinton,” *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, September 24, 2003, 3.

⁵⁹ “United Nations,” *Foreign Policy* 138 (September/October 2003): 18. Here Secretary Albright appears prescient on several counts.

“often conditioned the legitimacy of pre-emption on the existence of an imminent threat--most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack.” But, the document argues, global terrorist organizations possess easily concealed weapons of mass destruction that can be “delivered covertly, and used without warning.” This new reality requires that the US “adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries.” This may require taking “anticipatory action...even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the adapted concept of pre-emption does not imply that US force will be employed in all cases. Nor should other nations use this adapted concept “as a pretext for aggression” in pursuit of their own interests.

1. A Distinctly American Interpretation

In asking the international community to accept a distinctly American right of pre-emption, however, the Bush Doctrine appears to conflate a historically and legally recognized doctrine with a right to conduct *preventive* war which international law has not recognized. In employing the terms prevention, pre-emption and anticipatory action interchangeably the NSS is neither new nor unique. But it nevertheless invites significant confusion. Until recently, notes French scholar François Heisbourg, “‘prevention’ was widely used in strategic discourse to refer to crisis prevention or preventative deployment—as an alternative to the use of lethal force.” He cites the dispatch of UN peacekeepers in the 1990s to Macedonia to prevent armed conflict in that backwater area of the already inflamed Balkans. Such preventative action, Heisbourg believes, is the “polar opposite of the prevalent interpretation of the Bush doctrine, which assumes that the United States may use lethal force in cold blood to accomplish its objectives.”⁶¹

Heisbourg implies that the concept of preventive action that entails force is morally distinct from preventative economic, social and political means to combat

⁶⁰ NSS, 15.

⁶¹ “Is Preemption Necessary?” *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2003): 3

terrorism.⁶² This lends credence to his criticism that the conflation of pre-emptive and preventative doctrines sows confusion regarding US intentions and attitudes. But in that the *National Security Strategy* devotes two full sections to non-violent preventative strategies, Heisbourg's statement that the US seeks primarily to justify the use of "lethal force in cold blood" appears both unfair and hysterical. He nevertheless makes the significant point that blurring the concepts of preemption and prevention potentially revolutionizes the "legitimization of the use of force." Moreover, "misusing the two terms is to confuse the public debate in the international arena, inviting a confluence of worst-case political analysis and anti-U.S. sentiment by both US allies and adversaries."⁶³ In this regard, Heisbourg's resort to emotive language lends weight to his own argument. But he and others appear dismissive of the reality that internationally accepted preventative actions such as economic sanctions often produce as much if not more human suffering than the use of "lethal force."⁶⁴ Nor are so-called non-lethal measures more justly discriminating between the guilty and the innocent. Certainly in the case of Iraq it was the Iraqi people not Saddam and his circle who suffered most from 13 years of UN sanctions.

Nevertheless one need not accede entirely to views such as Heisbourg's to agree that the NSS is asserting a preventative war not a pre-emptive war doctrine. The doctrine

⁶² Ibid., 3. One wonders why Heisbourg offers the Macedonian case rather than the preventative insertion of largely ill-prepared Dutch troops to protect those 7,000 doomed Muslim men and boys in Bosnia. On another matter, he notes that the UN Security Council, with US support, rejected Israel's claim of self-defense in its 1981 attack on Iraq's French-built Osirak reactor. Because the strike was not taken to forestall an immediate Iraqi attack it was considered a preventative, not a pre-emptive, action. The 1967 Six-Day War, however, was according to Heisbourg a preemptive strike "in the purest sense" because the mobilization of Arab armed forces posed a clear and imminent threat.

⁶³ Ibid., 4. His assertion that the NSS asserts the right of unilateral action "with no mention of international support," is refuted by its numerous references to the need to work with allies, strengthen international organizations, and to build cooperation with "other main centers of power." Heisbourg obliquely corrects this oversight when he admits that the document has fallen victim to the "European perception of U.S. unilateralism." 5.

⁶⁴ In "Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked," George Lopez and David Cortright write that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in post-war Iraq proves that 13 years of UN sanctions worked. This appears true based on what we can now know. The authors acknowledge sanctions worked in large part because of massive western intelligence efforts combined with the US Navy's Maritime Interception Force. The case that sanctions "left Saddam's once-vaunted war machine in a state of disrepair," however, is made with scant attention to their cost in human suffering and the hatred this directed at the US and the west. *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 90-103.

is clarified by events.

The term “pre-emption” is not an accurate description of the Bush administration’s doctrine. It implies taking action against a nation or group that is about to strike. What the Bush administration did in Iraq was “prevention,” which implies taking action even before the decision to strike has been taken by a potentially hostile power, and perhaps well before. This is the harder case from a traditional international legal point of view.⁶⁵

Perhaps the NSS conflated the two terms hoping it might avoid making the harder and greatly more unsettling case for preventative war doctrine. But it is increasingly clear that it was not the mote of linguistic confusion but the beam of arrogance that proved most harmful to the Administration’s case. The unilateralist attitudes of the Administration combined with its bold assertions regarding American power and intentions projected an arrogance that lends moral authority to criticism such as Heisbourg’s. Had the Administration followed the promise of candidate Bush to “humbly” project American power its case for the use of preventative force against Saddam might not have stirred the degree of hostility that it did. James Rubin, a senior figure in the Clinton State Department believed that the “pre-emptive” strike controversy otherwise might have been “manageable.” As it was the perceived arrogance of the Administration led Richard Betts to observe that Washington “seems to have forgotten Bismarck’s characterization of preventative war as ‘suicide from fear of death.’”⁶⁶

Whichever U.S. officials decided to include the now-infamous language about preemptive strikes and the primacy of American power in the annual document, and then singled it out as marking a new U.S. doctrine, either did not consider or did not care how would affect the debate....If gaining support for action against Iraq was truly Washington’s highest priority in the fall of 2002, it is hard to imagine

⁶⁵ Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power*, 139. Kagan is one of the leading intellectuals associated with the Bush Administration.

⁶⁶ Richard K. Betts, “Suicide from Fear of Death,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 34. Betts was among the US foreign policy analysts who found the Intelligence Community’s assessment of Iraq’s WMD potential credible. “The fact is that the biological weapons Iraq already has are dangerous enough to do tremendous damage—even if the worst estimates of U.S. vulnerability are excessive.”

a more counterproductive step than to initiate a debate over whether the United States has the right to attack whomever it wants, whenever it deems necessary.”⁶⁷

Indeed, the perceived arrogance of the Administration proved a gift to those seeking to thwart US power. While capitalizing on the fears and hostility generated by the Administration’s arrogance France was able to claim the moral high ground while obscuring its significant financial stake in sustaining Saddam’s regime. This may be interpreted as French cynicism in protecting its own economic and political interests.⁶⁸ But the Administration’s prideful confidence that American power would carry all before it is almost certainly a relevant factor in allowing cynicism to wrap itself in a cloak of moral self-righteousness. Proof of French cynicism did not answer the case of those opposing preventative strikes against Saddam, of course, but the perception of Administration arrogance undermined its political and moral authority to make that case.

Thus the largely moderate and inclusive language that characterizes much of the *National Security Strategy* was obscured, in the eyes of many international observers, by the “shock and awe” of the Administration’s unilateral assertions of US power. This was the immediate context in which the international community considered America’s case against Saddam; but the broader question quickly became, as Kagan observed, “how can the world’s sole superpower be controlled?”⁶⁹

Here, as Niebuhr had cautioned seven decades before 9/11, a great nation’s pride of power “imperils the peace of the national community and destroys the security of the wilful nation by the very actions which are meant to guarantee it.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ James P. Rubin, “Stumbling into War,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 57-58.

⁶⁸ While the French government has significant financial interests in Iraq it also has political interests shaped in part by its substantial Muslim population.

⁶⁹ Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 83 (March/April 2004): 81.

⁷⁰ “Perils of American Power,” 96.

2. Niebuhr on Preventative War

*“Men may fall into evil by the very desperation of their effort to avoid it.”*⁷¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

In *The Irony of American History* Niebuhr observed that, “a democracy can not of course engage in an explicit preventative war.” He subjectively defined preventative war as the temptation “to bring the whole of modern history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty effort to overcome its frustrations.”⁷² Here he dealt with the causes of American Cold War frustrations but did not distinguish between preventative war and pre-emptive war doctrines. His brief treatment of preventative war in *Irony* had been more fully explored in his 1950 essay, “The Conditions of Our Survival,” which appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. This essay treats with the doctrine of preventative war as it is generally understood in international law and as reflected in Kagan’s brief definition.

Niebuhr here addresses the issue during the early Cold War before the world became inured to the fifty-year US/Soviet balance of terror. In 1949 the communist revolution triumphed in China. In June, 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea fomenting a bloody and inconclusive “police action.” Eastern Europe was being absorbed into the Soviet bloc under the shadow of massive Soviet armies. Most alarming, in 1949 the Soviets successfully tested their first atomic weapon and Stalin appeared determined to develop airpower necessary to deliver such weapons.⁷³ At the time the Communist bloc appeared both monolithic and irresistible. Niebuhr discerned in America “obvious notes of hysteria in our national life.” This hysteria

⁷¹ “The Christian Conscience and Atomic War,” *Christianity and Crisis* 10, no. 21 (December 11, 1950): 161.

⁷² *Irony*, 146.

⁷³ George F. Kennan, with whom Niebuhr had worked as a consultant to the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff in 1949, had consistently argued for negotiations with the Soviets and opposed calls for the militarization of the West’s containment policy. The Soviets’ acquisition of the bomb, coupled with Stalin’s increasingly firm grip on Eastern Europe and persistent pressure on Berlin, led to Kennan’s resignation in 1950. See John Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982): 82-83.

was evident in the inordinate fear of communist infiltration of US government and domestic institutions. It was an hysteria that led to a “false estimate of the foe’s power or cunning,” with potentially catastrophic implications.

Perhaps the most serious form of hysteria is that which manifests itself in the desire for a preventative atomic war...This form of hysteria is akin to the curious impulse, which sometimes overtakes people, walking on the edge of an abyss, to throw themselves into its depths...This willingness to flirt with the awful consequences of an atomic war is frequently justified by the dictum that total war is inevitable in any event, and that we ought therefore to choose the most propitious moment to initiate it. But the idea of inevitable war is itself an hysterical notion. There are probabilities, but no inevitabilities, in history; for history is never pure fate but a mixture of destiny and human decision. Decisions which capitulate to the illusion of inevitability are monstrous because they annul the character of man as a responsible agent.⁷⁴

Here Niebuhr sees political hysteria as a failure of faith. It reflects the anxiety that is the underlying condition of human sin. It is an acutely negative expression of the anxiety arising from humanity’s knowledge of its contingency and finitude. Although human beings find respite in faith, few ever completely overcome all anxiety. We sin when we attempt through power and spiritual pride to be what we cannot be and vainly seek to make ourselves and our own security the center of the universe. In theological terms we become idolaters. Hysteria rejects the faith in which we accept our finitude because we know that ultimate security rests with an infinite and loving Creator. In rejecting such faith political hysteria seeks security in false gods that we ourselves create and control. The idea of a preventative atomic war was, in Niebuhr’s view, was one such false god. This is the idol that vainly seeks to supplant God’s infinite and perfect justice with partial, finite and egotistical notions of justice. It is the idol adored when we worship of our own power.

Nevertheless, his rejection of preventative atomic war represented no retreat from Niebuhr’s insistence that American and Western security required sufficient military power to contain Soviet ambitions in Europe. In his 1950 essay, “The Hydrogen

⁷⁴ “The Conditions of Our Survival,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1950): 485-486.

Bomb,” Niebuhr fretfully supported US intentions to build the hydrogen bomb. It appeared certain that the Soviets, having developed their own atomic weapon, were working to develop the more advanced technology. He rejected the position that the US could unilaterally renounce such a weapon because doing so risked rendering the West’s defense untenable. A responsible statesman could not knowingly place the nation in such a position. While some individuals are capable of ultimate self-sacrifice nations are not. He rejected the idea that a unilateral US renouncement of this new weapon would “soften the Russian heart,” particularly regarding Soviet intentions to dominate Europe. Yet, he insisted, the development of the H-bomb should proceed concomitantly with a “solemn covenant never to use it first.” Such a policy retrieved some moral authority from tragic necessity and would serve “to counteract all those tendencies in our national life which make for the subordination of moral and political strategy to military strategy.”

The refusal to use the bomb first does have a further significance. We would be saying by such a policy that even a nation can reach the point where it can purchase its life too dearly. If we had to use this kind of destruction in order to save our lives, would we find life worth living? Even nations can reach a point where the words of our Lord, “Fear not them which are able to kill the body but rather fear them that are able to destroy both soul and body,” become relevant.

The point of moral transcendence over historical destiny is not as high as moral perfectionists imagine. But there is such a point, though the cynics and realists do not recognize it. We must discern that point clearly.⁷⁵

Christian realism nevertheless recognizes that no nation will choose self-annihilation rather than to produce a particular weapon, especially if it can be reasonably argued that the *possession* of the weapon makes its *use* unlikely (an ironic point Niebuhr apparently accepts). But nations have a concomitant moral responsibility to discern the circumstances in which such weapons will not be used. The statesman is to be held accountable for national survival but Christian realism discerns this accountability through a prophetic faith that knows there is no ultimate security in history. If Niebuhr’s prophetic faith requires Christian responsibility for more equal

⁷⁵ “The Hydrogen Bomb,” *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1950), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 237.

social justice *in* history, it knows as well that perfect justice is always *beyond* history. For him prophetic faith requires a profound humility before God that acknowledges both the responsibilities and the limits of human power. Here the attitudes of humility reject any idolatrous worship of our own power and militate against a hysterical response to the power of others.

3. Preventative War and Responsibility in Context

Christian realism requires attention to context and consequences. It was this insistence that led Niebuhr to reject the adoption of moral absolutes as political strategies: his proscription against preventative atomic war is as close to a moral absolute as can be found in his work. He had very early rejected pacifism as such an absolute for public responsibility.⁷⁶ He could commend an individual's moral choice to embrace absolute pacifism but believed that pacifism as public policy led to the irresponsibility of injustice. During the 1930s some Americans embraced neutrality as the nation's best option for avoiding the gathering turmoil in Europe. Some, in their determination to remain aloof from international conflict, also made neutrality a moral absolute of American foreign policy.⁷⁷ They sought to avoid the inevitable evil that war entails but incurred the guilt of irresponsibility in the face of a yet greater evil. As the calamitous events of the late 1930s pointed inexorably toward conflict with powerful and demonstrably evil adversaries, Niebuhr reflected upon a concept of preventative war consistent with the responsibilities entailed by his Christian realism.

Contemporary history refutes the idea that nations are drawn into war too precipitously. It proves, on the contrary, that it is the general inclination of democratic nations at least, to hesitate so long before

⁷⁶ See "On the Ethiopian War," *Radical Religion* 1, no.1 (Autumn 1935): 6-8; reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 166-67. Here Niebuhr reflects on the moral quandary that proposed sanctions against Italy posed for pacifists. This quandary proved "how hard it is to deal with political problems from the standpoint of an absolute credo."

⁷⁷ Niebuhr had embraced American neutrality as a means of forestalling his great fear in the 1930s that the nation's economic and military power would lead it down the path to fascism. That he was himself capable of an hysterical reaction is evidenced by his response to Roosevelt's 1938 call for increased US defense spending. "Brief Notes," *Radical Religion* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1938): 7.

taking this fateful plunge that the dictator nations gain a fateful advantage over them by having the opportunity of overwhelming them singly, instead of being forced to meet their common resistance.⁷⁸

His point here is not that war is ever good but that it might be the lesser of evil choices confronting the responsible statesman. Doubtless recalling the “peace” of Munich he reflected on a moral responsibility that recognizes “there can be no justice in the world if we resent only the injustice which is done to us.”⁷⁹ Nazi atrocities were even then known. Most of the concentration camps were in operation. Civilian populations were being indiscriminately attacked and displaced. Being unprepared for war or unwilling to wage it the western democracies had sacrificed the peace of others in order to secure their own. Moral guilt attached to this failure despite the best intentions and hopes of those who sought to avoid armed conflict. Here Niebuhr appears to believe that a preventative war before Nazi Germany could gain its “fateful advantage” would have been morally justified.

Thus it is problematic to argue that Niebuhr’s Christian realism would oppose preventative war under any circumstances. His adamant opposition to preventative atomic war thus does not necessarily imply opposition to preventative war within a quite different context. Hovering over his discussion is the probability that any nuclear attack entailed the kind of massive and indiscriminate killing for which he condemned both sides in WWII.⁸⁰ Such indiscriminate attacks moot the considerations of justice that must characterize Christian responsibility in the conduct of any war. Nevertheless, if justice requires that a nation’s claim to survival be considered, as Christian realism believes it does, then a preventative strike may

⁷⁸ “To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny,” *Christian Century* 57, no. 51 (December 18, 1940) cited in *Love and Justice*, 272. [Note: D.B. Robertson’s 1979 bibliography of Niebuhr’s works lists this essay under the title, “If America is Drawn into the War, Can You, as a Christian, Participate in it or Support it?” *Reinhold Niebuhr’s Works: A Bibliography* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979), 62.] Niebuhr prefaces this observation with the caveat that statesmen will seek “decent and honorable” means to avoid war, a policy which American isolationists and pacifists believed Roosevelt was not pursuing.

⁷⁹ “We Are at War,” 2.

⁸⁰ “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 4 (March 20, 1944): 2.

fall within the realm of tragic choices that a just cause may at times require.⁸¹ Here the statesman confronts the kind of morally ambiguous decision Churchill faced in destroying the powerful French fleet at Oran.⁸² He believed that should this force pass into Nazi control it would tip the naval balance in Germany's favour. Whether this was a pre-emptive measure against a clear and imminent threat or a preventative measure against a gathering but less immediate threat, this case underscores the difficulty in making a clear distinction between the two doctrines. For Churchill this was a "hateful decision" of the kind that necessity at times forces upon the responsible statesman.⁸³

Christian realism recognizes that responsibility at times might require such decisions. It does not believe that morally responsible decisions necessarily entail a defensive posture or that the foe always be allowed the initiative. Accordingly Christian realism need not rule out specifically targeted preventative measures against terrorist organizations or so-called rogue states. It accepts that moral responsibility might require the use of preventative force in humanitarian crises. It cautions that there may be crises in which United Nation's approval cannot be forthcoming and cannot be determinate of international responsibility and action.

But Christian realism for today also confirms that great power entails great responsibility and no more so than in the case of preventative war. Here it affirms Niebuhr's prophetic witness against the moral and political hazards of all arrogant power. Such hazards are reflected in the NSS' explicit embrace of preventative force in the interest of a "distinctly American internationalism." Although the doctrine of "pre-emption" is mentioned only briefly the NSS is perceived by many to be a proclamation of the global hegemony of predominant US power. It reflects an

⁸¹ "Justice and Love," *Christianity and Crisis* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1950), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 28-29.

⁸² Appearing before the Commons to report the matter, Churchill was observed "sitting there with tears pouring down his cheeks." Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 2001; London: Penguin Group), 622-625.

⁸³ This action cost the lives of 1300 French sailors and understandably overshadowed Anglo-French relations for many years. Though failing to destroy the entire fleet, the attack did seriously cripple it. Moreover, through this "brutal rather than glorious" act Churchill signalled to a wavering America that there should be "no more talk about Britain giving in." *Ibid.*, 624.

Administration whose actions and attitudes have marked a significant shift from the multilateral traditions that have shaped US responsibility within the international community. America's ties with the UN, NATO and other international bodies are the means by which American power and responsibility are shared. These traditions do not remove resentment of American power but they do ameliorate it. They are one means through which we may distinguish between just and unjust resentment of our power and thereby build a community of common interests.

Today's Christian realism recognizes that any government's first duty is to protect its citizens. It accepts that terrorism and so-called rogue states that support it pose serious threats to national security. But even as it supports responsible US measures to counter these threats, Christian realism always stands in judgment upon their justice and wisdom. It must remind us that times of great crisis are times that easily betray just fear into hysteria. This hysteria betrays our legitimate national security interests by obscuring the political and moral limits of power. Hysteria and great power combine to make false absolutes of our own interests and security. Here we destroy rather than build the greater international community of interest upon which our national security ultimately rests.

The *National Security Strategy's* assertion of a distinctly American interpretation of preventative war in pursuit of a distinctly American internationalism reflects a destructive amalgam of hysteria and prideful power. As an exercise in public diplomacy it reflects a disdain for world opinion and for the necessity of distinguishing just and unjust resentments of US power. Its arrogant proclamation of American power appears oblivious to the fact that most US allies are democratic states whose governments rightfully rest upon popular consent. Though it speaks of international cooperation the NSS appears to reduce old alliances and allies to tools in the toolbox of American power. Because of its arrogant assertions of American power the NSS has served less to unite the world against terrorism and rogue states than to divide old alliances. There was much pride and little humility evident in these assertions. Their costs are reflected in part in Iraq where much of the international community appears more content with the humiliation of great power than in rebuilding a devastated nation.

The *National Security Strategy* and the Failure of Intelligence

*Intelligence—and how we use it—is our first line of defense against terrorists and the threat posed by hostile states.*⁸⁴

National Security Strategy

The events of 9/11 that gave rise to the *National Security Strategy* evidenced a significant failure of intelligence with regard to internal US security. This failure had little apparent impact on the credibility of intelligence that was used to justify, in part, a US-led preventative attack to disarm Iraq and remove Saddam's regime. The US and most Western nations believed that the regime possessed WMD. Though their exact nature and quantity were unknown there was significant disagreement on the degree of threat they presented to the international community. Suffering from 9/11 after-shock, however, America's Intelligence Community fell into what the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence labelled "group think," a corporate mentality that uncritically accepted many worst-case estimates of Saddam's WMD capability.⁸⁵

While the issue of WMD was not the Administration's only argument for the forceful disarming of Iraq, in light of 9/11 it gave the issue immediacy. The Administration argued as well that the removal of Saddam was justified by his failure to comply with 16 UN resolutions dating to 1990. In this regard, it argued that a failure to act would consign the UN to the fate of the League of Nations. Saddam's execrable record of human rights abuses provided further grounds for his removal. Nevertheless it was the issue of WMD that lent urgency to the US argument for a preventative war against Saddam.

⁸⁴ NSS, 30.

⁸⁵ *Conclusions: Report of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, July 2004.

1. A Catalogue of Misjudgements

The events of 9/11 evidenced a massive failure of US intelligence that launched a number of Congressional inquiries. The first was conducted by a Congressional Joint Inquiry (a temporary joint committee composed of both House and Senate Members) that released its report in December 2002.⁸⁶ The Joint Inquiry report found that US intelligence had failed on a number of fronts.

For a variety of reasons, the Intelligence Community failed to capitalize on both the individual and collective significance of available information that appears relevant to the events of 9/11. As a result, the Community missed opportunities to disrupt the September 11 plot by denying entry to or detaining would-be hijackers; to at least try to unravel the place through surveillance and other investigative work within the United States; and, finally, to generate a heightened state of alert and thus harden the homeland against attack.

No one will ever know what might have happened had more connections been drawn between these disparate pieces of information.⁸⁷

The Joint Inquiry report revealed that US intelligence long had lacked a “domestic intelligence collection capability” following revelations of civil rights abuses in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁸ That US intelligence lacked such a capability with regard to 9/11 was part of the price the nation paid for those abuses. But the report underscored the point that even in the arena of domestic threats intelligence remains an ambiguous enterprise reflecting uncertainty and risk of error.

⁸⁶ *Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001*, Report of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, December, 2002. The report includes the ironical note that the US Intelligence Community had its origins in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks. “Additional Views of the Members of the Joint Inquiry,” 1.

⁸⁷ Joint Inquiry, 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. In 1963 the Kennedy Administration authorized FBI surveillance of civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King. FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover famously disliked King and distrusted the civil rights movement. Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 475-476. Hoover’s abuses led to more stringent controls on the collection of domestic intelligence.

The July 22, 2004 *Report of the Independent Bi-Partisan 9/11 Commission*, with the benefit of additional time and evidence, provided painfully detailed accounts of the failures of intelligence examined by the earlier Joint Inquiry. This commission, co-chaired by elder statesmen of each major political party, identified significant flaws in domestic intelligence that allowed the 9/11 plot to develop and largely succeed. It notes that terrorism was not the over-riding concern of the Clinton Administration or of the Bush Administration until 9/11. "None of the measures adopted by the U.S. government from 1998-2001 disturbed or even delayed the progress of the al Qaeda plot."⁸⁹ The disjointed nature of domestic intelligence gathering and assessment, the failure to communicate intelligence among federal and other law enforcement agencies, and the failure of front-line airport security measures all contributed to the disaster. Thus known or suspected terrorists entered the U.S, undertook training in flying large aircraft, and received substantial funds from terrorist organizations to finance the plot. On 9/11, carrying box cutters and pepper-spray devices, terrorists managed to board four fully fuelled commercial aircraft. Several had set off detection devices, were searched and then allowed to board even though they continued to trigger the devices.

The 9/11 Commission Report makes a number of recommendations addressing each of these failures of domestic intelligence. But significantly the report emphasises the relationship between America's domestic security and the manner in which it meets its international responsibilities. Here the report calls for a relationship "beyond oil" with Saudi Arabia (homeland to most of the 9/11 terrorists), a relationship that both nations "can defend to their citizens and includes a shared commitment to reform." The report observes that "America must stand as an example of moral leadership in the world" by pushing for reforms citizens of repressive Islamic regimes can see as the means to a better future.⁹⁰ American security requires drastic reforms in domestic intelligence but better intelligence and military power themselves will not guarantee national security.

⁸⁹ *Summary: The Independent 9/11 Commission Report*, July 22, 2004, 9.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

The first phase of our post-9/11 efforts rightfully included military action to topple the Taliban and pursue al Qaeda. This work continues. But long-term success demands the use of all elements of national power: diplomacy, intelligence, covert action, law enforcement, economic policy, foreign aid, public diplomacy, and homeland defense.⁹¹

Also in July, 2004 the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its report on US intelligence-related failures in Iraq. The focus of the Select Committee's report was the failure of American intelligence regarding Iraq's possession of WMD and related programs. Saddam's presumed possession of such weapons, in light of 9/11 and suspected ties with terrorist groups, lent immediacy to the Administration's call for a preventative war to destroy Iraq's WMD and to remove Saddam from power. The intelligence supporting the Administration's case was contained in the October, 2002 *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE), "Iraq's Continuing Program for Weapons of Mass Destruction."

The first conclusion of the Committee's report is that most "key judgments" contained in the NIE, "either overstated, or were not supported by, the underlying intelligence reporting. A series of failures, particularly in analytic trade craft, led to the mischaracterization of the intelligence."⁹² The NIE's unequivocal position that "Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons" overstated what was then known about Saddam's WMD holdings. Most of what the Intelligence Community (IC) knew with any certitude regarding Iraq's WMD programs apparently predated the 1991 Gulf War. Moreover, the IC lost its UN sources when Saddam ousted its inspectors in 1998. As a second conclusion notes the IC failed to accurately and adequately convey the uncertainties behind the judgments reflected in the NIE.

Intelligence analysts are not only charged with interpreting and assessing the intelligence reporting, but with clearly conveying to policy makers the difference between what intelligence analysts know,

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹² *Summary: The Senate Select Committee Report*, 1.

what they don't know, what they think, and to make sure that policy makers understand the difference.⁹³

The report strongly criticised the institutional attitudes and assumptions that fomented Intelligence Community errors in judgment:

The Intelligence community suffered from a collective presumption that Iraq had an active and growing WMD program. This “group think” dynamic led Intelligence Community analysts, collectors and managers both to interpret ambiguous evidence as conclusively indicative for a WMD program as well as ignore or minimize evidence that Iraq did not have active and expanding WMD programs. This presumption was so strong that formalized IC mechanisms established to challenge assumptions and group think were not utilized.⁹⁴

The Senate Committee found that the IC was under “tremendous pressure to make correct assessments, to avoid missing a credible threat, and to avoid an intelligence failure on the scale of 9/11.”⁹⁵ Although there had been allegations to the contrary the Committee found no evidence that Intelligence Community judgments regarding Iraq’s WMD programs were changed under pressure from the Administration.

2. Contrition and the Lessons of Failure

As one who had read and believed privileged information regarding Iraq’s WMD program I found the Administration’s assertions credible. Based upon my own understanding of the destructive potential of these capabilities I believed it essential that Saddam be disarmed. My conviction in this regard was heightened by the ease with which the attacks of 9/11 claimed 3000 lives and the possibility that Saddam might provide WMD to terrorist organizations. While the Senate Committee’s

⁹³ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 28. Some attention was focused on personal visits Vice President Cheney had made to CIA headquarters. According to the report participants in these briefing did not believe that Cheney pressured analysts to change their assessments of Iraq’s suspected WMD programs.

subsequent investigation on Iraq's WMD program found no evidence linking Iraq to the 9/11 attack, at the time I believed such a link plausible. With regard to American intelligence on Iraq I confess with David Kay that "we were all wrong."⁹⁶

Although he does not use the term Kay reminds us of the relevance of contrition to Christian responsibility. It is indispensable to Christian realism because it is an attitude of Christian humility without which there is no truly Christian responsibility. It is not indispensable because Christian realism excuses incompetence but because it recognizes human finitude and accepts that mistakes are inevitable. More importantly, contrition is essential because Christian realism is always mindful that pride in its many guises betrays us into error. Contrition is essential because it safeguards against self-righteousness and opens us to the lessons of our mistakes. It is an acknowledgement of the fragmentary nature of our understanding of truth. We remain responsible for our mistakes but in a contrite confession of our errors we open ourselves to the divine forgiveness and a grace that illumines responsibility anew.

Christian realism requires that we learn the lessons of history and experience. The post 9/11 inquiries regarding US intelligence point to many such lessons. It is the mark of a responsible democracy that the post 9/11 inquiries, particularly regarding Iraq, have laid humiliating failures before the world. Perhaps we may call this a secular expression of Christian contrition. Yet in the prophetic tradition Christian realism seeks to discern the attitudes that lend a moral taint to the failure of intelligence regarding Iraq. It is unfair to hold the Bush Administration exclusively responsible for a decade of intelligence failures. The inquiries make this clear. Moreover, any nation's responsibility to protect its citizens would be massively underscored by the murder of 3000 people going about their daily tasks. Yet Christian realism discerns in this Administration an arrogance regarding American power that undermines its long-term ability to do that. Its apparent disregard for America's multilateral traditions, its dismissal of international opinion, and a national security strategy that proclaims a distinctly American internationalism all reflect

⁹⁶ Kay Testimony, Senate Armed Forces Services Committee, January 29, 2004. Kay, a senior member of the US Intelligence Community, had been head of the post-war Iraq Survey Group.

pride that betrays power into weakness.

The *National Security Strategy*'s assertion of American hegemony served to raise the suspicions of a world already resentful of American power. This prideful and gratuitous assertion was accompanied by the "shock and awe" of Administration rhetoric preceding the invasion of Iraq. Intelligence regarding Iraq's WMD used to give immediacy to this invasion has been proven largely wrong. The failure to adequately provide for the post-invasion security and rebuilding of Iraq, the abuse of prisoners and the failure of intelligence have combined to sap both the credibility and moral authority of American power. From the perspective of Christian realism these failures indicate an absence of humility; the attitudes that might have helped distinguish between what we know and what we should know; a humility that discerns responsibility in great crisis without succumbing to the irresponsibility of either complacency or hysteria.

As he did in another great crisis of American history, Niebuhr's understanding of humility's essential relevance informs a Christian realism for today.

The American situation is such a vivid symbol of the spiritual perplexities of modern man, because the degree of American power tends to generate illusions to which a technocratic culture is already too prone. This technocratic approach to the problems of history, which erroneously equates the mastery of nature with the mastery of historic destiny, in turn accentuates a very old failing in human nature: the inclination of the wise, or the powerful, or the virtuous, to obscure and deny the human limitations in all human achievements and pretensions.⁹⁷

National Security Strategy and the Abuse of Human Rights in a War for Human Dignity

The *National Security Strategy* offers a vision of international peace reflecting the

⁹⁷ *Irony*, 147.

“non-negotiable” demands of human dignity.

In pursuit of our goals, our first imperative is to clarify what we stand for: the United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations and no nation is exempt from them.⁹⁸

Thus opens Section II of the document, “Champion Aspirations of Human Dignity.” “America,” it declares, “must stand firmly for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity” that include the rule of law, limits on the absolute power of the state and equal justice.⁹⁹ The United States will “speak out honestly about violations of the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity using our voice and vote in international institutions to advance freedom”¹⁰⁰

The NSS posits America’s support for human dignity as central to its national security policies. The requirements of human dignity, it asserts, “will guide our government’s decisions about international cooperation, the character of our foreign assistance, and the allocation of resources. They will guide our actions and our words in international bodies.”¹⁰¹ The strategy notes that history has harshly judged nations that systematically violate human rights and deny the aspirations of their own people. As the world grows smaller systematic human rights abuses are seen as affecting the global community not simply the unfortunates who reside in totalitarian states. Recent events confirm that in the age of global technology even weak states such as Afghanistan may create a “crossroads of radicalism and technology” that threaten US security.¹⁰² Human dignity accordingly is made a tenet of American international responsibility. Such obligations, the strategy cautions, are “not to be undertaken symbolically to rally support for an ideal without furthering its attainment.”¹⁰³

⁹⁸ NSS, 3.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *The President’s Cover Letter to the National Security Strategy*, The White House, September 17, 2002, 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3.

Niebuhr would have grimly appreciated the irony.

In its emphasis on the ideal of human dignity the strategy truthfully acknowledges that “our own history is a long struggle to live up to our ideals.” Events subsequent to the attacks on the Taliban and on Iraq ironically confirm that this struggle continues. The NSS’ ideal of human dignity--intended to lend moral authority to the pursuit of US security interest--has been made risible by prideful power. The treatment of Guantánamo Bay internees, the abuses in Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib jail, and the lack of preparation for providing security in post-war Iraq are each failures of American justice.

1. The Guantánamo Bay Internees

Early in the Afghanistan campaign the Administration determined that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to the great majority of internees confined at the US Naval Base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In response to criticism from human rights organizations and some foreign governments, the President found that the Conventions applied to Afghanistan Taliban fighters but not to al-Qaida internees. However, this new determination did not confer Prisoner of War (POW) status on captured Taliban because they failed to meet Convention standards as lawful combatants. Because they represented no state signatory to the Conventions, al-Qaida fighters remained outside Geneva Convention protections.

The Bush Administration has deemed all of the detainees to be “unlawful combatants,” who may, according to Administration officials, be held indefinitely without trial or even despite their eventual acquittal by a military tribunal. The decision with respect to the application of the Geneva Conventions has thus not effected the treatment of any of the detainees held at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and has not quelled the criticism. The Secretary of Defense has reaffirmed that detainees will continue to be treated humanely....

The U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR) and some human rights organizations argue that all combatants captured on the

battlefield are entitled to be treated as POWs until an independent tribunal has determined otherwise. The U.N. Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Arbitrary Detention deemed that the U.S. detention of “enemy combatants,” without determining their status in accordance with international law, may be arbitrary....The Administration’s position [is] that, there being no doubt as to the status of the detainees, individual legal procedures to determine the status of the detainees are unnecessary.¹⁰⁴

In late 2003 the US Supreme court heard *amicus curiae* briefs (including one submitted by a former Japanese-American internee) and granted *certiorari* to hear arguments as to whether US courts have jurisdiction to hear legal challenges on behalf of the detainees. An earlier appellate court had found that it had no such jurisdiction because the detainees are aliens and are being detained outside the sovereign territory of the US. In July 2004 the US Supreme Court, while confirming the President’s right to hold combatants without trial, ruled that the Guantánamo Bay internees have recourse to the US courts.

The treatment of these internees discredited the Administration claims that the war against terrorism is “a fight for freedom, the rule of law and human dignity.”¹⁰⁵ Although the Department of Defense persistently claimed that their treatment is fully consistent with Geneva Convention principles internees were nevertheless denied Prisoner of War status under the Geneva Convention.¹⁰⁶ This was, according to the *New York Times*, an arbitrary action that “rightly offended most of America’s allies.” Moreover, the *Times* continued, “following the standards of the Geneva Convention, a treaty signed and properly ratified by the Senate, does not require coddling violent enemies of the United States. It simply requires applying America’s proud standards of justice to them.”¹⁰⁷ In the Administration’s refusal to apply Geneva Convention status to the Guantánamo detainees we see reflected the increasing divergence of US attitudes on human rights from those shared by the wider international community.

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Elsea, *Treatment of “Battlefield Detainees” in the War on Terrorism, A Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, December 8, 2003, 1-4.

¹⁰⁵ *World Report 2003*, Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3>, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Elsea, *Treatment of “Battlefield Detainees,”* 36. This analysis notes that “earlier reports that the detainees were being treated inhumanely appear to be unfounded.”

¹⁰⁷ “Justice at Guantánamo,” Editorial, *New York Times* (January 29, 2002).

The majority of expert opinion, including that of the International Committee of the Red Cross, opposed US policy.¹⁰⁸

While there were both legal and practical grounds to deny POW status to Guantánamo Bay internees,¹⁰⁹ the Administration's efforts to justify its position on the issue have been impeded by its real and perceived arrogance toward international opinion.¹¹⁰ Given the methods employed in the 9/11 attacks and the possibility that some detainees were similarly trained, extreme caution in their initial transport and incarceration was reasonable and responsible.¹¹¹ Yet the Administration's intransigence has undermined its efforts to justify reasonable precautions for the safety of both internees and US personnel. Even attempts at openness backfire as photos of the hooded and manacled prisoners continue to be flashed into living rooms around the world. Particularly in those areas of the globe where winning hearts and minds is seen as imperative these recurrent images cannot be offset by any number of words.¹¹² Allowed to fester for nearly two years, this issue smacks of an arrogance that has sapped American moral authority and increased resentment of American power. Normally US-friendly, *The Economist* observed that "even judged by Mr Rumsfeld's lengthening list of Pyrrhic victories, this one particularly hurts America's reputation."¹¹³

A Christian realist's perspective does not require hindsight to believe that humility on the part of the Administration might have avoided, or at least ameliorated, this

¹⁰⁸ See Joanne Mariner, "The Continuing Debate over the Legal Status of Guantánamo Detainees," *Findlaw Forum* (March 11, 2002): 1.

¹⁰⁹ See Ruth Wedgwood, "Prisoners of a Different War," *Financial Times* (January 30, 2002). Yale Law professor Wedgwood is an international law consultant to the Pentagon.

¹¹⁰ See Marjorie Cohn, "Bush and the Geneva Convention: Begging the Question," *Jurist* (February 8, 2002): 1.

¹¹¹ In the course of my military service I once served as operations officer for an aerial transport squadron. Knowing something of the hazards of all aerial transport I did not find that detainees being hooded and manacled during flight to be inhumane treatment under the circumstances. Without taking every precaution it would have been a dereliction of duty to order military personnel on board transport aircraft.

¹¹² "Torture! What's Next? Electrodes?" headlined one report. See "Rumsfeld, Myers Pentagon Briefing," *An International Information Program*, U.S. Department of State, February 8, 2002: 2-3.

¹¹³ "Not Good Enough," *The Economist* (July 3, 2004): 12.

disaster. If it understands the inevitability of some misjudgement in crisis, Christian realism also knows that crisis presents and demands creative measures. The Guantánamo Bay internee issue reflects lost opportunities for the kind of creative public diplomacy called for in the 9/11 Commission report. The *National Security Strategy* urges, ironically it now seems, that US security requires effective public diplomacy “to help people around the world learn about and understand America.”¹¹⁴ This was published even as the quandary of Guantánamo Bay became a diplomatic Bay of Pigs. Certainly the Guantánamo Bay quandary involves significant international legal issues that require international solutions. It also entails issues in American law over which the Congress has significant legislative authority.¹¹⁵

This situation challenged the US to provide international leadership in finding these solutions and it failed to meet this responsibility. The internees’ case presented an opportunity for America to set an example of democratic rule and open diplomacy. It seemed to present precisely the kind of problem for which the NSS pledged “consistent consultations among partners with a spirit of humility.”¹¹⁶ Yet the prideful and unilateral stance of the Administration regarding the Guantánamo Bay internees has undermined its moral authority in a conflict it has itself defined in moral terms.

2. Abuse in Abu Ghraib Prison

The obscene abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US military personnel in Saddam’s most notorious torture chamber was so grotesque as to constitute treason in a war for human dignity. It has been a cruel gift to al Qaeda and other terrorists groups seeking support among Arab populations. This moral failure has hardened Iraqi anti-

¹¹⁴ NSS, 31.

¹¹⁵ Elsea, *Treatment of “Battlefield Detainees,”* 9-51. Here Elsea finds that the US Constitution provides Congress “with ample authority to legislate the treatment of battlefield detainees in the custody of the U.S. military.” Given the Administration’s assertion that “the war on terror is a new kind of conflict, requiring a new set of rules and definitions...the role of Congress might be seen as particularly important in providing a definition and set of boundaries to shape how such a war is to be fought.”

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

American sentiment and further endangered the lives of US military personnel in the field.¹¹⁷ It has been a body blow to US prestige and moral authority, all the more so because the Administration offered America as the model for others to emulate. That Abu Ghraib, the symbol of Saddam's murderous regime, should become the symbol of disgraceful conduct by US soldiers is one of the searing ironies of the war on terrorism.

Yet if this damaging and humiliating episode serves to inspire humility in this Administration it may serve constructive purposes. The President, the Secretary of State, and the commanding general have each apologized to the Iraqi people and to the international community. Nevertheless their expressions of contrition will be given substance only if justice is served and is seen to be served. Here repentance requires a comprehensive investigation embracing the entire military and civilian chain of command. The prosecution of those found responsible must be open and transparent. It must set an example of the democratic processes and values betrayed by those who abused the Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib.

Christian realism discerns through the lens of humility another possibility for some redemptive good to come of this disaster. In the immediate case repentance entails justice for abuser and abused. Yet it may serve other essential and creative purposes. Humility expressed through repentance is requisite to Christian responsibility in conflict. It illumines the elements of common humanity that are the building blocks of hopes for a better community beyond conflict. It points to a truth of faith that rejects both despair and the vainglory of power. Here is a God's eye perspective that allows us to acknowledge our finitude and imperfections while discerning our responsibilities to others.

Beyond all moral distinctions of history we must know ourselves one with our enemies not only in the bonds of a common humanity but also in the bonds of a common guilt by which that humanity has become corrupted. The Christian faith must persuade us to be humble

¹¹⁷ Luke Baker and Alastair Macdonald, "U.S. Jails First Soldier Over Iraq Jail Abuse," *Reuters* (May 19, 2004): 1.

rather than self-righteous in carrying out our historic tasks. It is the humility which is the source of pity and forgiveness.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

The *National Security Strategy* provides the Bush Administration's vision of 21st century American power and international responsibility. Although it was most immediately prompted by the 9/11 attacks, and proposes strategies to defeat international terrorism, the NSS is more broadly a proclamation of a global hegemony based on American military and economic power. Even as the NSS speaks of international cooperation, economic development and the non-negotiable demand for a universal respect for human dignity, it asserts the international primacy of US interests and values.

Predictably the latter emphasis invited international resentment. The NSS' proclamation of a "distinctly American internationalism"; the explicit embrace of preventative war doctrine; and the unilateralist attitudes and actions of the Bush Administration all gave new impetus to old suspicions of American power. For many in the international community the policies, attitudes and actions of the Administration reflect an arrogance that appears to threaten their interests more immediately than international terrorism. The NSS and related Administration policies have struck an ironically discordant note just as US and international security requires unity of purpose. While the 9/11 attacks rightly would have shaken the complacency of any government, the Administration's assertion of unilateral power appears dismissive of the resentment it predictably created and oblivious to its potential consequences. As Niebuhr's incidental work repeatedly reveals from 1932 onwards resentment of US power has been an enduring fact of international life. There is little in the NSS that reflects either an awareness of this resentment or an understanding that US attitudes and policies must take it into account.

Although candidate George W. Bush called for humility in the exercise of American

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, "Our Responsibilities in 1942," 1-2.

power neither his Administration nor the NSS reflected the attitudes of humility discerned in Niebuhr's incidental work. The gratuitous rejection of various international agreements already mooted under President Clinton coupled with the Administration's hostility to the United Nations indicated major shifts in America's traditionally multilateral approach to its international responsibilities. Though after 9/11 there was broad international support for removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, this support faded as the Administration shifted its focus to removing Saddam's regime in Iraq. At the same time the Administration promulgated its *National Security Strategy*. Predictably Iraq is seen as a case study in the political and practical implications of this assertive US strategy. Robert Kagan, a leading intellectual close to the Administration, invites this view.

Even at times of dire emergency, and perhaps especially at those times, the world's sole superpower needs to demonstrate that it wields its great power on behalf of its principles and all who share them.

The manner in which the United States conducts itself in Iraq today is especially important in this regard. At stake is not only the future of Iraq and the Middle East more generally, but also of America's reputation, its reliability, and its legitimacy as a world leader. The United States will be judged, and should be judged, by the care and commitment it takes to secure a democratic peace in Iraq. It will be judged by whether it indeed advances the cause of liberalism, in Iraq and elsewhere, or whether it merely defends its own interests.¹¹⁹

The outcome of the US-led effort to secure a democratic peace for Iraq appears cannot be predicted. Yet even as its outcome appears distant and uncertain the Iraq experience offers the lessons that history teaches those willing to learn them. As a Christian realist I believe these lessons are most profoundly understood when viewed through the lens of Christian humility. The work of this chapter has been to apply that lens to the *National Security Strategy*.

If the NSS offers a bold assertion of US global hegemony the Iraq experience offers essential lessons in the ways in which great power may be humbled. Perhaps the

¹¹⁹ Kagan, *Paradise & Power*, 154.

most immediate of these lessons is that our failure to discern the political and moral limits of our power is a failure of humility. Humility does not assume the fault is always ours; such an assumption is an ironical expression of pride disguised as humility. Rather Christian humility requires that we acknowledge the pride that betrays our power into self-destructing error. Thus while the NSS posits “human dignity” at the core of US foreign policy, the arrogant handling of battlefield detainees in Guantánamo Bay became an international scandal that has damaged the moral authority of our power. Although the NSS devotes considerable and thoughtful comment to the importance of international cooperation it assigns an incidental role to the UN, the most influential of multinational organizations. Events in Iraq reveal that the price of this error is being paid in the increased suffering of its people and in Coalition lives and resources. A state’s right to use pre-emptive force in certain circumstances has long been recognized. But the assertion of a distinctly American preventative war doctrine in the cause of a distinctly American internationalism appeared to frighten more allies than terrorists.¹²⁰ Thus prideful assertions have projected hysteria rather than power affirmed by an earned respect for its moral authority.

In each of these cases prideful power appears to have obscured the reality that US responsibility includes the humble recognition that all human power has its limits. When both responsibility and limits are humbly acknowledged the nation more clearly discerns its own interests and, through patience, toleration and contrition, the interests of others. Just here the attitudes of humility must inform responsibility and serve to guide American power in a time of terror.

We will be undone if we do not constantly overcome the two temptations of nations in our situation. One is the temptation to flee from the responsibilities which are inherent in our power....The other temptation is to over estimate the degree of our power, more particularly our moral authority, in the calculations of world politics.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Heisbourg, 4. Heisbourg contends, hyperbolically in my view, that the doctrine seeks to justify the use of “lethal force in cold blood.”

¹²¹ Niebuhr, “American Conservatism and the World Crisis,” *The Yale Review* (March, 1951): 399.

In its appeals to freedom, democracy and human dignity the *National Security Strategy* reflects cherished ideals that shape America's self-image. These are ideals that Christian realism values because, however imperfectly, they reflect of God's love, goodwill and respect for all human beings. Yet in its understanding of human nature Christian realism knows that pride and irresponsible power inevitably taint and betray our efforts to secure these ideals. Here it seeks the grace of humility that is the source of forgiveness and the contrite spirit that discerns God's prophetic judgment on all human power and pretension.

Humility attends to the obscure and fragmentary voices in which divine judgment often speaks truth to power and pretension. Months following the "shock and awe" visited upon Iraq one of its bewildered citizens asked an interviewer, "If America is so powerful, why doesn't my telephone work?"

Conclusion

The Attitudes of Humility and a Christian Realism for America Today

The best chance of our own powerful nation meeting the great responsibilities which history has given us too brief a preparation, lies in abjuring every temptation to regard our power and our favoured position among the nations as proof of our superior virtue; and in listening patiently to the mounting criticism of our life (even though envy may partly prompt it) in the hope that it may make us wiser in the exercise of our power and more prudent in the discharge of our responsibility.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction

My understanding of a relevant Christian realism inescapably reflects a first career in politics and public service as a professional staff member in the US House of Representatives. In that this experience allows insights into the understanding and use of power it complements and critiques a contemporary Christian realism. But this experience also presents impediments to sounding a Niebuhrian voice for today. Loyalty to structures of power and partisan ideologies become so identified with the ego that the transcendent perspective required of prophetic truth is obscured or perhaps un-recognized. That this was largely true of my own experience cautions me in criticising those who bear political responsibilities. More to the point it is difficult and painful to criticise those who now dominate a political party with which I have long identified personally and professionally.

Nevertheless Christian realism demands a faith perspective that transcends partisan loyalties and politics. It knows that it is only through politics that the relative justice of Augustine's earthly kingdom is achieved. Thus while Niebuhr was often and at

¹ "America's Precarious Eminence," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1947): 490.

times unfairly critical of politicians he never denigrated the necessity and importance of the political calling. And while he could be biting partisan his political views were shaped by a prophetic faith that always points to the requirements of justice, the Christian's fundamental social responsibility. This is the faith informed by the God's eye perspective through which Christian realism discerns just political action. It is a faith perspective that must transcend and critique all political loyalties, one that I was unable to manage while in the political trenches.

In my search for the origins of humility in Niebuhr's theology I have experienced a spiritual conversion that I believe is essential to such a faith perspective. As Gordon Harland observed, in asking that we face the truth about ourselves and our Christian responsibilities, Niebuhr "does not point us to himself, but always to the Cross."² As discussed in Chapter Two, Niebuhr discerns the full significance of the Cross event through his understanding of the Atonement. He follows Augustine's insistence that humility, as revealed and exemplified in Christ's redeeming work, is a gift of grace. This grace enables the profound experience of God in which we know and accept ourselves as sinners. Yet it is the grace that offers divine acceptance, forgiveness and mercy in which we know ourselves as his beloved and redeemed creatures. Thus true Christian humility is not something we can possess or control: "It is ever a gift of grace, appropriated in faith and renewed in love and obedience."³ Through this grace I have experienced the profound and continuous encounter with God that I now recognize as essential to discerning the truths of Christian life and its responsibilities.

As Niebuhr cautions, I cannot claim these truths as my possession. Yet in faith the grace of humility enables an understanding of Christian truth that has transformed my spiritual life. Moreover, the profound encounter with the great good of divine love illumines my judgment regarding the finite goods that may be achieved through political action. Thus in faith I can acknowledge with Robin Lovin that my responsibilities and hopes for a more just and peaceful world "must pass through politics."⁴

² Harland, *Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 132.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴ Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 248.

Reading Niebuhr for Today

For many theologians, public intellectuals and lay Christians Niebuhr's Christian realism made him a recognized voice speaking truth to 20th century American power. In this sense he was, as he intended to be, an American theologian relevant to his time. Prophetic faith nevertheless must speak enduring truths to power in ways that transcend time and place. Discerning the truths that faith must speak to contemporary American power requires a Christian realism that reads the signs of our own times. I believe that humility and its attitudes provide a lens through which we may read the signs to guide superpower responsibility in un-charted waters. It is the grace that illumines the errors of pride that betray power into weakness and irresponsibility. It is the gift of grace through which we may glimpse the God's eye perspective from which all human endeavours for good are partial and finite and stand under divine judgment. Here the grace of humility issues in the courage of prophetic insight to challenge and critique all power, particularly, and perhaps most difficultly, our own use of power for "good."

This entails speaking hard truths about the self-interest and ideologies that inevitably mask our use of power. The tradition of Biblical prophesy that Christian realism reflects spoke its truths first and foremost against an ancient Israel whose slide into pride and injustice was a betrayal of its divinely inspired responsibilities within history. As then, a relevant prophetic voice for today will speak the truths of humility and its attitudes to American power.

Niebuhr believed that relevance to social justice is an essential test of any theological or philosophical system. While this conviction underlies his understanding of Christian responsibility he offers no systematic approach to meeting this test. Rather, his Christian realism discerns the attitudes of faith coupled with political understanding that illumine Christian responsibility for justice within particular circumstances. As I believe the case studies demonstrate, humility and its attitudes

are pervasive, if not always explicitly so, in Niebuhr's incidental work. My task there was to show that humility born of prophetic faith underlies Christian realism and provides a lens through which its insights are relevant to our political responsibility for justice.

If the case studies demonstrate the significance of humility in the incidental work they confirm as well that Christian realism offers no facile answers to perplexing questions regarding American power and responsibility. Rejecting moral absolutes in public policy, wary of set rules and rigid formulae for right action, Niebuhr offers no policy blueprint for addressing contemporary problems.⁵ Yet even as we accept that Christian realism offers no such blueprint, indeed, that it requires action attendant to circumstances, we must affirm its assumption that Christian responsibility for justice entails the understanding and use of political power. This, in turn, rests upon the Biblical understanding of human nature in which we discern the "level of human possibilities and of sin."⁶ Christian realism always attends to this understanding of human nature. It discerns on the one hand the unlimited potential for greater justice in human freedom. On the other it knows that human freedom perverted by egotism and pride always imperils justice. A Christian realism for today accordingly understands that human nature makes the use of power necessary for social justice but that all human use of power is morally ambiguous. As is evident in the case studies Christian realism provides no theological or political formula that, if followed, removes the moral ambiguity of power used in the more just cause. Christian realism accepts that at times responsibility for justice may entail the use of power in the lesser of evil choices.⁷

What the case studies do attest is an expression of Christian faith that serves to guide both the ends and means of responsible action. To claim that the attitudes of

⁵ As noted earlier, Colin McKeogh offers a succinct analysis of Niebuhr's aversion to the imposition of moral absolutes in political decision-making. See *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 109-110.

⁶ Larry Rasmussen, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theologian," *Cross Currents* 38 (Summer 1980): 204.

⁷ This is a recurring motif in Niebuhr's Christian realism and is the motif around which Ignatieff constructed his 2003 Gifford Lectures, published as *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004). Niebuhr is not cited in the volume.

humility are a resource of faith is not to preclude others, though I believe that humility is central to Christian responsibility because it is organically related to Christian love, faithfulness, obedience and forgiveness. We nevertheless must be humble about humility. Certainly there is no basis in the case studies for any claim that the attitudes of humility provide some philosopher's stone for right Christian action. In humility we must confess the paradox of having yet not having the ultimate truths that must illumine the ends and means of Christian responsibility. Humility before God acknowledges our finitude but does not eliminate it. It opens us to the possibilities of grace that is power beyond our power for good but offers no guarantees. As a resource of faith the grace of humility illumines our responsibilities in history but always reminds us of the divine judgment that transcends history. Thus humility guards against the sinful egotism that identifies our finite perspective with the divine perspective through which Christian realism must discern the responsibilities of power.

We must be humble about humility but notions of humility as subservient, passively compliant and perhaps obsequious are clearly inconsistent with the humility of Christian realism.⁸ As the right relationship with God properly orders all human relationships we discern as well our responsibilities to others. Thus true humility is always in the service of those responsibilities as a divine grace that illumines particular attitudes efficacious to meeting them. As the incidental work demonstrates, humble responsibility at times requires patience and at times impatience; it requires toleration of conflicting ideas but not connivance with evil; it requires our creative best to find peaceful alternatives in addressing injustice but

⁸ Appealing to the significance of humility in Niebuhr is not to reject the feminist critique that his fulminations against pride may "undermine the assertiveness that women need to escape the subordinate roles in which they have been locked." Lovin, *Christian Realism*, 149. Like Lovin, I find this a valid critique and correction of Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship between pride and power. But I do not believe this failure invalidates the essential role that Christian realism assigns to humility and its attitudes. Indeed, the attitudes of humility that illumine Christian responsibility should open us to the assertiveness and challenges of those that others' pride has excluded from institutional and political power. In reflecting on a range of critiques of Niebuhr's work, Richard Hutcheson wrote that, "I am not bothered by the fact that we take pieces of Niebuhr's work while rejecting some of the underlying assumptions, because those pieces are so important to the way we address public policy. Those pieces help to provide an understanding of power, justice, the significance of sin, the relevance of biblical images in public life, and the necessity of a prophetic critique along with active involvement." In *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*, ed. Richard J. Neuhaus (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989): 122.

accepts that responsibility for others may require the use of morally ambiguous coercion. The humility of Christian realism can never be obsequious before evil but neither can it be a ruse to mask irresponsibility or prideful self-interest. Humility requires a decent respect for the opinions of mankind but cannot allow those opinions the last or only word in meeting our responsibilities. Finding the proper balance requires political knowledge, an understanding of human nature and God's grace. This may be a razor's edge endeavour with no guarantee of success. Yet as with Lincoln we must humbly seek to do right as God gives us the right to see, and at the end of the day know that humility "must temper, not sever, the nerve of action."⁹

Reading Niebuhr for today requires a necessary word about irony. He believed that irony is a great teacher of humility to those willing to learn its lessons. In his trenchant retrospective on the American experience, *The Irony of American History*, humility and its attitudes are pervasive motifs that illumine the lessons of irony for American power. While just power always entails commensurate responsibilities in building a more just community irony teaches the humble that power imperils community when pride obscures its political and moral limits. It is in its persistent appeals to humility that Niebuhr's prophetic faith speaks both timely and timeless truths to American power. He warned that America's power and idealistic particularity regarding its own virtues might ironically coalesce as destructive pride. An enduring truth of his prophetic legacy is that spiritual pride transforms political strength into weakness.

That, in a word, is what Niebuhr meant by the irony of American history—the tendency of American civilization to allow the decency of its motives and the nobility of its intentions to blind it to the sins and errors to which it is prone, and thereby allow its virtue to become the source of its vice.¹⁰

As with Niebuhr in his time, Christian realism today seeks the lessons of irony for American power today. In Chapter 10 I examined key elements of the *National*

⁹ Schlesinger, in Brown's *Niebuhr and His Age*, vii.

¹⁰ Wilfred M. McClay, "The Continuing Irony of American History," *First Things* 120 (February 2002): 23.

Security Strategy, a document that provides the Bush Administration's vision of 21st century American power and responsibilities. In some ways a remarkably honest exercise in public diplomacy, this document is a bold assertion of global hegemony based upon US military and economic power. It is honest in its stated intention to maintain US military predominance. Likewise it is straightforward in asserting that this power will be devoted to securing US global interests. Neither assertion is uniquely new regarding the uses of national power. The national interest guides the power of all nations and no nation is likely to announce in advance that it will relinquish whatever power it possesses to secure those interests. Moreover, the NSS devotes significant attention to international cooperation, economic development, the advance of democracy and human dignity. As it reflects these traditional American ideals, the NSS again reveals nothing particularly new. Nevertheless to many observers, including some long-time allies, the NSS is an exercise in insolence that confirms decades of suspicion regarding the ascendance of American power.

The great irony of the NSS is that its bold assertion of American power undermines not strengthens national security. Two elements are particularly damaging and both appear to stem from pride in its various guises. The first is the proclamation of a "distinctly American internationalism," to which it is assumed that all but America's sworn enemies would accede. The Administration's early unilateralist stance regarding international agreements indicated the practical implications of this proclamation. The second is the adoption of a uniquely American doctrine of preventative war as one means through which this distinctly American internationalism will be pursued. As discussed in Chapter 10, there are substantive arguments to be made regarding preventative war and its uses against terrorism and so-called rogue states. Yet for the Administration to assert this as a distinctly American unilateral right when national security requires multilateral cooperation appears self-defeating.

Perhaps this assertion reflects the sense of innocence that Niebuhr believed Americans harbour regarding their use of power. In any event, the intent may have been to intimidate current and potential enemies but its ironical effect was to alienate a world already suspicious and resentful of American power. As Niebuhr reminded America in his own time, it is our pride that betrays our power into weakness.

Niebuhr's Christian realism required that those who support a particular war be ever mindful of the truths of faith by which all Christian responsibility is measured. As one who supported the war to remove Saddam I have a particular responsibility for making such judgments regarding its prosecution. In this regard I must confess the evil and injustice that all war entails, including those fought on behalf of what I may believe is a just cause. Christian realism requires contrition for the pride that creates errors in judgment and obscures the practical and moral limits of power. It requires that we attend to the lessons humility offers for correcting mistakes and in renewed discernment in meeting the responsibilities of American power today.

The Iraqi Conflict and Lessons in Humility for American Power

As discussed in Chapter 10, the conflict in Iraq is an ongoing test of the Administration's *National Security Strategy* and of the attitudes it embraces. The struggle in Iraq continues and its outcome remains fearfully uncertain. A relevant Christian realism must stake out positions both within and above that conflict. Here Christian realism draws upon the resources of faith that illumine a God's eye perspective on human conflict. It must attend as well to the political realities and particular responsibilities of American power in Iraq. It does not presume to offer a blueprint for political action or a distinctly "Christian" solution to enormously complex issues. Nor does it endow expertise in military strategy. What a relevant Christian realism does offer are the attitudes of humility that illumine a path for Christian responsibility between the irresponsible alternatives of vainglory and despair.

1. Addressing Resentment of American Power

Despite candidate Bush's call for a humble projection of American power his Administration's dismissive attitude toward international agreements lent it an arrogance that strengthened suspicions regarding the world's remaining superpower. Moreover, the Administration's unilateralist tone appeared to mark a distinct departure from America's post-WWII multilateral traditions. The point in repeating

this scenario is to underscore the damage that the Administration's pre-9/11 attitudes inflicted on its efforts to meet post-9/11 responsibilities. The humble projection of American power called for by candidate Bush would not have prevented the disaster but it would have ameliorated some of the international resentments that continue to plague the Bush presidency. The Administration was either oblivious to long-held resentments of American power or it believed that great power rendered these resentments irrelevant to US national interests.

While power inevitably creates resentment Christian realism requires that we distinguish between just and unjust resentment because resentment indicates an irresponsible use of power. An underlying assumption of the Administration's plan in Iraq appears to be that gratitude for the removal of Saddam would largely erase the history of Iraqi resentment of Western colonialism and US power. Such an assumption reflects something of our innocence about how others view American power. It discounts, for example, the cruel hardships that US/UN sanctions inflicted on ordinary Iraqis even as these measures apparently served to thwart Saddam's WMD programs. Post-war inspections indicate that those who championed economic sanctions as an alternative to force may be entitled to feel some vindication. Yet it is too easily forgotten that, as Niebuhr observed, economic sanctions tend to hurt most those who have the least responsibility for the policies they seek to change.¹¹ The assumption that Saddam's removal would mitigate resentment of US power also appears to have raised unrealistic hopes regarding the intractable religious and ethnic strife that has plagued the Iraqi state created by the Western democracies after WWI. Here prideful assumptions regarding the salutary effects of removing Saddam and a display of technological virtuosity betrayed a significant lack of cultural understanding and political realities.

It is difficult to conclude that an Administration of political realists was naïve about such matters. Yet in its zeal for removing Saddam and the creation of a democratic

¹¹ See George A. Lopez and David Cartright, "Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 90-103. Lopez and Cartright offer convincing arguments that sanctions "did much to erode Iraqi military capabilities." They acknowledge that sanctions resulted in the preventable deaths of several hundred thousand children but that the situation was "eased" by the oil-for-food program instigated in 1996.

Iraq it appeared to ignore or minimize the relevance of anti-US/Western political and religious resentments. The Administration appeared to assume that the “shock and awe” of American military power would carry all before it while somehow ameliorating past resentments and avoiding the creation of new ones. Such an assumption reflects a coalescence of spiritual pride and pride of military power that always obscures its own moral and political limits. As Niebuhr had insisted in his time and Michael Ignatieff in ours, the effectiveness of military action cannot be evaluated apart from its political consequences.¹² As events unfold in Iraq it appears that our failure of humility in this regard has betrayed good intentions into further resentments.

2. Recognizing the Limits of Military Power and Technology

Secretary Rumsfeld’s shock and awe campaign underscored America’s current predominance in military technology and, as expected, quickly demolished Saddam’s decaying armed forces. While the insertion of live reportage among coalition forces served to remind the world that combat is not a video game, the military outcome was never in question. Unfortunately, the degree of military planning necessary to achieving this certainty appears to have crowded out essential planning for the critical phase that would follow. The shock and awe of the campaign to destroy Saddam’s military machine ironically heightened the expectations of many Iraqis regarding America’s ability to restore order, rebuild the nation’s infrastructure and help establish some form of democratic government.

As the *National Security Strategy* demonstrates, the Administration, or at least some elements within it, recognized the importance of getting things right in post-war Iraq. Certainly realists close to the Administration understood the degree to which the moral and political authority of American power should and would be measured by how and what it might achieve in Iraq. Robert Kagan observed in 2003 that what is at stake “is not only the future of Iraq and the Middle East...but also of America’s

¹² *The Lesser Evil*, 82.

reputation, its reliability, and its legitimacy as a world leader.”¹³ Yet the Administration’s failure to plan carefully for the all-important post-war phase became readily evident. Even as Saddam’s statue was toppled in central Baghdad wholesale looting began. Ordinary Iraqis quickly felt less secure in their homes and possessions than when the tyrant was in power. As subsequent events demonstrate the looting presaged far worse to come and revealed Administration miscalculations that are now undermining America’s ability to deliver on its promises in Iraq.¹⁴

Pride in its various guises appears to be at the heart of Administration miscalculations. On the one hand pride of power greatly miscalculated the degree to which an initial military success would assure political success in Iraq. The Administration’s shock and awe mantra reflected Secretary Rumsfeld’s innovative strategies designed to maximize US technological supremacy while tailoring US forces to meet a variety of battlefield exigencies. Driving these new strategies was the recognition that few nations or terrorist organizations are likely to confront US power directly. More likely, Rumsfeld wrote in 2002, they will “seek to challenge us asymmetrically by looking for vulnerabilities and trying to exploit them.”¹⁵ That this is precisely what has happened in Iraq invites Rumsfeld’s critics to blast him with his own petard.

Despite the likelihood of so-called asymmetrical tactics by a variety of insurgent groups, the Administration refused to commit forces sufficient to provide the basic security on which meeting its post-war political objectives in Iraq depended. Pride of power, particularly the Administration’s assumptions regarding US technological supremacy and the appeal of America’s democratic ideal, appears behind this failure. With some apparent disdain for “nation-building” Rumsfeld and his senior civilian leadership refused to recognize that security is the essential requirement in salvaging a collapsed state. Ignoring extensive post-conflict planning in Colin Powell’s State Department, Rumsfeld and his staff insisted on military control of post-conflict Iraq.

¹³ *Paradise & Power*, 154.

¹⁴ See Larry Diamond, “What Went Wrong in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 5 (September/October 2004): 34-56. Diamond’s analysis provides background for much of the following discussion.

¹⁵ Donald Rumsfeld, “Transforming the Military,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (May/June 2002): 25.

In Diamond's words this fundamental error with far-ranging consequences reflects self-defeating "hubris and ideology"¹⁶

Thus the failure to provide for the security of the Iraqi people may be seen as failure of humility. Here Rumsfeld's failure of humility was a failure to acknowledge the limits of his own strategy. Few people doubted the ability of US military power to destroy the Saddam regime. The greater and more difficult task, as even friends of the Administration like Kagan affirm, is whether US power in its various guises can rebuild a collapsed state amid the political, ethnic and religious turbulence of the Middle East. Yet even as Iraq's internal security collapsed the Administration refused to commit the number of properly trained troops necessary to provide the security on which so much depended. This was a failure of humanitarian responsibility to the Iraqi people. It has made the rebuilding of the Iraqi infrastructure and a stable government immeasurably more difficult and costly. What was intended to display the effectiveness of American power has ironically underscored its limitations. And, as the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal attests, the failure of planning in providing trained and disciplined personnel has shredded the moral authority of American power.

The Intelligence Community's belief that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction lent immediacy to the Administration's argument for armed intervention in Iraq. When I had access to privileged information I found this intelligence credible. That we now know this intelligence was largely wrong does not require that I believe the Administration deliberately misled the American people regarding Saddam's imputed WMD programs. Undeniably the discovery of WMD would have vindicated Administration action in one significant respect. Yet it is difficult to see how this would have appreciably alleviated the lack of security occasioned by the

¹⁶ Diamond, 36. Before the war senior military commanders argued that hundreds of thousands of coalition troops would be required to secure Iraq. Had forces been deployed in Iraq at the ratio that NATO forces were deployed in Bosnia half a million coalition troops would have been required. The number of troops deployed in Iraq has never exceeded one-third that level. According to Diamond, their civilian chiefs silenced these commanders. "The coalition should have deployed vastly more military police and other troops trained for urban patrols, crowd control, civil reconstruction, and peace maintenance enforcement. Tens of thousands of soldiers with sophisticated monitoring equipment should have been posted along the borders with Syria and Iran to intercept the flows of foreign terrorists, Iranian intelligence agents, money and weapons." 35-36.

failure of post-war planning. If the WMD issue gave immediacy to armed intervention, the Administration's more strategic objective was to rebuild Iraq as a democratic state. In the event, the failure of post-war planning has severely impeded this objective. As Diamond notes, the failure to provide basic security has meant that most of the \$18.6 billion in reconstruction funds appropriated by Congress in 2003 has gone unspent.¹⁷

The prideful failures regarding post-war planning reflect a failure to attend the lessons of history. Even as victory in WWII was a dim and uncertain prospect Niebuhr insisted that the war be prosecuted in ways that anticipated a more just world order beyond the conflict. He was particularly critical of what he considered the American propensity to concentrate on military exigencies to the detriment of post-war political planning. Moreover, as Niebuhr observed in 1952, America's predominance in the age of technology tempts it to forget the lessons that such failures may offer to the humble.

The American situation is such a vivid symbol of the spiritual perplexities of modern man, because the degree of American power tends to generate illusions to which a technocratic culture is already too prone. This technocratic approach to the problems of history, which erroneously equates the mastery of nature with the mastery of historic destiny, in turn accentuates a very old failing in human nature: the inclination of the wise, or the powerful, or the virtuous, to obscure and deny the human limitations in all human achievements and pretensions.¹⁸

If, as its advocates claim, technology reduces the collateral damage of warfare, Iraq demonstrates that technology cannot substitute for proper planning nor overcome the inclination of the powerful to believe that it can. Its precision may lessen the injustice that warfare inflicts on the innocent but technology does not lend moral authority to American power. Nor does it endow us with the political and cultural understanding essential to rebuilding the so-called rogue states that it enables us to destroy. As the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸ *The Irony of American History*, 147.

Iraqi experience continues to demonstrate technology must not tempt us again to obscure the tortuous task that nation-building entails. Here Ignatieff warns us this cannot be done quickly or on the cheap, either economically or militarily. "To exercise power in this way is to risk losing authority, and to risk losing everything eventually, since peoples disillusioned with our promises will have enduring reasons never to trust us again."¹⁹ Pride that obscures these truths betrays our power into weakness and our search for security into insecurity.

3. Relevance of the United Nations

As discussed in Chapter Six Niebuhr always cast a realist's eye on the United Nations. He recognized that post-WWII political realities and issues of national sovereignty limited its role in maintaining international order. He accepted that its power in this regard was essentially the power that Security Council members could agree to give it. He had few illusions that it was or could be the world government envisioned by some idealists of his day. Moreover he feared that attributing to the UN power it did not possess might occasion irresponsibility on the part of those who did possess the power essential to maintaining international order. In this regard Niebuhr's Christian realism did not posit loyalty to the UN as the *sine qua non* of a politically or morally responsible American foreign policy.

Niebuhr nevertheless insisted that the UN had significant roles to play in relating US power and wealth to an impoverished world. He saw the UN as a forum in which the US might gain some of the political and cultural understanding essential to exercising its power responsibly. He believed that America's loyalty to the UN was a recognition that its power could serve the broader international interest in building a more just and secure international community. Thus loyalty to the UN reflected Americans' recognition that "they are in a web of history in which many desires, hopes, wills and ambitions, other than their own, are operative."²⁰ Approached

¹⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003), 127.

²⁰ Niebuhr, "Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations," 20.

through the attitudes of patience, forbearance and toleration America's loyalty to the UN could serve to illumine the responsibilities of American power.

From early days the George W. Bush Administration appeared to mark a significant departure from America's post-WWII multilateral traditions, including loyalty to the UN. In its first six months the Administration rejected a number of multilateral treaties and agreements, including the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocol. That Congress had rejected both agreements during the Clinton presidency rendered the Bush Administration's action gratuitous while creating resentment among key European allies. Moreover, unilateralists for whom the removal of Saddam was a top priority were given senior positions in the Departments of State and Defense. Following the 9/11 attacks the Administration developed a *National Security Strategy* that gave short shrift to the UN while favouring "coalitions of the willing" and a preventative war option in the pursuit of US security interests.

The President's appearance before the UN to argue the case for war nevertheless reflected an awareness that Security Council action bore some relevance to US strategy. It reflected an understanding that in both domestic and international public opinion UN approval did carry moral authority. From its beginning the Iraqi crisis has revealed the intricate ways in which the UN may be relevant to American security interests. The failure to allow UN inspections to run their course unquestionably weakened America's case for war in domestic and international public opinion. Allies such as France, Germany and Turkey, all democratic states, reflected the opposition of their people and thereby made specific UN approval a condition of their support. While neither French nor German military support was anticipated in any case, the compliance of Turkey played a key role in US invasion plans. The failure to gain this compliance had a very material affect on invasion strategies. Moreover, the lack of UN approval made it much more difficult for other nations to provide troops and support following the collapse of Saddam's regime.

One might conclude that given French and Russian financial interests in maintaining Saddam's regime the Security Council might never have approved a US led war to remove him. As events in the former Yugoslavia attest, the interests and ethnic ties

of Security Council members, including the US, may foreclose UN action in the most desperate of humanitarian crises. This political reality militates against the notion that UN authorization alone lends moral authority to the use of force in meeting international crises. Yet, as events leading up to the Iraqi conflict demonstrate, UN authorization is undeniably an important source of moral authority because many people believe that it is. This belief may be given concreteness in the lending or withholding of support necessary to any nation achieving its security interests.

Distrust of the UN appears to have exacerbated post-war conditions in Iraq. The inadequacy of the Administration's post-war planning was compounded by its prolonged refusal to accept any role for the UN in the political reconstruction of Iraq. Though it lacked understanding of the cultural and religious elements within Iraq's immensely complicated politics, the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority appeared obsessed with maintaining absolute control to the detriment of establishing political legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

The obsession with control was an overarching flaw in the U.S. occupation from start to finish. In any post-conflict international intervention there is always a certain tension between legitimacy and control. Yet for most of the first year of the occupation, the U.S. administration opted for the latter whenever the trade-off presented itself.²¹

An apparent prideful belief in the sufficiency of American power and know-how severely damaged the political transition process in Iraq. Only when the US-brokered plan neared complete collapse did the Administration turn to the UN for assistance. To its credit it sought a UN role in the transition process that led to Security Council Resolution 1546 passed on June 8, 2004. This resolution sanctioned a June 30, 2004 turnover of political power to the Iraqi Interim Government and outlined further plans for an elected transitional parliament and prime minister.²² Although it was

²¹ Diamond, 47.

²² As Diamond notes, it was widely believed that the June 30 date was driven by the 2004 presidential election schedule. "But this criticism never made sense. In Iraq, it was always clear that Washington was being driven by an even more palpable imperative: the need to give Iraqis back their dignity and to empower them to determine their own course." 48. Of course, the more quickly a legitimate

forced by circumstances to do so, the Administration came to recognize that the UN could indeed play an essential role in the nation-building process.

However belatedly, the humble recognition of our limits enabled a result that our own power and knowledge alone could not achieve. Whatever the outcome of the Iraqi conflict this case presents one of the enduring lessons for America in meeting its international responsibilities. A Christian realism for today neither idealizes the UN nor dismisses its political and institutional limits. In speaking truth to American power today Christian realism reminds us that humility discerns and accepts that there is always some wisdom and some form of power beyond our own. The United Nations can be a source of both as American responsibility seeks to build the more just world community upon which its security ultimately rests.

Christian Realism and Christian Patriotism in a Time of Terror

Niebuhr was unquestioningly among America's most trenchant critics. His prophetic calling was to attack the pretensions, ideologies and pride that engendered an irresponsible use of power. He was particularly fearful that American power and spiritual pride might coalesce into national self-righteousness. As his wartime incidental writing reveals, this temptation is strongest in times of national peril when we seek ever-greater accretions of power as proof against our insecurities. Though his Christian realism accepts that responsibility for justice requires the use of power it posits as well the moral ambivalence of all power. He was ever mindful of the spiritual pride that tempts the power of "good" people in their desperate pursuit of a "good" cause. Niebuhr's prophetic criticism of American power always sought the God's eye perspective that illumines the limits of what we may call good and the ambiguity and limits of our power to achieve it.

Yet in that his prophetic criticism seeks to illumine ever-greater possibilities for

government could be elected the more it was assumed that some semblance of order would be restored. This, it was hoped, would hasten the day that American and coalition forces might be reduced and eventually withdrawn.

justice Niebuhr provides a model for an appropriate Christian love of country. There can be no question that the Christian's ultimate loyalty is to God and the things of God. Niebuhr's most wrathful attacks were directed at those who sought to identify their finite notions of the good with God's infinite great good. For him this confusion is a demonic expression of our spiritual pride that only the grace of humility may overcome. Because humility is essential to the proper ordering of both our spiritual life and our social responsibilities it is the foundation of any Christian patriotism. Through the grace of humility we discern those qualities and goods that make a nation worthy of a Christian's loyalty and sacrifice. This same grace nevertheless illumines the great disparity between the relative justice we may achieve and the perfect justice of God. It militates against the pride that obscures the partialness of our achievements and that tempts us to the irresponsible alternatives of complacency and self-righteous vainglory.

Informed by the attitudes of humility the patriotism of Christian realism always attends its responsibility for shaping a national power that serves the cause of justice. It knows that injustice may result from even the best-intentioned use of power. It is a patriotism whose self-knowledge is always informed by the just criticism of others. It understands that power disordered by spiritual pride leads to the sin of national idolatry. Accordingly Christian patriotism can only be a humble love of country; a love that challenges the prideful ideologies that betray us into the worship of gods that we ourselves have made.

Christian realism is grounded in a faith encountered through the grace of humility. Niebuhr's prophetic gift was to show the relevance of such a faith to a world that exalts power. From his Biblical faith he understood that the exaltation of power reflected the sinful egotism of human nature. He recognized that this fact of human nature required power to balance power to achieve relative justice among people. Christian responsibility for social justice thus entailed the understanding and use of power. But his particular prophetic vocation was to remind the powerful of the moral ambivalence of their power, particularly in the pursuit of what they believed to be a just cause. This prophetic truth glints throughout his incidental writing during the 20th Century's most tragic decade. It is Niebuhr's prophetic truth for American power today.

There is, in short, even in a conflict with a foe with whom we have little in common the possibility and necessity of living in a dimension of meaning in which the urgencies of the struggle are subordinated to a sense of awe before the vastness of the historical drama in which we are jointly involved; to a sense of modesty about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities; and to a sense of gratitude for the divine mercies which are promised to those who humble themselves.²³

²³ *The Irony of American History*, 174.

Epilogue

Robin Lovin whose *Reinhold Niebuhr & Christian Realism* (1995) provides a recent benchmark in Niebuhrian studies, suggests that if there is to be a future for Christian realism its legacy must be examined critically. While his perspective is sympathetic to the achievements of Niebuhr and other Christian realists, Lovin insists on a critical approach to assessing Christian realism's future as an option for Christian participation in political and social decision-making. This insistence on assessing the relevance to the human condition of any system of moral decision-making is certainly one that Niebuhr himself would demand. In his 2000 essay, "Christian Realism: A Legacy and Its Future," Lovin offers a post-Cold War but pre-9/11 critique in which he examines its past for clues that might help us discern whether there is or should be a future for Christian realism.²⁴ Lovin's post-9/11 essay, "Reinhold Niebuhr in Contemporary Scholarship: A Review Essay," provides an overview of recent critical studies, sympathetic or otherwise, of Niebuhr's particular expression of Christian realism.²⁵ Here Lovin examines recent work that include post-9/11 critiques of the theological grounding of Niebuhr's Christian realism or that address the challenges to Christian realism in the age of terror.

We have earlier examined Lovin's account of the three realisms-theological, political and moral-that he believes are the constituents of Niebuhr's Christian realism. Of particular importance in "A Legacy and Its Future" is his account of moral realism in Niebuhr's public theology. This emphasis reflects Lovin's conviction that Christian realists must be full participants in the multi-disciplinary and continuous examination of human experience to discern the goods essential to human flourishing. It is as moral realists that Christian realists can participate in this enterprise even as they recognize that others who share the task may not share their theological perspectives.

The fact that the Christian holds beliefs about human life and its ultimate purposes that are not persuasive to the secular participants in discussions of, say, medical technology, welfare policy, or human rights does not mean that their moral discourses are incommensurable, only that their

²⁴ *The Annual of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000), 3-18.

²⁵ *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.3 (2003): 489-505.

moral knowledge is incomplete. The moral realist will not be surprised by this, nor will she be deterred from continuing the discussion to see what they can learn together.²⁶

An essential corollary to this attitude of participation is that a contemporary Christian realist will expect that his attitudes may require change or correction. Christian realists as theological realists accept that truths of faith always illumine what they can and cannot follow by way of proximate moral choices; but Lovin insists that this not be the “hermeneutical lens” through which the Christian realist examines every opportunity to enter into the wider search for moral knowledge. The Christian realist recognizes that there are times that require a stance reflective of the “Confessing Church,” but rejects the notion that there is ever a situation in which knowledge is so complete as to make “some sort of moral deliberation in collaboration with others unnecessary.” Lovin posits this as a *cognitivist* and *fallibilist* approach in which Christian realists know that moral knowledge is possible while accepting the possibility that they may get it wrong.²⁷

In this regard the future of Christian realism entails meeting three essential challenges that may reflect its past failures or inadequacies. Here a relevant Christian realism must accept the criticism of those who believe that it failed them politically. These include African Americans, women and Latin American Christians who found Niebuhr’s Christian realism unhelpful in their own struggles for justice. Second, Christian realism must also answer its postmodernist critics who reject its modernist search for “human universals” and its confidence in “its own omniscient perspective.” Finally, with its past emphasis on the nation-state and balances of power, Christian realism must now address the emerging realities of globalization and the place of international institutions in its search for relative social justice.²⁸

In meeting these challenges a relevant Christian realism will have to be a more humble Christian realism, less certain of its own perspective, remaining open to

²⁶ Lovin, “A Legacy and Its Future,” 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

collaborative developments in moral knowledge, and in recognizing its past failures and where it got it wrong. Here, Lovin believes, Christian realism was too often applied to developing situations “without the participation of those new voices that might have brought the realist’s own biases and limitations into sharper focus.”²⁹ The element so often missing in Christian realism’s account of reality was the element of hope sounded by these new voices. This hope is not derived from liberal ideals regarding the perfectibility of human nature or the historical inevitability of progress arising from historical conditions. Rather, the hope of those excluded from power is “the awareness that something else is nonetheless possible.” This is the hope of those who have little stake in the world as it is. Lovin finds the element of such hope deficient in the legacy of Christian realism but insists that it must have an essential place in its future.

So the question at the beginning of the twenty-first century becomes, “who is being unrealistic? Those who hope for changes that realize the best possibilities they can imagine for themselves? Or those who expect the institutional inertia to control the pace of events because everyone prefers present order [to] uncertain possibilities?”³⁰

Of the challenges facing contemporary Christian realism, Lovin believes the most difficult is posed by a postmodernism that questions even the possibilities of a deliberative process in which its participants are so dissimilar in social perspectives and in self-understanding. Indeed, postmodernists find moral vocabularies so tradition-bound that even the rare appearance of consensus is illusory at best; the result is the illusion of consensus that issues in as much moral confusion as the conflict it attempts to address. If postmodernists are correct in these assertions then just as our political realities are demanding an inclusive deliberative process their philosophical attempts to interpret the process would tell us that “even the limited openness we have tried has already rendered our deliberations meaningless.”³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

³¹ Ibid., 15.

Here Lovin reminds the postmodernist that Christian realism does not claim to possess universally accepted rational rules governing its discourse. Moreover, contemporary Christian realists are more keenly aware than in the past of the cultural biases and subtleties of power that impinge upon the deliberative process; that, indeed, they will demand that such a critique be built into the process itself. Christian realism does not insist that this kind of inclusive approach to building moral consensus is always possible, much less always successful. But it does hold some promise, some hope. Lovin insists that Christian realism cannot accept any postmodernist insistence that the conditions of success must be established before the project can commence. For Christian realists the “question is not ultimate commensurability, but practical agreements in which the parties share a working understanding of the proximate terms and are committed to further discussions shaped by that understanding.”³²

Such expectations, Lovin observes, are Christian realism’s legacy.

The task for the future is to put them into practice more fully than we have yet done. We have that task in part because the critics of realism have put us in a position to understand just how limited are previous achievements have actually been.³³

Events of 9/11 prompted renewed interest in the legacy of Niebuhr’s Christian realism while issues raised within the context of global terrorism underscore some of its contemporary challenges. In this regard Lovin’s insistence on a chastened Christian realism’s responsibilities in developing an inclusive process for moral deliberation appears prophetic indeed.

In his subsequent 2003 essay, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Scholarship,” Lovin surveys the landscape of major works on Niebuhr, dating from 1997. These works shed critical light on significant facets of Niebuhr’s legacy, including the theological grounding of his Christian realism. Here we encounter Stanley Hauerwas’

³² Ibid., 16.

³³ Ibid., 17.

With The Grain of the Universe (2001) and Langdon Gilkey's *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (2001). Colm McKeogh's *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1997) offers an insightful analysis of Niebuhr's Christian realism and just war traditions. In her *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (1997), Heather Wilson places Niebuhr in the broader Christian realist movement as it developed within the context of three tumultuous decades. Historian Mark Kleinman's *A World of Hope, a World of Fear: Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr, and American Liberalism* (2000), examines liberal conflict over post-WWII American foreign policy.

Hauerwas and Gilkey provide the two most significant of recent works to examine Niebuhr's theological grounding. Hauerwas used the occasion of his 2001 Gifford Lectures to critique the theological underpinnings of Niebuhr's Christian realism. In *With the Grain of the Universe*, Hauerwas places his critique of Niebuhr between his treatments of William James' religious naturalism and Karl Barth's theology. That Niebuhr wrote his Yale BD thesis on James' religious pragmatism provides the point of departure for Hauerwas' examination of Niebuhr's theological assumptions. The younger Niebuhr had joined with many contemporaries in rediscovering the Biblical views on human nature and history with which they attacked the optimism and confidence in reason of their liberal Protestant legacy. Niebuhr, however, went further than most in his insistence that human experience itself refuted the claims of liberalism and served to partially validate the Biblical perspective. Just here, Lovin notes, Hauerwas asserts that "Niebuhr's account of what we can know about history and human nature depends on William James's pragmatism."³⁴ This establishes Hauerwas' claim that, despite his prophetic remonstrance against prideful human illusions, Niebuhr's theology actually reflects James' confidence in human reason. Hauerwas traces this element of pragmatism well into Niebuhr's mature thinking on the meaning of history and concludes that his "god" is simply an element found in all human consciousness.

It appears that for Niebuhr God is nothing more than the name of our need to believe that life has an ultimate unity that transcends the world's chaos and makes possible what order we can achieve in this life. Niebuhr does

³⁴ "Contemporary Scholarship," 498.

not explain why he thinks anyone would feel compelled to worship or pray to a god so conceived.³⁵

Yet if we find with Lovin that Niebuhr's mature work stresses the limited and partial validation that history offers Christian faith, a different conclusion may be drawn. Contra Hauerwas, Lovin suggests that Niebuhr reflects a Christian pragmatism that believes we can systematize what we know about God even as God has a reality beyond what we can know. This, Lovin asserts, is a theological realism that "can speak of claims about God in human experience without supposing that human experience exhausts the reality of God." Hauerwas wrongly identifies Niebuhr's Christian pragmatism with the radical empiricism of James' pragmatic method in which reality is established solely by rational investigation. By such a reading Hauerwas sees no place for an active, immanent God in Niebuhr's theology; he concludes that Niebuhr's Christian realism offers no distinctive perspective on human experience. If all persons share this same, non-distinctive perspective then Niebuhr's theology simply reflects what people already believe.³⁶

Niebuhr's work now represents the worst of two worlds; most secular people do not find his arguments convincing; yet his theology is not sufficient to provide the means for Christians to sustain their lives...Niebuhr's theology reflects the loss of truthful Christian speech and, hence, of faithful Christian practice.³⁷

To the contrary Langdon Gilkey suggests that a careful examination of Niebuhr's theology lends his ethics additional meaning for today. Gilkey's *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*, reflects a lifetime of critical Niebuhrian analysis and is in Lovin's estimate the best systematic treatment of Niebuhr's theology that has been written. If, as we have seen, Niebuhr's dialectical approach often fails of precision, Gilkey

³⁵ *With the Grain of the Universe*, 131, cited in "Contemporary Scholarship," 499.

³⁶ "Contemporary Scholarship," 499.

³⁷ *With the Grain of the Universe*, 139-140, cited in "Contemporary Scholarship," 500. Hauerwas notwithstanding, the year 2004 saw the inaugural meeting of the Reinhold Niebuhr Society whose members, including theologian Langdon Gilkey, find in Niebuhr "a guide to the present situation's moral complexities." Among the "secular people" who still find Niebuhr's arguments convincing is Jean Elshtain. See her *Just War Against Terror* (2003), 103, 106-111.

brings Niebuhr's theology into a more precise focus. This focus, Gilkey insists, must be on Niebuhr's theological understanding of history.

Unless the meaning of life is in the midst of its passage perfectly clear and fully secure-and [Niebuhr] has surely shown that it is not-then the presence of the power and mercy of God at the Beginning and at the End, to complete what we cannot complete and to purge what we have corrupted, are the sole grounds for any real hope.³⁸

Unlike Hauerwas' empiricist reading, Gilkey's is a realist's interpretation of Niebuhr's theology.

Essential to this, of course, is the reality of God. Niebuhr does not to my knowledge discuss this point; he assumes it. In Niebuhr's theology, god cannot be a projection, a human idea shone outward into the cosmos, an ideal made transcendent by the creativity of human self-transcendence (though many of his statements in his early writing seem to imply that view).

Such a deity would for the mature Niebuhr be the creation of an ordinary and all-to-common human idolatry, a product of a finite and so partial cultural imagination and so no more transcendent than any other cultural artifact.³⁹

Hauerwas' contention is that it is James' empirical pragmatism that Niebuhr uses to make sense of history; thus his argument that Niebuhr's theology is simply what Gilkey, above, calls the product of a finite and partial cultural imagination. And this is the basis for Hauerwas' claim that Niebuhr's theology simply mirrors what culture thinks about God at any given juncture in history. Gilkey on the other hand insists on a realist's reading of Niebuhr's idea of the "limited rational validation" experience offers for Biblical truths about history and human nature. Gilkey's reading emphasizes the importance of the word "limited." Thus the limited validation afforded through the study of human experience does not make sense of history but,

³⁸ *On Niebuhr*, 222, cited in "Contemporary Scholarship," 501.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 188-189, cited in "Contemporary Scholarship," 501.

rather, provides guidance for the choices we must make within it. "It makes sense to speak in such terms because we have to choose and act; but our hope does not rest on the results of our actions. We hope in the power and mercy-in the reality-of God."⁴⁰

Gilkey's emphasis on Niebuhr's theological realism stems in part from his agreement with Hauerwas that many of Niebuhr's understandings have succumbed to cultural and historical changes. Recent scholarship questions the idea of a unified Biblical understanding of human nature and finds that the diversity of Biblical perspectives undermines any understanding that there is a unified Biblical worldview. Gilkey suggests that these and all human constructs must be constantly sifted in light of new knowledge and understanding. "What matters theologically is the conviction that none of these constructions provides history with a final validation, a meaning that reaches beyond present needs and aspirations."⁴¹ Rather, as Gilkey insists, it is the reality of the power and mercy of God that provides the sole grounds for real hope.

Hauerwas characterizes Niebuhr as a man of his own day whose theology was largely a reflection of the culture of which he was a part. It is undoubtedly true that Niebuhr insisted upon a theology relevant to human experience, one that sought to provide human beings a sense of meaning and an understanding of moral responsibility in their lives. But in his prophetic vocation Niebuhr always insisted that our sense of meaning and understanding of moral responsibility remains partial, subject to human finitude and human nature; that it is faith in a God who is both within and beyond history that lends meaning and hope to our lives. The God we find in Niebuhr's theology, the God revealed in both human experience and the atoning work of Christ, is the God who Niebuhr worshiped, prayed to, and served far beyond the often too comfortable, remote confines of academic theology. This is the God we encounter through the grace of humility, the God before whom all human constructs-including Niebuhr's-are judged and found wanting. But this is Niebuhr's God whose ultimate revelation to humankind is not judgment but forgiveness and mercy.

⁴⁰ Lovin, "Contemporary Scholarship," 501.

⁴¹ Ibid, 502.

Bibliography

Books by Reinhold Niebuhr Cited or Consulted

- 1928 *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study of the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life*. New York: Macmillan.
- 1929 *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1929; Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1980.
- 1932 *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- _____. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- 1934 *Reflections on the End of an Era*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1935 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935; New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1963.
- 1937 *Beyond Tragedy, Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937; London: Nisbet and Co., 1938.
- 1940 *Christianity and Power Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- _____. *Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist*. London: S.C.M. Press.
- 1941 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. 1, *Human Nature*. London: Nisbet & Co.
- 1943 *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Vol. 2, *Human Destiny*. London: Nisbet & Co.
- 1944 *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1946 *Discerning the Signs of the Times, Sermons for Today and Tomorrow*. London: S.C.M. Press.
- 1949 *Faith and History, A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1952 *The Irony of American History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1953 *Christian Realism and Political Problems: Essays on Political, Social, Ethical and Theological Themes*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1955 *The Self and the Dramas of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1959 *Nations and Empires: Recurring Patterns in the Political Order*. London: Faber and Faber.
- 1974 *Justice and Mercy*. Edited by Ursula M. Niebuhr. New York: Harper & Row.

Incidental Writings by Reinhold Niebuhr Cited

- 1928 "What the War Did to My Mind." *Christian Century* 45, no. 39 (September 27):1161-1163.
- 1932 "The Perils of American Power." *Atlantic Monthly* 149 (January): 95.
- _____. "Thomas for President." *World Tomorrow* 15 (July): 195.

- 1934 "The Problem of the Communist Religion." *World Tomorrow* 17 (July 26): 378-379.
- 1935 "On the Ethiopian War." *Radical Religion* 1, no.1 (Autumn): 6-8.
- 1936 "The Blindness of Liberalism." *Radical Religion* 1 no. 4 (Autumn): 4
- 1938 "Brief Notes." *Radical Religion* 3, no. 2 (Spring): 7.
- 1939 "Ten Years That Shook My World." *Christian Century* 56, no. 17 (April): 542.
- 1940 "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny." *Christian Century* 57, no.51 (December 18): 1578-1580.
- 1941 "What is at Stake?" *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 8 (May 19): 1-2.
- _____. "Repeal the Neutrality Act." *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 18 (October 20): 1-2.
- _____. "History (God) Has Overtaken Us." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 1 (Winter): 3-5
- _____. "We Are at War." *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 23 (December 29): 2-3.
- 1942 "Our Responsibilities in 1942." *Christianity and Crisis* 1, no. 24 (January 12): 1-2
- _____. "Civil Liberties in Wartime." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 16 (February 23): 1-2.
- _____. "Amidst Encircling Gloom." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 3 (March 9): 1-2.
- _____. "Russia and the Peace." *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 2 (Spring): 8-9.
- _____. "The Unity of History." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no.7 (May 4): 1-2.
- _____. "The Evacuation of Japanese Citizens." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 8 (May 18): 2-5.
- _____. "The Race Problem." *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 3 (Summer): 3-5.
- _____. "In the Battle and Above It." *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 4 (Autumn): 3-4.
- _____. "Plans for World Reorganization." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 17 (October 19): 3-6.
- _____. "The Christian and the War." *Christian Century* 59, no. 51 (November 16): 5-7.
- 1943 "The Intelligent Man's Burden." *Nation* 156, no.1 (January 2): 25-26
- _____. "Russia and the West, Part I," *Nation* 156, no. 3 (January 16): 82-84.
- _____. "Russia and the West, Part II," *Nation* 156, no. 4 (January 23): 124-125.
- _____. "The United Nations and World Organization." *Christianity and Crisis* 2, no. 24 (January 25): 1-2.
- _____. "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility." *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 16 (January 30): 2-4.
- _____. "Power and Justice." Review of *The World After the War* by Henry B. Parkes. *Nation* 156, no. 10 (March 6): 354.
- _____. "American Power and World Responsibility." *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 5 (April 5): 2-4.
- _____. "National Power and the Organization of Peace." *American Teacher* 27, no.7 (April): 23-26.
- _____. "A Fourth Term for Roosevelt." *New Statesman and Nation* 25, no. 638 (May 15): 315-316.
- _____. "Marxism in Eclipse." *Spectator* 170, no. 5997 (June 4): 518-519.
- _____. "Factors of Cohesion." *Spectator* 170, no. 5999 (June 18): 562-653.
- _____. "Great Britain's Post-War Role." *Nation* 157, no. 2 (July 10): 39-40.

- _____. "The Possibilities of a Durable Peace." *Christianity and Society* 8, no. 3 (Summer): 9-12.
- _____. "The Bombing of Germany." *Christianity and Society* 8, no. 3 (Summer): 3-4.
- _____. "Russia and the Christian World." *Christian News-Letter*, supplement no. 189 (August 25): 1-2.
- _____. "From Wilson to Roosevelt." *Christianity and Society* 8, no. 4 (Fall): 3-5.
- _____. "We Are in Peril." *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 17 (October 18): 2-3.
- _____. "A Just World Power." *Current Religious Thought* 3, no. 8 (October): 11-13.
- _____. "The Pillars of Peace." *Spectator* 171, no. 6017 (October 22): 378-379.
- _____. "The Perils of Being the Judge." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 1 (Winter): 10-11.
- _____. "From Victory to Peace." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 1 (Winter): 36-38.
- 1944 _____. "The German Problem." *Christianity and Crisis* 3, no. 23 (January 10): 2-4.
- _____. "Airplanes Are Not Enough." *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 1 (February 7): 1-2.
- _____. "The Japanese Atrocities." *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 2 (February 21): 1-2.
- _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 4 (March 20): 2.
- _____. "World War III Ahead?" *Nation* 158, no. 13 (March 25): 356-358.
- _____. "Is the Bombing Necessary?" *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 5 (April 3): 1-2.
- _____. "Christian Faith and the Race Problem." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 3 (Summer): 21-24.
- _____. "Justice and Forgiveness." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 3 (Summer): 8-10.
- _____. "The End of Total War." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 4 (Fall): 3-4.
- _____. "Democratic Goals and World Order." *New Leader* 27, no. 29 (September 23): 4-5.
- _____. "Justice for the Enemy." *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 4 (Fall): 5-6.
- _____. "The Basis of World Order." *Nation* 159, no. 17 (October 21): 489.
- 1945 _____. "Russia and the Peace." *Social Progress* 35, no. 5 (January): 22-23.
- _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 2 (February 19): 2.
- _____. "Soberness in Victory." *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 9 (May 28): 1-2.
- _____. "The Atomic Bomb." *Christianity and Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall): 3-5.
- _____. "Which Question Comes First for the Church?" *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 19 (November 12): 1-2.
- _____. "If Thine Enemy Hunger Feed Him." *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 22 (December 24): 2.
- 1946 _____. "I Was An Hungered and Ye Gave Me No Meat!" *Christianity and Crisis* 5, no. 23 (January 7): 5-6.
- _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 3 (March 4): 2.
- _____. "World Community and World Government." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 3 (March 4): 5-6.
- _____. "The Myth of World Government." *Nation* 162, no. 11 (March 16): 312-314.
- _____. "Positive Defense." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 7 (April 29): 1-2.
- _____. "The Conflict Between Nations and Nations and Between Nations and God." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 14 (August 5): 2-4.
- _____. "A Report on Germany." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 17 (October 14): 6-7.

- _____. "Will Germany Go Communist?" *Nation* 163, no. 14 (October 15): 371-373.
- _____. "The Fight for Germany." *Life* 21, no. 17 (October 21): 65-72.
- _____. "The United Nations." *Christianity and Society* 12, no. 1 (Winter): 3-4.
- 1947 _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no.1 (February 3): 2.
- _____. "The Organization of the Liberal Movement," *Christianity and Society* 12, no. 2 (Spring): 8-10.
- _____. "American Power and European Health." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 10 (June 9): 1-2.
- _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 13 (July 21): 2.
- _____. "Democracy as Religion." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4): 1-2.
- _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 14 (August 4 1947): 2.
- _____. "America's Precarious Eminence." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 23, no. 4 (Autumn): 481-490.
- _____. "American Wealth and the World's Poverty." *Christianity and Society* 12, no.4 (Autumn): 3-4.
- _____. "The Marshall Plan." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 17 (October 13): 2.
- 1948 _____. "Editorial Notes." *Christianity and Crisis* 7, no. 24 (January 19): 2.
- _____. "The Federation of Western Europe." *Christianity and Crisis* 8, no. 3 (March 1): 17-18.
- 1948 _____. "The Glories of 'Free Enterprise.'" *Christianity and Society* 13, no. 2 (Spring): 6-7.
- _____. "The Morality of Nations." *Christianity and Society* 13, no. 2 (Spring): 7-8.
- _____. "Churchill's Hour." *Nation* 166, no. 26 (June 26): 720-721.
- _____. "American Pride and Power." *American Scholar* 17, no. 4 (Autumn): 393-394.
- 1949 _____. "Hazards and Resources." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 25, no. 2 (Spring): 194-204.
- _____. "The Illusion of World Government." *Foreign Affairs* 27, no 23 (April): 379-388.
- _____. "The Validation of the Christian View of Life and History." *Theology Today* 6, no.1 (April): 31-48.
- 1950 _____. "The Theory and Practice of UNESCO." *World Organization* 4, no. 1 (February): 3-11.
- _____. "The Hydrogen Bomb." *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 2 (Spring): 7.
- _____. "The Idolatry of America." *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 2 (Spring): 3-5.
- _____. "The Spirit of Justice." *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 3 (Summer): 5-6.
- _____. "The Conditions of Our Survival." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 26, no. 4 (Autumn): 481-491.
- _____. "Justice and Love." *Christianity and Society* 15, no. 4 (Fall): 6-8.
- _____. "The Christian Conscience and Atomic War." *Christianity and Crisis* 10, no. 21 (December 11): 161.
- 1951 _____. "Ten Fateful Years." *Christianity and Crisis* 11, no. 1 (February 5): 1-4.
- _____. "American Conservatism and the World Crisis." *Yale Review* 40, no.3 (March): 385-399.
- _____. "Hybris." *Christianity and Society* 16, no. 3 (Summer): 4-6
- _____. "The American Power." *Christianity and Crisis* 16, no. 4 (Autumn):6-8.
- 1952 _____. "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." *Journal of Religious Thought* 9, no. 2 (Spring-Summer): 95-111.

- _____. "Christian Faith and Political Controversy." *Christianity and Crisis* 12, no. 13 (July 21): 87-98.
- 1955 "Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations." *Motive* 16, no. 1 (October): 17-20. Originally published in 1952 in the *Hazen Pamphlets*, no. 29.
- 1956 "Intellectual Autobiography." In *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*. Edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, 3-23. New York: Macmillan.
- _____. "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism." In Kegley and Bretall, 429-452.
- _____. "Our Moral and Spiritual Resources for International Cooperation," *Social Action* 22 (February): 18-19.

Secondary Works on Reinhold Niebuhr Cited or Consulted

- Baillie, John. "Report on Germany: Excerpts from a Personal Diary—June-July, 1946." *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 16 (September 30, 1946): 3-7.
- Bennett, John C. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics." In Kegley and Robert Bretall, 45-78.
- Berger, Peter. *The Desecularization of the World*. London: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Bingham, June. *The Courage to Change*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.
- Brown, Charles C. *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy*. New Edition. Harrisburgh, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002.
- Brown, Robert M. "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility." *Journal of Religion* 54 (October 1974): 325-331.
- Bloesch, Donald. *Reinhold Niebuhr's Apologetics*. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002.
- Childress, James F. "Niebuhr's Realistic-Pragmatic Approach to War and the 'Nuclear Dilemma.'" In *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries, 157-183. London: Mobery, 1986.
- Chrystal, William G. *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*. St. Louis, MO: Eden Publishing House, 1977.
- Davis Harry R. and Robert C. Good, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.
- Dorrien, Gary. *Soul and Society: The Making and Renewing of Social Christianity*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Durkin, Kenneth. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. London: Cassell Publishers, 1989.
- Fackre, Gabriel. *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr*. New York: J.B.Lipincourt, 1970.
- Fox, Richard. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. Pantheon Books, 1985: Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- _____. "The Niebuhr Brothers and the Liberal Protestant Heritage." In *Religion & Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacy, 94-115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Gilkey, Langdon. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History." *Journal of Religion* 54 (October 1974): 360-386.
- _____. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. Chicago: The University of

- Chicago Press, 2001.
- _____. "Society and Politics in the Early Niebuhr." *Political Theology* 5.4 (2004): 467-473.
- Gill, Robin. *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997.
- Good, Robert C. "The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr's Debate with Morgenthau and Kennan." *Journal of Politics* 22, no. 4 (November 1960): 557-619.
- Harries, Richard, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*. London, Mowbray, 1986.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. *Wilderness Wonderings: Probing Twentieth Century Theology and Philosophy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997.
- _____. *With the Grain of the Universe*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001.
- Hoffman, Hans. *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Translated by Louise Pettibone Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Kegley, Charles and Robert Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956.
- Kellerman, Bill. "Apologist of Power: The Long Shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism." *Sojourners* 16 (March, 1987): 14-20.
- Kleinman, Mark L. *A World of Hope, a World of Fear: Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr, and American Liberalism*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000.
- Landon, Harold R, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*. Cambridge: Seabury Press, 1961.
- Lee, Hak Joon. "Reinhold Niebuhr and the US War on Terror: A Response to Dr. Gilkey." *Political Theology* 5.4 (2004): 481-485.
- Lehmann, Paul. "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr." In Kegley and Bretall, 251-280.
- Lovin, Robin W. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- _____. "Christian Realism: A Legacy and Its Future." *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000): 3-18.
- _____. "Reinhold Niebuhr in Contemporary Scholarship." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.3 (2003): 489-505.
- Lowith, Karl. "History and Christianity." In Kegley and Robert Bretall, 282-290.
- MacGregor, G.H.C. *The Relevance of An Impossible Ideal*. London: The Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1960.
- McCann, Dennis. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology." *Journal of Religion* 58 (January 1978): 140-168.
- _____. *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology: Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981.
- McClay, Wilfred M. "The Continuing Irony of American History." *First Things* 120 (February, 2002): 20-25.
- McKeogh, Colm. *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War*. London: Macmillan Press, 1997.
- Marty, Martin. "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience." *Journal of Religion* 54 (October, 1974): 332-59.
- Naveh, Eyal. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and*

- Despair*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002.
- Neuhaus, Richard J., ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Niebuhr, Ursula. *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr*. Edited by Ursula Niebuhr. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Packenham, Frank, Earl of Longford. *Humility*. London: Fontana Books, 1969.
- Paris, Peter J. "Response to Langdon Gilkey's Inaugural Address at the Niebuhr Society, 22 November 2003 in Atlanta." *Political Theology* 5.4 (2004): 475-479.
- Rasmussen, Larry. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*. London: Harper & Row, 1988; San Francisco: Collins, 1989.
- _____. "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theologian." *Cross Currents* (Summer 1988): 198-210.
- Rhoades, Dan. "The Prophetic Insights and Theoretical-Analytical Inadequacy of 'Christian Realism.'" *Ethics* LXXV, no. 1 (October, 1964): 4.
- Robertson, D.B. *Reinhold Niebuhr's Works: a Bibliography*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979.
- Schlesinger, Arthur. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life." In Kegley and Robert Bretall, 126-50. .
- Secundo, J. *Liberation Theology*. Dublin, 1977.
- Stone, Ronald. "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr." *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (March 17, 1969): 50.
- _____. "The Niebuhrs and Their Critics," *Worldview* 16, no. 6 (June 1973): 19-24.
- _____. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*. Washington: University Press of America, 1981.
- _____. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.
- Thompson, Kenneth. "Beyond the National Interest: A Critical Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theory of International Politics." *Review of Politics* 17, no. 2 (April 1955): 167-188.
- _____. "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr." In Kegley and Bretall, 150-176.
- Warren, Heather. *Theologians of a New World Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Weber, Marianne. *Max Weber*. Tubingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1926.
- Wolf, William. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man." In Kegley and Bretall, 230-249.
- Yoder, John H. "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1955): 101-117.

Writings by Augustine and Related Secondary Works

- Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Pelican Books, 1972. Reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 1984.
- _____. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford Classics paperback, 1992; World Classics paperback, 1998.

- _____. *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. In *Saint Augustine on Genesis*. Translated by Roland Teske. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991.
- Battenhouse, Roy, ed. *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955.
- _____. "The Life of St. Augustine." In Battenhouse, 15-56.
- Bingham, Thomas and Albert Mollegen. "The Christian Ethic." In Battenhouse, 371-397.
- Bowlin, John R. "Augustine on Justifying Coercion." *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997): 49-70.
- Clark, Mary. *Augustine*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994.
- Cushman, Robert. "Faith and Reason." In Battenhouse, 287-314.
- Harrison, Carol. *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lamirande, Emilien. *Church, State and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine*. The Saint Augustine Lecture 1974. Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1975.
- LeMoine, Fannie and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds. *Saint Augustine the Bishop: a Book of Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- Lienhard, Joseph. "Augustine on Grace: The Early Years." In LeMoine and Kleinhenz, 189-196.
- Markus, Robert. *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Mathewes, Charles T. *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford: Blackwell: 1990.
- Outler, Albert. "The Person and Work of Christ." In Battenhouse, 343-370.
- Pagels, Elaine. "Augustine on Nature and Human Nature." In LeMoine and Kleinhenz, 77-108.
- Zumkeller, Adolar. *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.

Historical, Political, Diplomatic Works and Public Documents Cited

- Ajami, Fouad. "The Sentry's Solitude." *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 (November/December, 2001): 2-16.
- _____. "Iraq and the Arabs' Future." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January/February, 2003): 2-18.
- Albright, Madeleine K. "Bridges, Bombs, or Bluster?" *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 2-19.
- _____. "United Nations," *Foreign Policy* 138 (September /October 2003): 16-24.
- Bass, Gary J. "Milosevic in the Hague." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 3 (May/June, 2003): 82-96.
- Bearden, Milton. "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires." *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6

- (November/December 2001): 17-30.
- Boasting: Self-righteous Collective Superiority as a Cause of Conflict*. Belfast: Faith and Politics Group, 1999.
- Bobbitt, Phillip. *The Shield of Achilles*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Bowman, Steve. "Iraqi Chemical & Biological Weapons (CBW) Capabilities." *A Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, February 17, 1998.
- Bruner, Edward. "Comparison of National Security Strategies Published by Presidents Bush and Clinton." *A Congressional Research Service Memorandum*, September 24, 2003.
- Buchanan, Patrick. "Have the Neocons Thought This Through?" In *The Gulf War Reader*, 213-215.
- Bush, G.H.W. "The Liberation of Kuwait Has Begun." Speech of January 16, 1991. In *The Gulf War Reader*, 349-350.
- Bush, G.W. "A Grave and Gathering Danger." Speech of September 12, 2002 before the UN General Assembly. In *The Iraqi War Reader*, 313-318.
- Caraley, Demetrios J., ed. *September 11, Terrorist Attacks, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Academy of Political Science, 2002.
- Cheney, Dick. "The Risks of Inaction Are Far Greater Than the Risk of Action." A Speech of August 26, 2002 before the 103rd National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. In *The Iraq War Reader*, 298-300.
- Chomsky, Noam. "The Use (and Abuse) of the United Nations." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 307-310.
- Clinton, Bill. "The Cost of Action Must Be Weighed Against the Price of Inaction." Speech of December 16, 1998. In *The Iraq War Reader*, 205-209.
- Corbin, Marcus. *The Bush National Security Strategy: A First Step*. Washington: Center For Defense Information (September 26, 2002).
- Daalder, Ivo H., James M. Lindsay, and James B Steinberg. "Brookings Scholars Evaluate and Analyze President's National Security Strategy Paper." *A Brookings Forum*. Washington: October 4, 2002.
- Eden, Anthony. *The Reckoning: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Elliot, Kimberly, et al. "Sanctions Work: The Historical Record." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 255-259.
- Elsea, Jennifer. "Treatment of 'Battlefield Detainees' in the War on Terror." *A Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, December 8, 2003.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.
- Gaddis, John. *A Grand Strategy of Transformation*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 1, 2002.
- "The Glaspie Transcript: Saddam Meets the U.S. Ambassador." In *the Gulf War Reader*, 122-133.
- Glennon, Michael. "Why the Security Council Failed." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no.3 (May/June 2003): 16-35.
- Graham-Brown, Sarah and Chris Toensing. "A Backgrounder on Inspections and Sanctions." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 165-173.
- Grimmett, Richard F. "U.S. Use of Preemptive Military Force: The Historical Record." *A Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, December

- 15, 2003.
- Heisbourg, Francois. "A Work in Progress: The Bush Doctrine and Its Consequences." *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2003): 1-10.
- Hersh, Seymour M. "Did Iraq Try to Assassinate Ex-President Bush in 1993? A Case Not Closed." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 146-147.
- Hitchens, Christopher. "Realpolitik in the Gulf: A Game Gone Tilt." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 107-118.
- _____. *Regime Change*. London: Penguin, 2003.
- Human Rights Watch. *World Report 2003*, www.hrw.org/wr2k3
- Ignatieff, Michael. *Empire Light: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*. London: Vintage, 2003.
- _____. *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*. The Gifford Lectures. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*, PL 105-174. Signed by the President, October 31, 1998.
- Jabar, Faleh A. "Why the Uprisings Failed." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 103-113.
- Jenkins, Roy. *Churchill: A Biography*. London: Macmillan, 2001; Plume: 2002.
- Jervis, Robert. "Understanding the Bush Doctrine." *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 365-388.
- _____. "An Interim Assessment of September 11: What Has Changed and What Has Not." In Caraley, 179-200.
- Johnson, Rebecca and Micah Zenco. "All Dressed Up and No Place to Go: Why NATO Should Be on the Front Lines in the War on Terror." *US Army War College Quarterly* (Winter 2002-3): 48-63.
- Kagan, Robert. *Paradise & Power*. London: Atlantic Books, 2003.
- _____. "America's Crisis of Legitimacy." *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April): 65-87.
- Kaplan, Lawrence and William Kristol. "America's Mission, After Baghdad." *The Iraq War Reader*, 608-613.
- Kay, David. *Testimony, Senate Armed Services Committee, January 29, 2004*.
- Kennan, George F. ("X"). "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs* XXV, No. 4 (July, 1947): 566-582.
- _____. *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950*. London: Seeker & Warburg, 1952.
- _____. *Realities of American Foreign Policy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- _____. *Memoirs: 1925-1950*. London: Hutchinson, 1968.
- Kennedy, David M. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Kissinger, Henry. "How To Cut Iraq Down to Size." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 238-242.
- _____. *Diplomacy*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1994.
- Krauthammer, Charles. "The Unipolar Moment Revisited: America, the Benevolent Empire." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 593-607.
- LaFeber, Walter. "The Post September 11 Debate Over Empire, Globalization, and Fragmentation." In Caraley, 15-31.
- McCullough, David. *John Adams*. London: The Free Press, 2002
- McIntyre, Ian. "Blix Bombshell Proves a Damp Squid." Review of *Disarming Iraq* by Hans Blix. *Times Books Review* (March 13, 2004): 13.

- Makiya, Kanan. "How Saddam Held on to Power." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 114-125.
- Mariner, Joanne. "The Continuing Debate over the Legal Status of Guantanamo Detainees." Findlaw Forum, <http://writ.news.findlaw.com>, March 11, 2003.
- "The Marshall Plan." <http://www.Marshallfoundation.org>, July 7, 2003.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946; Phoenix Books, 1965.
- _____. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Revised by Kenneth Thompson. New York: McGraw Hill, 1993.
- Moynihan, Daniel P. "A Return to Cold War Thinking." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 284-286.
- National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The White House, September 2002.
- Nineteen-Ninety One Congressional Quarterly Almanac*. Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1991.
- "Not Good Enough." *Economist* (July 3, 2004): 12.
- Nye, Joseph S jr. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- _____. "U.S. Power and Strategy After Iraq." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 60-73.
- Patterson, James. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; Oxford University Press paperback, 1997.
- Peukert, Detlev. *The Weimar Republic*. Translated by Richard Deveson. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Pollack, Kenneth. "How Saddam Misread the United States." In *The Iraq War Reader*, 79-85.
- Powell, Colin. "A Strategy of Partnerships." *Foreign Affairs* 83, no.1 (January/February 2004): 22-34
- Progress Report on the Global War on Terrorism*, The White House (September 2003).
- Project for the New American Century. "Remove Saddam From Power." An open letter of January 26, 1998 to President Clinton. In *The Iraq War Reader*, 199-201.
- Record, Jeffrey. "The Bush Doctrine and War with Iraq." *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly* (Spring 2003): 4-21. .
- Renshon, Stanley A. "The Gulf War Revisited: Consequences, Controversies, and Interpretations." In *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon, 329-355. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.
- Rubin, James. "Stumbling Into War." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no 5. (September/October 2003): 46-66.
- Schlesinger, Arthur. "Roosevelt and U.S. Foreign Policy." An unpublished Speech before the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, Vassar College, June 18, 1992. Cited in Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 409.
- Shapiro, Jeremy and Lynn E. Davis. *The U.S. Army and the New National Security Strategy*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2002.
- Sicherman, Harvey. "America and the West: Lessons from the Marshall Plan." *Foreign Policy Research Institute Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (January, 1998): 1-3.
- Silfry, Micah L., and Christopher Cerf, eds. *The Gulf War Reader: History*,

- Documents, Opinions*. New York: Random House, 1991.
- _____. *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Simes, Dimitri. "America's Imperial Dilemma." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (November/December 2003): 91-102.
- Sloan, Stanley R. "The United States and the Use of Force in the Post-Cold War World: Away from Self-Deterrence?" *A Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, January 6, 1997.
- Stone, Ronald H. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*. Washington: University Press of America, 1981.
- Summary: Report of the Independent Bi-Partisan 9/11 Commission*. Washington, July 22, 2004.
- "U.N. Resolutions on Iraq: The Complete Text." In *The Gulf War Reader*, 137-156.
- U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record-House*, January 12, 1991
- U.S. Department of State. *Guantanamo Bay: A First-Hand View of Camp X-Ray*. A Foreign Press Service Briefing, February 1, 2002.
- U.S. Department of State. *Rumsfeld, Myers Pentagon Briefing*. An International Information Program, February 8, 2002.
- U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. *Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001*, December, 2002.
- U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. *Conclusions: Report Of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, July, 2004.
- Waterbury, John. "Hate Your Policies, Love Your Institutions." *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 58-68.
- Wedgwood, Ruth. "Al Qaeda, Military Commissions, and American Self-Defense." In Caraley, 161-178.
- _____. "Prisoners of a Different War." <http://www.law.yale.edu/outside>, January 30, 2002.