



## Book Review

### *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*

By **Jeremy L. Sabella**

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On April 1, 2017, Maryland Public Television showed a documentary on Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), one of America's great theologians. The documentary, produced by Journey Films and directed by Martin Doblmeier, was well researched and included interviews with political leaders Jimmy Carter and Andrew Young; public commentator David Brooks; and a raft of impressive academics, including Cornel West and Stanley Hauerwas. Jeremy L. Sabella, who had recently earned his Ph.D. from Boston College with a dissertation on Niebuhr's Christian realism, wrote the companion book to the documentary of the same name, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. Sabella, now serving as a professor of religion at Fairfield University, Connecticut, has written a thoughtful, concise, and generally celebratory introduction to Niebuhr's life and thought.

Although a hugely influential academic, the highest degree Niebuhr received was a Master of Arts in Divinity in 1915 from Yale Divinity School. He then served as a pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan, until 1928. For the remainder of his career, until his retirement in 1960, Niebuhr was a professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary, a lofty academic perch from which he produced twenty-one books and over 2,600 articles. His books include some of the most memorable theological texts of the twentieth century: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932); *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Volumes I and II (1941, 1943); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944); and *The Irony of American History* (1952).

Like Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, Niebuhr was an occasional theologian, which is to say that he wrote, not in a systematic way, but in response to the pressing issues of this day as they arose. While serving as a pastor in Detroit, he was concerned about matters such as America's entry into World War I, racism, a renascent Ku Klux Klan, and the labor practices of automobile Titan Henry Ford.

It was at Union Theological Seminary, however, that Niebuhr wrote thereappraisal of the Social Gospel, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that brought him national renown. Niebuhr's critique of the movement's liberal naïveté and his realist resort to the use of coercion to combat

social evil sent an electric shock through America's Protestant establishment. Sabella writes that "*Moral Man* changed the face of theological discourse in American." Cornel West concurs, lauding it as "the most important text of Christian ethics to this day." *Moral Man* appeared at a moment of crisis in American history, as 1932-33 was the nadir of the Great Depression. Niebuhr's radicalism, then, was understandable in its context. Yet it would have an unexpected and far-reaching influence. Sabella comments that Niebuhr's book "helped lay the groundwork for key aspects of the civil rights movement." For it was upon reading *Moral Man* that a young Martin Luther King Jr. refined his understanding of how nonviolence and civil disobedience could be used as political leverage.

Niebuhr may have been at his best as an iconoclast shattering outmoded but deeply entrenched paradigms. Yet over the course of the next two decades he moved steadily to the center-left of the American political spectrum. By the time he wrote the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* in 1943, Sabella writes, "he had established himself as the country's premier theologian." *Nature and Destiny* was based on Niebuhr's Gifford lectures, given in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1939. During one of the lectures, the sound of German bombs exploding a few miles away may have lent somber corroboration to Niebuhr's argument for humanity's essential fallenness, sinfulness, and tragic nature. Despite all outward appearances, however, Niebuhr concluded that humanity's destiny was not finally to be tragic but transcendent. While in *Moral Man* he arraigned human communities for their inevitable tendency to immorality, in *Nature and Destiny* he asserted their "positive potential of grace in history."

Niebuhr's theological commitments shifted over time from the optimism of the Social Gospel at the outset of his career to the pessimism of *Moral Man* and finally to the Christian realism of *Nature and Destiny*. He would continue to espouse and develop this latter more-balanced view for the remainder of his career. In 1940 he wrote "An End to Illusions," which announced his break with pacifism and socialism. Reentering mainstream politics, he urged America's intervention into World War II and helped to craft President Franklin Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" – a declaration of American principles issued as the nation stood on the threshold of world war. In 1944 he wrote *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, a defense of democracy amid the global struggle against totalitarianism. For Niebuhr, democracy is better than any of the alternatives (namely, Nazism and Communism) because it is based on a Christian view of human nature. It sets interest against interest in a system of checks and balances that, necessarily in a fallen world, modestly seek "proximate solutions to insoluble problems."

Niebuhr's realism was never a simple "political realism" that assumed that nations should only operate on the basis of self-interest and the pursuit of power. Instead, he advocated a "Christian realism" that understood the world of politics on its own self-interested terms but also insisted that political decisions should take into account the ideals of love and justice. Without this, he concluded, politics would never move beyond the balance-of-power strategies of the status quo.

In the postwar years, as America entered the long twilight struggle of the Cold War, Niebuhr helped to found Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), an organization of

Democratic political leaders and thinkers who sought to sustain “the vital center” of American politics against the illusions of the left and the ruthlessness of the right.

On March 8, 1948, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary issue, a sure sign that he had arrived as a public theologian. To liberals, he was often taunted as the “establishment theologian.” Yet Sabella makes a good argument that this moniker more rightly belongs to Billy Graham than to Niebuhr. After all it was Niebuhr, not Graham, who was the subject of an FBI investigation for potentially subversive activity. Moreover, it was Graham who hobnobbed with presidents while Niebuhr consistently took nuanced and critical stands on government policies. For example, he lamented the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but he later endorsed the nuclear deterrence policy of the government during the Cold War. The ambiguity implicit in Niebuhr's stances on American policy decisions can also be seen in his last great book, *The Irony of American History* (1952), in which he sought to puncture American pretensions to righteousness and innocence while maintaining fealty to America's soaring idealism.

“A foolish consistency,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, “is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” Niebuhr was never foolish, and he made a career of exposing philosophical-theological hobgoblins in American politics. Moreover, he never allowed himself to remain shackled to previous positions merely to retain a public image of consistency. In the course of his career, he moved from pacifist to military interventionist, from socialist to New Deal Democrat, from Social Gospeler to Christian Realist, and from a far-left critic of the government to being the so-called “establishment theologian.”

Niebuhr recognized the moral ambiguity of the political world. He saw that political choices are often between two evils – sometimes between the unthinkable and the merely vile. Above all he sought to chart a middle course in the political realm between sentimentality and cynicism. Though not well known today by the general public, in 1991 *Time* magazine commended him as “the greatest Protestant theologian in America since Jonathan Edwards.” He has been admired and acclaimed by political leaders as discordant as Barack Obama and John McCain, and by theologians as disparate as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel and Protestant ethicist Stanley Hauerwas. Niebuhr's Christian realism is a timeless contribution to political thought, one often claimed both by liberals and conservatives, idealists and realists, neocons and theocons. Though a home-grown twentieth-century American thinker, Niebuhr's Christian interpretation of politics is one that transcends time and nationality. If the reader has not yet encountered this towering theologian of the twentieth century, Sabella's short incisive study may be just the place to make his acquaintance.

**Michael Parker**  
**Professor of Church History**  
**ETSC**