CrossMark

Modern Intellectual History, 11, 3 (2014), pp. 761–771 © Cambridge University Press 2014
doi:10.1017/S1479244314000298

THEN AS NOW, WHY NIEBUHR?

K. HEALAN GASTON
Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University
E-mail: gaston@hds.harvard.edu

John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Daniel F. Rice, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009)

Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

The literature on the life and legacy of the American Protestant thinker Reinhold Niebuhr has long been driven by questions about Niebuhr's continued relevance. Like other contributions to the recent "Niebuhr revival," each of the three books under consideration here raises this question—John Patrick Diggins's *Why Niebuhr Now?* (2011) by offering a series of "sympathetic reflections" on Niebuhr's central claim that human beings are both creatures and creators of history (ix); Daniel F. Rice's edited volume *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* (2009) by inviting a cadre of top Niebuhr scholars to make the case for Niebuhr's relevance to a new generation; and Rice's own *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (2013) by contending that close attention to Niebuhr's formative relationships sheds light on his ongoing relevance.[1]

The themes of doubt and secularism figure prominently in these and other assertions of Niebuhr's relevance. Today's interpreters, like Niebuhr's contemporaries, often portray him as a modern-day prophet to a secular age who possessed an uncanny sense of the moral ambiguities of war and the dangers of American nationalism—indeed, as a thinker so profound that he reached across the religious–secular divide, speaking to Christians and non-Christians alike about the heights and depths of human experience. The image

[1] Other recent writings on Niebuhr have come from the pens of Kevin Carnahan, James H. Cone, Terry D. Cooper, Richard Crouter, Mark Thomas Edwards, Andrew S. Finstuen, Martin Halliwell, Richard Harries, David A. Hollinger, R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson, Charles C. Lemert, Robin W. Lovin, Ronald H. Stone, Vibeke Schou Tjalve, and the contributors to Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power* (New York, 2010), among others.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Niebuhr as a prophetic figure, persuasive enough to rally even atheists to his cause, became common in his own day and has remained so in ours. Many recent interpreters have explained Niebuhr's appeal by emphasizing the skeptical, fallibilistic dimensions of his thought, labeling him a Christian pragmatist and contending that his attention to doubt ironically facilitated his ascent as one of the most successful apologists for Christianity in modern America. Each of the books reviewed here highlights the roles that doubt and secular culture played in securing Niebuhr's legacy.

Doubt clearly featured prominently in Niebuhr's life and thought. John Patrick Diggins underscores this point in the opening pages of *Why Niebuhr Now?*, where he invokes "Niebuhr's lifelong doubts about his religious vocation." As a young man, Diggins writes, Niebuhr "questioned whether he was a Christian, and colleagues and followers would speculate on whether he believed in or prayed to God." According to Diggins, Niebuhr deemed doubt essential to meaningful belief and regarded skepticism as both "a matter of honesty" and "a necessity for a good Christian." Diggins contends that Niebuhr "agreed with Pascal's dictum that genuine religion is always a struggle between belief and unbelief" (11–12). These reflections upon ultimate questions about the nature of faith are especially poignant because Diggins wrote them in the twilight of his own life, as he battled cancer.

Overall, *Why Niebuhr Now?* offers a series of wide-ranging and spirited meditations on Niebuhr's intellectual contributions that will inspire those inclined to view Niebuhr's thought in broad strokes. The book unfolds through a loosely chronological set of discussions juxtaposing Niebuhr with a wide range of figures, including not only American and European theologians but also interwar cultural critics such as H. L. Mencken and Joseph Wood Krutch; the pioneering pragmatists William James and John Dewey; and canonical Western theorists such as Augustine, Pascal, Edwards, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Throughout the book, Diggins traces Niebuhr's remarkable "capacity to doubt the illusions of certainty" to his keen sense "that the acids of doubt begin with reason, and that reason can destroy faith even when used in religion's defense" (39). Doubt plays a central role in Diggins's portrait of Niebuhr as one who sought to "revive religion in an age of doubt and disbelief" by constructing a Christian philosophy that made room for fallibility and uncertainty. He argues that "Niebuhr set out to develop a new approach to Christianity for a modern world that could no longer believe in historical progress or rational order, a religion fit for an age of anxiety, for man's despairing predicament in a meaningless world" (109, 13). If "[m]odern thinkers were doubters," as Diggins contends, then Niebuhr was surely one of them (57). Yet, Diggins argues, Niebuhr, "Alone among modern thinkers[,] . . . turned to religion for instruction in how to think about power," even as he joined his fellow religious liberals in focusing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

less on "[w]hether a supreme being exists" than on "the message Christianity holds out to humankind" (116, 110).

Diggins's obvious personal investment in Niebuhr accounts for both the greatest strengths of *Why Niebuhr Now?* and its most glaring weaknesses. His discussion of the link between Niebuhr's preoccupation with doubt and his engagement with history (51–2) is especially astute. Diggins is at his best when he describes Niebuhr's capacity to "tak[e] us into the heart of history where the self is revealed" (34). Consider the following elegant summary:

> Niebuhr's theology is a study in both the limitations of knowledge and the necessity of faith. Man is estranged, God is in exile, and the nineteenth-century attempt to find God in history is a chimera. History is tragic because man is finite. The Supreme Being can do little to elevate man above his human condition. (15)

Elsewhere, Diggins writes that Niebuhr "rejected any determinist theory of history," seeking instead "to save history from Hegel—and steep it in sin" (51). Rather than viewing history as "the unfolding of reason," he explains, Niebuhr recognized that

> [t]he true drama of human history is the history of liberalism. Humanity is finite but free, corrupt but knowing, self-deceiving but determined to transcend its limitations. The fundamental problem facing the West is not the growth of the state, or the control of property, or inequality and class struggle. It is human nature itself, the presence of sin and the deceits of pride. (70)

On the theme of history, chapters 4 and 5 of *Why Niebuhr Now?* are particularly successful.

At other times, Diggins proves insufficiently critical, simply siding with Niebuhr's highly debatable views on the limited wisdom of secularists and the constrained horizons of secular world views. For instance, early in the book, Diggins states that Niebuhr "wanted to save Christianity from its too-easy identification with secular reform, which misunderstands the causes of the world's conflicts and the self's temptations." Similarly, he asserts that pride "worries religious thinkers more than secular ones" (18–19). In his final pages, Diggins declares that "until we consider certain Christian insights about human nature, we can never understand the nature of power in history" (117). To Diggins, the ultimate answer to the question *Why Niebuhr Now?* is that "Niebuhr shows us how to think about power" (116).

Though still sympathetic to Niebuhr's general approach, and concerned in their own ways with doubt and secularism, the essays in Daniel F. Rice's *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*—written by a star-studded cast of Niebuhr interpreters, several of whom were Niebuhr's students and colleagues—tend to counterbalance Diggins's largely uncritical embrace of Niebuhr's views. As Martin Marty points

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out in the foreword, the book invites readers to "converse with the essays, and through them, with Niebuhr" (xv). *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* succeeds admirably in its aim of "bringing Reinhold Niebuhr to the attention of a new generation." Does it also inspire us to "engage Niebuhr anew," as Marty puts it (xvi, xv)?

Among the volume's greatest strengths is its critical edge. Compare, for instance, Diggins's rather simplistic, Niebuhrian assertion that the Social Gospel "proposed to apply love rather than power to politics" (17) with Gary Dorrien's far more nuanced account of the Social Gospel and how Niebuhr departed from it. As Dorrien rightly points out, many Social Gospel thinkers appreciated the human propensity for evil and the central role of power in human affairs. Where Niebuhr significantly improved on "even the strongest liberal theologies of sin," Dorrien observes, was in making the dialectical argument "that every social gain creates the possibility for new forms of social evil." Unlike the leading Social Gospel thinker Walter Rauschenbusch, who envisioned "the struggle for the kingdom dualistically as a fight between the forces of righteousness and evil," Dorrien writes, Niebuhr saw "that good and evil are not merely opposing forces, but are inevitably mixed together" (32).

Several essays in *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* speak to the role of doubt in Niebuhr's life and thought. Douglas John Hall characterizes Reformation Christianity as "a tradition in which faith implies an ongoing dialogue with doubt" (65–6, 68). Indeed, William D. Dean locates Niebuhr among the "classical negative theologians" in his sense of God as unknowable (94–5). Roger L. Shinn, Niebuhr's former colleague at Union Theological Seminary, neatly captures the centrality of doubt in Niebuhr's writings: "For Niebuhr, Christian faith included the willingness to say to many questions, 'I don't know.' Agnosticism, of course, may be flippant, cynical, or irreverent. But a reverent agnosticism is part of all Christian faith" (79).

Rice himself tackles the question of how Niebuhr understood secularism in his essay "Niebuhr's Critique of Religion in America." According to Rice, Niebuhr defined secularism as either a mode of idolatry that directed religious reverence toward a nonreligious object or a degraded "culture religion" that emerged when a belief system outlived its "prophetic note of transcendent judgment" (332–3). Rice could have stressed more strongly that Niebuhr pursued an anti-secularist line from the late 1930s through World War II and into the postwar years before steadily tempering his critique of secularism during and after the McCarthy period. As Rice indicates, by 1961, Niebuhr openly sought "to qualify [his] early polemics against 'secularism,'" noting that he had "never regarded secularism as the source of all modern evil, in the way some Christian apologists do." A "Christian humanism," Niebuhr declared, then, needed not only to find "common ground with the different kinds of secular humanism" but also to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"do so in contrite awareness that the secular humanist may be more honest and courageous in meeting large ethical problems than religious people" (quoted at 336).

As I have suggested elsewhere, this change in Niebuhr's view of secularism reflected the excesses of religious nationalism in early Cold War America. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Niebuhr's longtime supporter, the Jewish thinker Will Herberg, argued repeatedly that Niebuhr's account of the unique political resources provided by a Christian view of human nature meant that staunch Judeo-Christian believers made better defenders of democracy than did either liberal religionists or atheists. The more forcefully Herberg asserted this view, the more assiduously Niebuhr worked to distance himself from it, and with good reason: in a Cold War context, where mainstream opinion equated communism with atheism, this claim could fuel virulent forms of religious nationalism that endangered liberal religionists and nonbelievers alike. Reinhold Niebuhr's brother, the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, had anticipated the rise of arguments such as Herberg's and throughout the 1940s warned Reinhold not to base the case for a Christian view of human nature on its utility for the defense of democracy against totalitarianism. But Niebuhr's publication of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) and his reinvigorated attack on secularism in the late 1940s associated him so strongly with a Christian, anti-secularist "vindication of democracy" that it was difficult for him to escape the logic of Herberg's position.[2]

The essays in *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* show that the question whether believers have special access to the character and meaning of God's action in history, and perhaps even a special role to play in history's unfolding, remains tantalizingly open. As Robin Lovin deftly explains in his insightful essay, Niebuhr's Christian realism assumes that "history is always in God's hands" and "belongs to no human power." This fact implies that "[w]hatever unity and meaning history has must, therefore, be supplied by God's judgment, which 'both completes and contradicts every form of historic virtue.'" Lovin emphasizes that "[t]his judgment should be approached with humility, even by Christian faith, which must proclaim the certainty of judgment without being too confident of its own statement of what judgment entails." Yet Lovin does not say whether Christians have unique access to humility in the face of God's judgment. His observation that "prophetic faith makes at least some sense, even to skeptics and unbelievers, because the evidence of judgment is apparent in experience," tends to imply that

[2] K. Healan Gaston, "The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right," *Journal of American History*, 99/4 (March 2013), 1109–32; Gaston, "'A Bad Kind of Magic': The Niebuhr Brothers on 'Utilitarian Christianity' and the Defense of Democracy," *Harvard Theological Review*, 107/1 (forthcoming, Jan. 2014), 1–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unbelievers lack the clarity of Christians. But in the end, Lovin simply calls for humility among both believers and nonbelievers alike (226).

In an irony that Niebuhr would have appreciated, some of the primary strengths of *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* are again tied up with the volume's deficiencies. The prominence of the contributors, and in many cases their personal connections to Niebuhr, make the volume less variegated than it might have been. Most notably, women are entirely absent among the contributors, as they are from the cast of characters that Rice treats in *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence*. Fortunately, the two books do not represent the current state of the field in this regard. For instance, the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* recently published a roundtable on Valerie Saiving, an early feminist critic of Niebuhr, and Rebekah Miles has written a provocative piece suggesting that Niebuhr's wife Ursula might have served as his coauthor.[3] More should be said about this and other dimensions of Niebuhr's life and legacy.

Fortunately, what the essays comprising Rice's *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* lack in gender diversity, they make up for in capturing the tenor of some of Niebuhr's most formative intellectual relationships. Whereas Diggins places Niebuhr in an imagined dialogue with largely canonical Western figures, Rice recounts Niebuhr's actual engagements with a series of influential contemporaries. Rice situates Niebuhr squarely in the pantheon of American liberalism, exploring his associations with widely heralded intellectuals (Paul Tillich, John Dewey, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, and Hans Morgenthau) and political figures (Norman Thomas, George Kennan, and Felix Frankfurter).

Those already familiar with the existing literature on Niebuhr's relationships with Dewey and Tillich will find less of interest in the book's first few essays than in the later ones. As in *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (1993), Rice presents Dewey and Niebuhr as cut from much the same cloth, even though their relationship was intellectually antagonistic and featured "little personal contact" (47). In the case of Tillich, meanwhile, Rice stresses the German context for Niebuhr's early thought and focuses on how Tillich's penchant for ontological speculation strained his relationship with Niebuhr after World War II. More original and compelling are the chapters on Niebuhr's relationships with Schlesinger and Frankfurter. This is due in part to the richness of the extant correspondence in these cases. But it is also a product of the dominant themes of those two relationships, which reveal much about Niebuhr's sense of religious identity and his views of secularism and secularists.

[3] Mark Douglas, Elizabeth Henson-Hasty, *et al.*, "Fifty Years of Reflection on Valerie Saiving," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28/1 (Spring 2012), 75–131; Rebekah Miles, "Uncredited: Was Ursula Niebuhr Reinhold's Coauthor?" *Christian Century*, 129/2 (25 Jan. 2012), 30–33.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rice portrays Schlesinger as the quintessential "atheist for Niebuhr," writing that the Harvard historian "remained at arm's length from Niebuhr's theological convictions" but marveled that "this passionate, profound and humble believer should have had so penetrating an influence on so many nonbelievers" (quoted at 115). As Rice notes, Schlesinger explained that seeming paradox by citing Niebuhr's "capacity to show how the most piercing contemporary insights had their precedents in historical Christianity"—in other words, "to restate historical Christianity in terms that corresponded to our most searching themes and anxieties" (quoted at 144). Certainly, Niebuhr's relevance in both his day and ours has much to do with his ability to address concerns lodged deep in the American psyche, not least the question of reason's sufficiency for addressing human problems.

In the case of Frankfurter, Rice characterizes Niebuhr's relationship with the celebrated jurist as "the most intimate" (2) of the seven engagements treated in *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence*. This fact surely accounts for much of the essay's power. At its core, Rice explains, the relationship between Niebuhr and Frankfurter was "a personal friendship" forged during the 1940s in Heath, Massachusetts, where each retreated during the summer months. Frankfurter, appreciative of a sermon Niebuhr delivered at a nondenominational church, asked, "may a believing unbeliever thank you for your sermon?", to which Niebuhr replied, "may an unbelieving believer thank you for appreciating it?" (quoted at 206). This self-portrait as "an unbelieving believer" highlights the importance of doubt for Niebuhr's identity as a Christian. Rejecting the label of "theologian," Rice writes, Niebuhr instead presented himself as a Christian ethicist and apologist with "an interest in the defense and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age, particularly among what Schleiermacher called Christianity's 'intellectual despisers'" (4). Both Niebuhr's heavy dose of doubt and his willingness to openly express that doubt aided his campaign to reach and redirect the skeptical critics of Christianity.

Niebuhr's relationship with Frankfurter may also have influenced the shift in his view of secularism. In a 20 February 1953 letter on "our old theme [of] church and state," the strict separationist Frankfurter warned Niebuhr about Will Herberg's burgeoning conservatism on church–state issues. He deemed Herberg neither "lucid in his thinking" nor "wise in his judgment."[4] It is unclear how this pressure from Frankfurter affected Niebuhr's growing desire to distance himself from Herberg's increasingly stark expressions of religious nationalism, but future historians might find in Niebuhr's friendship with Frankfurter one of the keys to his halting reconciliation with secularism in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

4 Ursula M. Niebuhr, ed., *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr: Letters of Reinhold & Ursula M. Niebuhr* (San Francisco, 1991), 306.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Where do these three books leave the classic image of Niebuhr as a prophetic figure so persuasive that he managed to rally even atheists to his cause? Niebuhr's daughter, Elizabeth Sifton, has suggested in *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (2003) that her father enjoyed less influence than retrospective accounts tend to assume. She writes, "I am regularly amazed when I read in this or that magazine that my father, like his friend Paul Tillich, was a 'major leader' of postwar American Protestantism. If only! American Protestant churches mostly paid the two of them no heed."[5] An unfailing defender of her father's legacy, Sifton is by no means an uncritical one. Her insight into the limits of Niebuhr's relevance in his own day tempers the boosterish impulse that occasionally drives the musing about Niebuhr's timeless relevance. Indeed, one can surmise that Niebuhr himself would have been delighted by his daughter's instinct to question the cult around him. Picking up on Sifton's point, Gary Dorrien, the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, has called it "chastening to be reminded that Niebuhr's influence was quite small compared to that of [Norman Vincent] Peale or [Billy] Graham."[6]

If Niebuhr was not even as relevant in his own day as we tend to believe, then what of his contemporary relevance? Can it be that Niebuhr has gone the way of the dodo in twenty-first-century America? Hardly. Even interpreters far less enamored of Niebuhr's thought than Sifton and Dorrien recognize the continued importance of the central issues he addressed. Indeed, the historian Robert Orsi contended in 2006 that Niebuhrian neoorthodoxy has exerted a stranglehold over the historiography of American religion since the mid-twentieth century.[7] One need not go as far as Orsi to recognize the influence of Niebuhrian thought in the field of American religious history. A common move among younger scholars in this area is to seek new insights by decentering Niebuhr. Andrew S. Finstuen takes this tack in *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants* (2009), which examines the responses of "lay theologians" to the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in the postwar "age of anxiety." Likewise, Mark Thomas Edwards contends in *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (2012) that neoorthodoxy's center of gravity lies not with the Niebuhr brothers but with lesser-known Christian realists, such as John Coleman Bennett, Walter Marshall Horton, Francis Pickens Miller, and Henry Pitney Van Dusen, who displayed

5 Elizabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York, 2003), 316.

6 Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 21–2.

7 Randall Stephens, "Beyond the Niebuhrs: A Conversation with Robert Orsi on Recent Trends in American Religious History," *Historically Speaking*, 7/6 (July/Aug. 2006), 8–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stronger evangelical leanings. These accounts provide fresh contexts for thinking anew about Niebuhr's impact and legacy.[8]

An established scholar, David A. Hollinger, has recently sought to decenter Niebuhr in another way. In the epilogue to *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (2013), Hollinger questions whether Niebuhr really stood in such high repute among secular thinkers. Noting that Morton White coined the phrase "Atheists for Niebuhr" as a term of derision, he directs our attention to "Niebuhr's secular critics," such as Sidney Hook and Walter Kaufmann, and to "potential interlocutors," such as Hannah Arendt and John Rawls, who chose to simply ignore Niebuhr's thought. Focusing on these contemporaries highlights some of Niebuhr's distinctively Christian features, particularly his tendency to make implicitly exclusivist claims on behalf of a "Christian view of human nature." As Hollinger explains, Niebuhr usually "presented a series of quite general virtues as products of Christianity," although he did not reject openly "the possibility that these virtues might be cultivated and propagated without Christianity."[9]

What are we to make of this apologetic side of Niebuhr's thought today, when the easy assumption of Protestant cultural dominance has waned? Niebuhr had a complex and shifting relationship with the world of secular thought. Although he worried little about the natural sciences, he deplored the growing authority of the social sciences, believing that they offered little insight into human behavior and social relations. At the same time, he recognized the power of the secular witness against the pretensions and hypocrisies of the Christian churches. As with Judaism and Catholicism, Niebuhr viewed secularism as a crucial resource for Protestant self-criticism, even as he rejected its overall interpretation of humanity's character and fortunes. Niebuhr sought to incorporate into Christianity what was valuable in secular critiques of religion while convincing his science-minded contemporaries that they could never grapple adequately with the problems of a technological age without returning to the ancient fount of Christian wisdom.

Hollinger's turn to the critics of this apologetic approach raises anew the issue of Niebuhr's contemporary relevance. Indeed, it might suggest that Niebuhr, as a product of his own time, has little to say to ours. At the very least, we should ask why the question of relevance presses so urgently in relation to this particular

---

8 Andrew S. Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill, 2007); and Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (New York, 2012), 6–7.

9 David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, 2013), 211, 218.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

figure. Why do Niebuhr's interpreters feel so strongly compelled to assert his contemporary importance? What accounts for the profound anxieties of influence that swirl around him? In an afterword on "Niebuhr's Continuing Relevance" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence*, Rice deems Niebuhr's thought perpetually useful because it identifies a recurring set of pretensions that, he says, structure American experience: "America's inordinate view of its own virtue, its persistent declaration of innocence, its penchant for utopianism, its swing between isolationist and interventionist foreign policies, its simplistic moralism, and its excessive individualism" (247). For Rice, as for Diggins, Niebuhr helps us think critically about the power America wields and the cultural assumptions that animate it. No wonder so many participants in the Niebuhr revival have tied Niebuhr's work to the domains of international relations and war.

But what if Niebuhr's meditations—in classics such as *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) and *The Irony of American History* (1952)—on the peculiar combination of moralism, innocence, and belligerence that defined American nationalism actually sanctioned America's rise to global power by making it appear natural or inevitable? What of the uncanny capacity of Niebuhr's thought to ease the guilty conscience it has troubled? Hollinger's suggestion that "Niebuhr made war safe for American Protestants" by lambasting the pacifist movement and agitating mightily for American intervention in World War II raises such questions.[10] Perhaps the best explanation for the contemporary Niebuhr revival lies in the role Niebuhr played in America's ascent on the world stage. Surely the prophetic voice that—depending on one's point of view—either made America's exercise of power responsible or made it palatable to mainstream Protestants can now help us make sense of America's fall from grace.

With many of my fellow historians, I share a deep admiration for Niebuhr's writings on the hot and cold wars of his day. I am struck by the capacity of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* and *The Irony of American History* to simultaneously construct and deconstruct American power. But I ultimately think Niebuhr remains relevant not because of what he said about the American nation but rather because his writings challenge all of us, whether Christian or not, to consider troubling questions about the limits of our own subjectivity. Niebuhr's insights into the pretensions and hypocrisies that accompany war and other exercises of national power apply just as surely to the less dramatic but equally consequential exercises of personal power that flow through our individual lives.

The enduring impact of Niebuhr's thought, it seems to me, lies in the way it forces us to grapple with our own beliefs and actions by insisting that we

[10] Ibid., 211.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press

confront the layers of rationalization that complicate all of our attempts to act morally in the world. Niebuhr demands that we constantly ask ourselves a series of vexing questions: why do I believe what I believe and do what I do? Which theories of moral action best explain the actions of my fellows and our mutual responsibilities to one another? What are the consequences of adopting one or another of the prevailing views of human nature? Cornel West says as much in the foreword to a new edition of Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932): Niebuhr "forces us to wrestle with our pride, our greed, our bigotry, our hubris, our hypocrisy, and our capacity to love our neighbor in this 'mess' . . . we call history."[11]

This concern with subjectivity and rationalization lies squarely at the intersection of the religious and the secular—in other words, at the point of engagement between Niebuhr, his secular admirers, and his secular critics. A simple answer to the question of Niebuhr's continuing relevance is that his thought raises issues of ultimate concern for both religious and secular readers, and especially for those who find value in arguments drawn from both sides of the religious–secular divide. Niebuhr's own project, after all, was to bridge that divide, to make the Christian tradition relevant in an age of doubt by convincing non-Christians of its perennial insights and virtues. Whether we see Niebuhr's Christian view of human nature as a resource or a liability, we can hardly doubt that his quest to relate that view to the modern age captivated many of his leading contemporaries. Today, as well, Niebuhr's vision remains alive because it taps into deep anxieties about the relevance of the Christian tradition in the modern world—anxieties lurking behind the current scholarly fascination with secularism.

If this is true, then Niebuhr is relevant in our day for many of the same reasons he was relevant in his own. Times have certainly changed, and some of Niebuhr's ruminations about human nature and American national character are decidedly out of step with our current emphasis on the contingent and constructed status of both the self and the nation. But as we grapple with perennial questions of religious difference and the limits of human subjectivity, I feel sure that Niebuhr's powerful writings and his numerous admirers and critics will continue to bring his voice into the conversation.

[11] Cornel West, "Foreword," in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY, 2013), xi.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244314000298 Published online by Cambridge University Press