

Unlike Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, I have come both to praise and to bury Reinhold Niebuhr. The praise I will offer is genuine, but the internment is long overdue, for Niebuhr continues to cast far too restrictive and censorious a specter over our public intellectual life. Take his beloved "Serenity Prayer," which encapsulates the wisdom but also hints at the shortcomings of his political theology:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to know the difference.*

That's a memorable chestnut of popular piety, oft-cited and admired as a wizingen maxim of existential and political maturity, and its stoical spirit has been invoked by a roster of intellectuals and politicians. As with so many of Niebuhr's pronouncements, we're all expected to stroke our chins and furrow our brows at the Wise Man's *gravitas*, and take to heart his reminder that our sin and finitude place inexorable limits on our ability to master for good the vicissitudes of history. As I explained in *Christian Critics* and will emphasize again today, there are good reasons why Niebuhr is the perennial theological favorite of Very Serious People, those entrusted to wield or plump for the powers and principalities of rule, violence, and imagination. Would we not want them to be serene and courageous, and wise about when to be one or the other?

Yet this prayer also reflects everything anemic and debilitating about Niebuhr's political thought. As the course of Niebuhr's career from socialist prophet to Establishment cleric suggests, the "serenity" it counsels turns far too easily into

complacency and resignation; the "courage" it affirms flexes its muscles within far too narrow a compass; and the serenity congeals and the courage withers because the "wisdom" they demand -- otherwise known as "Christian realism" -- derives from the canons of reality as defined by Very Serious People.

While I certainly agree that Niebuhr articulated an incisive critique of the liberal Protestant social gospel, and that he offered a salutary if often unheeded chastisement of the pretensions of Cold War liberalism, I also think that his political theology cannot provide what we need for our time. As a cleric of what Henry Luce dubbed "the American Century," Niebuhr quite deliberately intended to lower our expectations of political agency, to circumscribe and even smother the fires of the era's incendiary political hopes, to constrict and even abort the political imagination, and to inhibit the enlargement of political possibility. As that "American Century" is, I believe, entering the climacteric of its descent and demise, Niebuhr's work offers little but a snare and impediment to the work of political imagination and reconstruction on which we must embark in the coming decades. So redolent of resignation and sobriety, he cannot help us ignite the renaissance of political hope that we desperately need.

A theological connoisseur of irony, Niebuhr may well have appreciated the winding denouement of his political career, for he began as a Protestant firebrand inveighing against liberal judiciousness and lethargy. It's become almost impossible for us to imagine Niebuhr apart from the unsentimental and at times cynical

political intelligence of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), but it's worth recalling that during the previous decade-and-a-half, as the pastor of Detroit's Bethel Evangelical Church, he had been one of the bright young hopes of the social gospel, eagerly rattling the teacups in the vicarage of liberal Protestant rectitude. Both religious and secular liberals had become tiresome bores, in Niebuhr's anything-but-humble opinion. In a letter to the *New Republic* published in the summer of 1919, Niebuhr lamented what he called liberalism's "gray spirit of compromise." Provided with an auspicious moment for social reconstruction in the aftermath of World War I, liberals, he charged, balked at the opportunity to "tear down old houses and build new ones." Liberals lacked "fervency," in his view, that "spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks." Once the vehicle of youthful political exuberance, liberalism was now, Niebuhr mocked, a "philosophy of the middle-aged."

These brazen high spirits animated Niebuhr's pastorage of Bethel Evangelical, a tenure that both catapulted him into national prominence and served as the crucible for his political theology. They galvanized his rarely-cited campaign against the Ku Klux Klan; his criticism, not only of Henry Ford, but of Fordist management and mechanization; and his support for the city's labor unions, to the point, not only of joining them on picket lines, but of granting organizers access to his pulpit. This is the Niebuhr who embraced pacifism, served as national chairman of the Fellowship

of Reconciliation, and joined other liberal Protestants such as Kirby Page, Sherwood Eddy, and Harry Ward in advocating socialism.

Long after Niebuhr moved to New York in 1928, assumed his post at Union Theological Seminary, and entered the long *duree* of "realism" inaugurated by the publication of *Moral Man*, the radical enthusiasm and critical edge that marked his letter to the *New Republic* remained, in unmistakable albeit diluted forms. Niebuhr's embrace of Marxism, together with his enlistment in the more militant wing of the Socialist Party, testifies to the persistence of his radical bravado. Yet his disdain for liberal Protestant is so palpable in *Moral Man* that it's easy to forget that, as Niebuhr asserted plainly in the introduction, "the ultimate purpose" of his book was "to find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving *an ethical goal for society*" (my italics) – an objective inflected more by Protestant moralism than by Marxist dialectic. We should keep in mind that Niebuhr's excoriation of pacifism in *Moral Man* appeared in the midst of a reflection on "religious resources" for social and political transformation. Likewise, his moral equivalence of violent and nonviolent coercion, however dubious or incisive we may consider it, was intended to clarify the issues at stake, not to "lame the nerve of action," as he put it in *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934). Even though he left the FOR in 1934, Niebuhr helped to found the Fellowship of Socialist Christians in 1931 and remained a member well into the 1940s. Niebuhr may have thought many of his Protestant and secular colleagues deluded in one way or other, but he was generous enough to

write in *Moral Man* that "the modern communist's dream of a completely egalitarian society is a secularized, but still essentially religious, version of the classical religious dream."

Niebuhr's invocation of "dreams" would seem incongruous in a volume considered an *ur-text* of "realism," but I've come to think that the most trenchant and unassailable insight of *Moral Man* lies neither in its indictment of pacifism nor in its discussion of nonviolent resistance nor in what Christopher Lasch, enlisting Niebuhr's words, praised as its armature for a "spiritual discipline against resentment," but rather in its passages on "illusion" and "myth" – the realm of political *imagination*, as David Graeber might remind us. "Myth" was a salient topic among American intellectuals in the 1930s: Kenneth Burke's call for a "revolutionary symbolism," John Dewey's search for "a common faith," C. L. R. James' ruminations on the cultic quality of mass entertainment, or Thurman Arnold's sardonic examination of the "folklore" or "spiritual government" of capitalism. Anticipating all of them as well as echoing Georges Sorel, Niebuhr's moral and political psychology in *Moral Man* emphasizes not rationality or interest but imagination. Human beings, Niebuhr mused, are "governed more by imagination than by reason and imagination is compounded of mind and impulse." Especially when it assumes political form, imagination invents "illusions," which Niebuhr defines not as fantasy or chimera but rather as enacted fiction, something

one "believes to be true [and] is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted." Something like the "imagination" of Samuel Coleridge or Wallace Stevens, "illusion" would seem to be a way in which we discern some genuine possibility in reality that is unseen with the eyes of rationality; our action based on that vision – and vision is of something, which is why a "visionary" is someone who *sees* – can bring that gestating reality to birth. This is what Niebuhr appears to mean when he writes that "the truest visions of religion are illusions."

It's worth recalling that *Moral Man* ends on a note of intoxication rather than sobriety:

*...the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places." The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.*

If, as the saying goes, one governs in prose, Niebuhr was quite well aware that one revolts as well as campaigns in poetry.

Niebuhr's account of the promise and perversity of imagination leavened his later work as well, especially *The Irony of American History* (1952). To be sure, this book was Niebuhr's quintessential statement of a gray-flannelled Cold War liberalism; indeed, it elevated and assured his stature among the nestors of the postwar intellectual and political establishment. But it also extends the analysis of

"illusion" he crafted as a Protestant socialist from the terrain of class warfare to the topography of American nationalism. Though adamant in his conviction that American power and resolve were the only realistic bulwarks against the Soviet Union and revolutionary socialism, Niebuhr was equally insistent that the nation's most pernicious illusion – its "form of spiritual pride," in his words -- was its sense of "exceptionalism": its conviction of providential anointment and its delusional belief in its historical innocence. Along with a cohort of contemporaries, from Perry Miller to Ernest Tuveson, Niebuhr observed with profound ambivalence that "from the earliest days of its history to the present moment, there is a deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America." In Niebuhr's view, the mythology of exceptionalism underlay the American identification of material success with virtue and divine favor and energized its promethean effort to be "the master of destiny" at home and abroad. Now armed with a nuclear arsenal, the United States could no longer afford to subscribe to this farrago of "sentimentalities and pretensions."

One consequence of the exceptionalist illusion about which Niebuhr was especially prescient was the use of economic growth to evade rather than resolve social conflict. What Elizabeth Cohen has dubbed the postwar "consumers' republic" grew in part, in Niebuhr's view, from the exceptionalist dependence on capitalist prosperity as a sign of national anointment. "Every ethical and social problem of a

just distribution of the privileges of life is solved by so enlarging the privileges that either an equitable distribution is made easier, or a lack of equity is rendered less noticeable." The ever-escalating expansion of productivity and consumption in order to pacify class conflict was, by the 1950s, a staple of liberal social thought and politics, a hope ballasted by the apparent stability provided by the New Deal order, the hegemony of Keynesian economics among intellectuals, and the unprecedented material abundance and technological innovation that marked what historians have called "the golden age" of corporate capitalism. Niebuhr was one of the few liberal thinkers who suspected that the golden age – and, by extension, the sense of exceptionalism – might be short-lived. "This expansion cannot go on forever," Niebuhr warned, "and ultimately we must face some vexatious issues of social justice in terms which will not differ too greatly from those which the wiser nations of Europe have been forced to use." America would discover that the vices and antagonisms it thought it had left behind in Europe would not so much return as make their presence known with an unsettling and potentially explosive rudeness. Indeed, even the social mobility that had been a fixture of American mythology would wither as economic sclerosis set in, as Niebuhr predicted ruefully when he wrote that "the American class structure will become more fixed as the nation moves toward the final limits of an expanding economy."

Niebuhr could be just as far-seeing about the trajectory of "containment" – the diplomatic and military analogue to the suppression of class conflict through



prosperity – and he aimed his most acerbic critique of Cold War policy at the horrific folly of the war in Vietnam. The global extension of American power had entangled us, he recognized, in “a vast web of history” in which other peoples, “running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire.” Yet because the U. S. had so little experience navigating the “endlessly complex compounds of ethnic loyalties, historic traditions, military strength and ideological hopes,” Niebuhr feared – anticipating here the insight of Graham Greene in *The Quiet American* (1955), whose narrator said of his young CIA friend that he had “never met a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused” -- that the nation would “move with one direct leap from the use of economic to the use of military power.” When the U. S. did precisely this in Vietnam, Niebuhr took to the pages of the *New Republic* in January 1966 to declare that the war was “an impossible military and moral dilemma” and that the Johnson Administration should desist from escalating American involvement.

Niebuhr’s admonition would seem to confirm, not only his reputation as a steely-eyed sage, but the stature of “Christian realism” as a template for politics and a bridle on American hubris. Niebuhr warned that, however righteous American opposition to Communism, the United States must bridle its own aspiration to master history, an ambition that is always a prideful and insidious illusion. Acting (so this tale goes) as a prophet to the national security state, Niebuhr urged American leaders to cultivate a twofold sense of irony: an appreciation of

unintended consequences, and a capacity to identify the self-interest hidden under the noblest professions of selflessness. Suspicious of idealism of any kind, Niebuhr insisted that politicians seek limited, proximate goals, not the grandiose and utopian objectives pursued by empires and revolutionaries. Such ideals always represented, in his view, an impossible and dangerous transposition to groups of standards appropriate to individuals. "It is not within the realm of moral possibility to ask a nation to be `self-sacrificing.'" Thus, according to "Christian realism," the inevitable clashes of self-interested groups could be tempered, but never eliminated, and peace could be achieved through the alignment of interest with interest, not a larger transformation of heart. By the same token, since "idealism" could both inflate one's own sense of righteousness and demonize one's opponents, "realism" about group self-interest would diminish rather than encourage violence.

Niebuhr counseled humility, irony, and realism in part out of an eschatological modesty, a reticence that rendered foolish any blueprint or schedule of history's consummation. Writing in the chilliest days of the Cold War, Niebuhr feared that Americans "lack the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management." Indeed, to Niebuhr, the mythology of exceptionalism was more than a form of immodesty; it was an act of idolatry in which Americans worshipped their own graven image and likeness. "No society, not even a democratic one, is great enough

or good enough to make itself the final end of human existence." Only repentance of this self-deification could divert Americans from the path of folly; and once shorn of their idolatrous illusions about their nation's power, wisdom, and destiny, they could use their immense resources with greater prudence and generosity.

Similarly, Niebuhr's opposition to pacifism stemmed, not only from his aversion to idealism, but from a particular political ontology. Like imperialists and revolutionaries, pacifists, Niebuhr thought, were naïve in their conviction that ideals could be enacted in the turbulent contingencies of history. (When David Dellinger and other pacifist students at Union were expelled in 1940 for refusing to register for the draft, Niebuhr preached a sermon condemning not their lack of patriotism but their "arrogance.") Putting the wisdom of serpents before the gentleness of doves, Niebuhr's realism could both sanction intimidation, violence, and deceit *and* enjoin Christians to beg forgiveness for the commission of these necessary evils because it refused to grant any political significance to love. Speaking especially to religious pacifists, Niebuhr asserted, in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), that "the law of love stands on the edge of history, not in history. . .it represents an ultimate and not an immediate possibility." For Niebuhr, time was relentlessly unilinear; we have no access to the fullness of love that awaits us at the end of history. Love's appearance in our time could only be partial, at best; *agape* must always defer to *realpolitik*. (As Brecht put it, those who preached kindness could not themselves be kind.) Both Niebuhr's political ontology

and his eschatology rest on a secular temporality: "empty, homogeneous time" in Walter Benjamin's words, plodding and unredemptive, in which love will have to wait until the end of history, when all obstacles to its sway have disappeared. Until then, politics could only be, at best, an unending and often violent vocation in damage control.

This is the Niebuhr who continues to exercise a spell over politicians and intellectuals, from Presidents – Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama both cited him as a major influence – to philosophers, theologians, and historians – Paul Ramsey, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Richard John Neuhaus, and Andrew Bacevich, the latter Niebuhr's most able and sensitive contemporary acolyte, whose critique of American exceptionalism echoes that of *The Irony of American History*. Yet the fact that such a spectrum could invoke Niebuhr should elicit, not marvel at his bipartisan appeal, but rather suspicion of his bipartisan appeal, just as we should always be suspicious of anything "bipartisan." Aside from Bacevich, perhaps, the Niebuhrians I just cited have comprised a roster of faithful imperial stewardship, willing and even eager to justify the most horrendous and inept of imperial crusades. So as sympathetic as I am to Niebuhrian appeals for greater modesty and self-restraint, I'm doubtful that "Christian realism" can really moderate or constrain imperial ambition.

In his laudable eagerness to find historical precursors for his own critiques of empire, Bacevich overlooks some real and intractable problems with his hero's

work. Niebuhr adopted a fundamentally contradictory stance during the Cold War: condemn American illusions of innocence and omnipotence yet at the same time endorse a "realistic" posture against Communism that entailed both the possible use of nuclear weapons and the repression of post-colonial revolutionary movements. Despite his imprecations against the reckless pride of American globalism, Niebuhr's conception of Cold War international politics as a never-ending conflict in which the "children of light" would have to employ the weapons of the "children of darkness" made it difficult for him to oppose anything the United States did. Niebuhr himself realized that calls for humility and circumspection on the part of American leaders were perfectly compatible with global dominion. Writing in *Luce's Life* in September 1948, Niebuhr mused that "we will have to stand at every point of our far-flung lines." Later, noting in *The Irony of American History* that Egyptian and Mesopotamian city-states "were responsible for the order and cohesion of these first great empires in human history," Niebuhr opined that "the preponderant power of America may have a similar role to play in the present international scene." (Sounding eerily like neo-conservatives, Niebuhr contrasted the "buoyant vigor" of American culture both to the "spiritual tiredness" of Europe and to the "defeatism of Oriental cultures.") Note well that Niebuhr did not explicitly call upon the U. S. to *withdraw* its combat forces from Vietnam. This was not, I think, a mere default of logic; it was more fundamentally a default of imagination, a capitulation to the canons of reason enunciated by the military-

industrial Leviathan of the postwar corporate commonwealth. Niebuhr's demurrals on Vietnam was indicative of his habitual deference to the ideological and political parameters of the Cold War establishment of which he was a charter member.

Niebuhr could not and never did see how the debacle in Vietnam stemmed from the very notions of Communist malevolence and American indispensability that he shared with other liberal intellectuals, politicians, and policymakers. Like his fellow Cold Warriors, Niebuhr never really questioned the tenets of Wilsonian liberal internationalism – itself a progeny of that Messianic impulse that Niebuhr otherwise knew to be a source of terrible fanaticism. We and the rest of the world are paying the price for American denial of and inattention to the intractable realities of the post-colonial world that was emerging in the wake of the Versailles Treaty and the end of the Second World War.

At the same time and by the same token, Niebuhr could not endorse a more radical reorganization of American society because he shared with liberals a truncated sense of political possibility, acquiescing in their circumscribed account of what was "realistic." He and other liberal intellectuals counseled either resignation to "malignant power" or a decent modesty in its reform – anything but a "sublime madness" that he now castigated as either ineffectual or murderous. His abandonment of any meaningful socialist politics was bound up with an overvaluation of expertise – something endemic, I would contend, both to the liberal

Protestant social gospel and to the entire Progressive-liberal lineage of American social and political thought from John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen to Daniel Bell, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Cass Sunstein. To be fair, Niebuhr was no technocratic ideologue; in *Irony*, for instance, he warns against America's "cult of technical efficiency" and insists that "we are more desperately in need of genuine charity than of more technocratic skills." Yet an inclination toward managerialist politics was evident in Niebuhr's writing as early as the 1920s, but it surfaced most clearly during the Second World War. In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), Niebuhr went so far as to assert that the "professional class" – who comprised, he believed, the "most intelligent portions" of American society – occupied "a position of relative detachment from the ideological struggles of owners and producers." Niebuhr even redefined socialism not as the resolution of "the property issue" through workers' control of production but rather as the achievement of abundance and efficiency through benevolent managerial prowess. The modern economic order required, he now thought, "the best possible distribution of power for the sake of justice and the least possible management for the sake of order" – a "management" provided precisely by the "professional class" supposedly insulated from the imperatives of capital. This was the ideology of "the end of ideology" as proclaimed by Bell in 1960, the exemplary Cold War restatement of the technocratic political imagination.

Niebuhr also defaulted on the racial front, endorsing the small-step strategy of

white liberals that Martin Luther King, Jr. would later dismiss as "the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." Niebuhr's reluctance to support the newly combative civil rights movement was sadly ironic, as it exemplified his prescient speculation in *Moral Man* – based on his observations of Gandhi's successes in South Africa and India -- that "there is no problem of political life to which religious imagination can make a larger contribution than this problem of developing nonviolent resistance." Yet when confronted with so glorious a confirmation, Niebuhr retreated into equivocation. The *Brown* decision in 1954 satisfied Niebuhr that America's racial divisions were "on the way of being resolved" because – in words that sound positively Deweyan in their optimism – he credited the "general tendency of increasing social intelligence to withdraw its support from the claims of social privilege." Yet Niebuhr expressed sympathy with Southern white parents who feared a decline in the educational standards of integrated schools, citing "cultural differences between the races." Later, responding to the Montgomery boycotts, Niebuhr went Burkean, invoking hoary conservative chestnuts about "organic processes" in an effort to convince King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to check the movement's momentum. It was "politically unwise to advocate 'gradualism,'" Niebuhr conceded, but it was, in his view, "morally wise to practice it." We're quite a long way from the socialist firebrand of the summer of 1919.



Thus it's hard to see how a thinker whom the journalist Richard Rovere anointed "the official establishment theologian" in 1960 could pose much of a threat to, well, the official establishment. His "realism" dovetailed well with the sonorous rhetoric of "maturity" and "responsibility" that was the *lingua franca* among courtier intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and imperial mandarins such as McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. As Niebuhr's biographer Richard Fox has observed, Niebuhr enabled such men to "maintain faith in themselves as political actors in a troubled – what he termed a sinful – world. . . Niebuhr taught that moral men had to play hardball." "Cover[ing] themselves with guilt in order to fulfill some high responsibility," Cold Warriors could ravage Vietnam and other nations, recalling Niebuhr's solemn benediction on "conscious choices of evil for the sake of good." (Niebuhr should have recalled that Pontius Pilate dispatched Jesus of Nazareth for the sake of the public order.) Despite his chastisement of American hubris, Niebuhr was no "prophet to the establishment," as Henry F. May once dubbed him. A rueful theologian of empire, Niebuhr was a *pontifex maximus* for Cold War elites, among whom "Christian realism" offered an ideological sanction for U. S. foreign and military policy.

Even if we set aside Niebuhr's reverential enlistment by the Cold War elite, his account of moral and political life is open to serious challenge. Although Niebuhr hoped that "Christian realism" could chasten ambition and civilize conflict, it is hard to see how it can ever do either, given Niebuhr's well-known pessimism

about groups. His dismissal of the notion that nations could be self-sacrificing leads inexorably to a sense of futility, since the acute and profound consciousness of the capacity for sin that is central to "Christian realism" would have to be cultivated *by a people*, not only by virtuosi in introspection. It would demand a talent for contemplation and humility that would, presumably, constrain their inclination to self-delusion, vengeance, and malice. Yet Niebuhr himself observed that no political community in history has ever possessed this talent, at least not in any abundance. And it is an especially difficult talent to develop when, as among Americans, the identity of that community is inseparable from a conviction of Errand, Destiny, Providence, or Century. As so often happens in his work, Niebuhr intensifies the consciousness of sin yet offers little but rumination on the Tragedy of It All. Those unwilling to make the future a hostage to tragedy must either hope that the virtues indispensable for "Christian realism" can be nurtured among an elite – and the track record on that score is not encouraging -- or forthrightly dispute the terms of Niebuhr's pessimism. They would have to counter, in the face of the ample historical evidence to the contrary, that charity, modesty, and self-sacrifice are indeed "within the realm of moral possibility" for groups and nations.

They would therefore have to contend with Niebuhr's insistence on "realism," the feature of his political thinking that is usually considered most unassailable – but which, I would suggest, is in fact quite dubious and contestable. "Realism" – like

other keywords such as "pragmatic," "efficient," "responsible," or "serious" -- has always been a formidable weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of power, indispensable for clearing and protecting the moral and epistemological high ground. Any challenge to Niebuhrian *realpolitik* must begin, not by sending a banal and ineffectual "idealism" into battle, but by exposing the fraudulence of many a hard-boiled claim to "realism." "Christian realists" too readily cede the power to define reality -- and therefore possibility -- to the professional and managerial cadres of the national security state and the corporations. Yet as Niebuhr himself might well have agreed, "realism" often turns out to be either an imprimatur on the status quo -- "a mere surrender to the actual," as Randolph Bourne once put it so well -- or the malignant illusions of the powerful. But if realism is not what it seems, then what appears to be Niebuhr's strongest point is in fact his Achilles' heel. If what often passes for "realism" is so thoroughly suspect, then "Christian realism" is but a pious version of the counterfeit veracity of power. By deferring to the cognitive and political expertise of the imperial state, "Christian realists" both stoke imperial desire -- and thus ensure their irrelevance -- and obscure the range of moral and political possibility. So rather than lament the lack of "hope" or "idealism," today's apostates from empire must reclaim the language of realism. They must be *visionaries* in the proper sense of the word -- people who see what's really there, in fact and latent in possibility. It may turn out, ironically, that Niebuhrian realism paralyzes the moral and political imagination not because it is realistic, but because

it is not realistic enough.

The shortcomings of "Christian realism" were apparent to A. J. Muste, Dutch Reformed minister, genuine socialist, and one of Niebuhr's keenest and most persistent critics. Today, Muste is remembered primarily as an antiwar and civil rights activist: engaging in civil disobedience with Dorothy Day, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the War Resisters League, and often literally holding a candle of peace against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. Like Niebuhr, Muste wrote and acted on the basis of a distinctive political ontology and eschatology that challenged the "realism" of Christian realism. While Niebuhr was right, in his view, to warn that all earthly power was ultimately "ephemeral, weak, [and] doomed," Muste believed that history contained a wider array of possibilities. Nonviolence and radical change were practical and realistic, Muste believed, because the love that Niebuhr banished to the end of history was available in the here and now. "The divine," he proclaimed, is "always about to break into history." Against Niebuhr's secular, linear, "empty homogeneous time," Muste posed an ontological and eschatological alternative, a realized eschatology. The past, he reflected, does "not simply grind out the future through the sieve of the present." For Muste as for Benjamin, every moment was the gate through which the Messiah could enter. The present and the future are simultaneous and permeable; the here and now is open to incursion from the Kingdom; the future can interrupt and transform our time.

Every act of love is a visit to the Kingdom, and brings the future in the present tense.

"Love can change history," Muste insisted, because time, having more than one direction, is always on our side.

Muste conceded that love offered no greater guarantee of success than reliance on money and weapons -- the arsenal of fear that provides the world with its bloody and evanescent security. The partisans of love would inevitably suffer obloquy, exile, even death -- the main reason, Muste suspected, that guile and violence seemed to be safer options, even for Christian realists. But in the end, Muste mused, there simply *is* no safety in our futile efforts to secure ourselves in time; all attempts to master our fates conclude in ashes, ruin, and butchery. Nothing really belongs to us; so by accepting the vulnerability that comes with eschewal of possession and violence, the pacifist is "the supreme realist." However draped in the changing rhetorical fashions of liberal democratic capitalism, the American quest for imperial mastery was another vain grasp at eternity; and like that of an earlier empire, the nation's pursuit of global supremacy was a snare and a delusion. "In its way the Roman Empire was real enough," Muste wrote. But its "power structure [was] not permanent, not real. It [was] the house built on sand." For Muste, the problem lay not in the nature of groups but in the reluctance to live without dominion.

Forswearing ultimate allegiance to the principalities rooted in dust, the vanguard of the *eschaton* must be "loose and experimental," living as lightly tethered as possible to the world of business and empire. They might even lead their fellow citizens to a

happier if humbler destiny, for one never knew when the other side of history would swoop in and transform the time. "Love can change history," Muste asserted outrageously, for "love is mightier" than dominion.

To be sure, Muste could be no less insistent than Niebuhr on the ironies of historical action. Referring to the earliest Christians – who expected the heavenly city and instead inherited the Roman Empire – Muste observed that "what came about did not resemble their dreams," but then mused that "it never does. Corruption was mingled with the glory." But this recognition of the ineradicable ambiguity of history did not induce Muste, as it did Niebuhr, to counsel resignation to the sinful necessities of subterfuge and occasional carnage. In Muste's view, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in *realpolitik*. So if "reality is not what men tend to call the real" – if the world is an ampler and more generous place than the faithless are compelled to make it -- then love is a power, and not an ideal. As Muste had written in 1940, "there are in our universe resources for living the life of love which we have hardly begun to tap, but which we must learn to draw upon."

Muste's conviction that a politics of love was more practical than Niebuhrian realism was shared by an array of Cold War radicals, often dubbed "personalists" by historians: the Catholic Workers led by Dorothy Day; the participants in several communes or "intentional communities" such as Clarence Jordan's Koinonia Farm;

the loose coalition of secular and religious intellectuals who wrote for the journal *Liberation*, including Muste, Day, Dellinger, Bayard Rustin, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and a host of others who prefigured a "new left" dissociated from Marxism and social democracy; and eventually elements of that "new left" itself, the partisans of "beloved community" who permeated the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society. What distinguished personalism from other forms of postwar radicalism was its double focus on personal and political renewal, its commitment to the idea that existential metamorphosis – what Paul Tillich called "the courage to be," the fulfillment of the person's divine image and likeness – was bound up with political transformation.

Tillich's theology is crucial here, as its existentialist idiom was always inseparable from radical politics, from its inception in Weimar Germany among the "Kairos Circle" of German socialist theologians to its more muted but nonetheless influential iteration in his popular postwar work. Tillich has often been criticized – by me, no less – as a herald of today's therapeutic religious culture. Although I would still affirm most of what I wrote about Tillich (which was, in the judgment of readers who've contacted me, admiring as well as judicious), I have to say that I've grown ever more fond and appreciative of his work, and one of the reasons is that which many of his readers among the New Left cited: its intimation of what Tillich called the "New Reality," its resources for an expansive political imagination, its emphasis on what we call *sanctification*. Adumbrated in sermons such as "Holy

Waste" – where Tillich writes with Romantic flourish of a state of being that unites "reason and ecstasy, moral obligation and sacred waste" – this kind of politics would, unlike "Christian realism," arouse our enervated powers of joy, improvisation, and conviviality, because it would arise from what William James once called the saint's spirit of "ontological wonder" – Muste's historical realm always open to divinity, best transformed by a reparative and revolutionary conception and practice of politics. Indeed, I would argue that the richest troves of theo-political imagination lie in a revival and renovation of existential and liberation theology, not in the ecclesial fetishism of Stanley Hauerwas or the theocratic fantasies of John Milbank and "radical orthodoxy."

Tillich and Muste's insistence on a kind of existential exuberance as the basis of a new political imagination has been paralleled by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who have turned St. Francis from a medieval icon into a model of contemporary militancy. Unlike the steely and domineering Leninist who harnesses the power of historical forces as defined in the precincts of realpolitik, Francis, they write, is the revolutionary who "leads" by the example of self-effacing yet triumphant submission to the forces at work in the universe. Just as, in the poverty of his time, Francis discovered "the ontological power of a new society" – "love, simplicity, and also innocence." Reveling in what he believed to be the carnivalesque nature of God's superabundance, Francis "refused every instrumental discipline"; lived "a



joyous life" in contrast to the skinflint sobriety enjoined by nascent capitalism; and affirmed every animal, flower, and stone, "posing against the misery of power" the kaleidoscopic and immeasurable "joy of being." Similarly – but without Francis' sacramental ontology -- today's militant, they argue, must rely on a "fundamental productivity of being" that surges through the life of the global multitude.

We may differ about the source of that "fundamental productivity of being"; but any new radicalism must begin from a faith in the possibilities of the here and now – a realized eschatology, if you will, the future in the present tense. Living the new world in the wreckage of the old. Something Reinhold Niebuhr, too sure in the serenity of the ruling elite, would not and cannot help us do.