

# The Meeting of Religion and Politics

**Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr** edited by D. B. Robertson. Westminster Press, 309 pp. \$6.00.

by Ernest W. Lefever

The crisis which shook the world when Reinhold Niebuhr, as a young pastor in Detroit, first started to write—and which still shakes it—is profoundly political and profoundly religious. The false interpreters of the crisis who were the primary targets of Niebuhr's fire then and now are religious men who misunderstand politics precisely because they misunderstand the religious tradition from which they presume to speak.

(This is not to say that "sound" theology leads straight to "sound" political understanding. Obviously some "sound" theologians cannot discern the signs of the times and some people with no "theology" at all can be numbered among the prophets.)

Niebuhr's restless pen has always pointed in two directions. I cannot recall one of his essays on national or international issues which does not include both a discerning comment on the crisis and a devastating critique of the pious peddlers of platitudes, the "simple moralists," as he calls them, who compound the crisis with their confusion.

Niebuhr is never much concerned about the wicked prophets, men motivated by evil designs. He directs his powerful polemics against men with "noble intentions." The political irrelevance and moral irresponsibility of the "children of light," he says, is a result of their virtue, their desire to be right and pure. Herein lies the irony. Irony is not an accidental twist of fate that spells catastrophe, but a hidden defect in virtue which promotes the triumph of disaster.

It is precisely because Niebuhr is a prophet, and not a systematic

theologian, a historian or a journalist, that this collection of his fugitive essays in *Love and Justice* is an indispensable supplement to his books.

In these articles drawn from *Christianity and Crisis*, *Christianity and Society*, *The Christian Century*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, *The New Leader* and other journals, one can see Niebuhr responding to current episodes of a great drama, to the rapidly moving events of a larger story. He never pauses to fill in the historical context. He speaks in the present tense imperative to his contemporaries upon whom the momentous or less-than-momentous events impinge directly.

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When the World War started, said Niebuhr in 1928, "I was a young man trying to be an optimist without falling into sentimentality. When it ended . . . I became a realist trying to save myself from cynicism."

It might also be said that in the process of saving himself Niebuhr was trying to save the Protestant churches from the liberal illusions about the natural goodness and rationality of man he himself indulged in before the war. During the Great Depression he said that "practically every pronouncement on political issues by church bodies" was without political realism "and not one bit advanced over the romantic hopes of the eighteenth century which expected the Kingdom of God as soon as the printed word became ubiquitous and universal suffrage general."

In 1940 he said that Protestant perfectionism "is unable to distinguish between the peace of capitulation to tyranny and the peace of the Kingdom of God." "If modern churches were to symbolize their real faith they would take the crucifix from their altars and substitute the three little monkeys who counsel men to 'speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil.'"

Ten years later Niebuhr said

that Christian testimony on political issues tends to be "either so irrelevant or so dangerous that a wise statesman will do well to ignore" most of it. The statesman can thank God that the advice from one source cancels out advice from another sufficiently "to make their indifference politically expedient."

If the gentle reader feels that Niebuhr has been a bit ungentle with his Protestant colleagues, a brief exposure to the actual content of most Protestant political pronouncements, denominational or inter-denominational, might set the record straight.

Niebuhr is a true prophet because he speaks from a tradition which takes history seriously. He always sees the specific event, perhaps tragic in itself, as a part of a larger drama which is neither wholly tragic nor wholly heroic, but more tragic than heroic. There are elements of this-worldly hope as well as other-worldly redemption in every human situation. Thus he steers a course between the banalities of the utopian sentimentalists and the gloomy dirges of the cynics.

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One example will illustrate the relevance of Niebuhr's historical realism and the irrelevance of the rational-idealism he criticizes. During World War II, many religious leaders and other Americans expressed their interest in international affairs primarily by their preoccupation with the character and structure of the postwar peace organization which most Americans assumed would emerge after the war. Millions of conscientious citizens invested their hopes in an agency they believed would somehow succeed where the League of Nations had failed.

Niebuhr viewed this single-minded devotion to postwar peace machinery with no little alarm. In 1942 he said we ought "to dream less of future ideal plans" and "look more closely at what we are doing now." "The fabric of history is woven on one loom. The theory

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Mr. Lefever's book *Ethics and United States Foreign Policy* was reviewed in these pages last month.

which makes absolute distinctions between war and peace is false." Since the character of the postwar world will be determined largely by the distribution of power among the great nations at the end of the war, he said, we ought to be more concerned with the military and political decisions during the war than in sketching ideal blueprints for the period after the war. History has ratified his appraisal with a vengeance.

Niebuhr's inconsistency, like the reports of Mark Twain's death, has been grossly exaggerated. It is true that after World War I, Niebuhr was still a pacifist of sorts and a socialist of sorts, and that as late as 1936 he referred to the Soviet Union as "the most thrilling social venture in modern history." But that is not the whole story.

In 1927 while he was still a pacifist and seven years before he resigned from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Niebuhr developed a penetrating critique of pacifism which he elaborated in subsequent writing.

Long before he left the Socialist Party Niebuhr had serious reservations about the efficacy of socialism. In 1932 he said "it is probably romantic to hope, as most socialists do, that all causes of international friction would be abolished" if socialism were established. Four years before his 1936 statement praising Russia he criticized the religious pretensions of Marxism and noted the "abuse of power" and "the growth rather than the diminution of political terrorism in Russia." Under the impact of the Moscow trials, the Soviet attack on Finland and the German-Russian pact, Niebuhr became increasingly critical of the U.S.S.R.

In 1938 he compared Stalin's "dictatorship" to that of Hitler and in 1940 he predicted the possibility of postwar Russian expansion in Europe. He denounced the "subservience" of non-Russian Communist Parties to "Russian diplomacy, in all of its tortuous turnings." "The trouble with all the comrades and semi-comrades is that they have made Com-

munism their Christ and Russia the Kingdom of God." During and since the war he became increasingly critical of Soviet foreign policy. In short, Niebuhr since 1940 has been about as soft on Communism as Winston Churchill.

Why, then, did Niebuhr sometimes cling emotionally to certain causes and shreds of Marxist dogma which he had already disposed of intellectually? According to his own testimony, it took the impact of the Depression and war to force him to accept the deeper logic of his increasingly pragmatic political presuppositions. His personal association with leading socialists here and abroad also delayed his full acceptance of his own insights.

In retrospect, Niebuhr says he was "incredibly stupid in slowly arriving at a position which now seems valid but which required all the tragedies of history to clarify." If this is stupidity, the world could do with more of it.

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## Professor Toynbee as Theologian

**Christianity Among the Religions of the World** by Arnold Toynbee. Charles Scribner's Sons. 116 pp. \$2.75.

By William Clancy

In this as in his last book (*An Historian's View of Religion*), Professor Toynbee plays the role of synthesist: surveying the vast, complex area of the traditional higher religions, he attempts to indicate what the future of these religions, acting together in a civilization that is struggling to be born, will be. And if Professor Toynbee as historian was, in some circles, a cause for controversy, Professor Toynbee as theologian seems likely, in other circles, to be a cause for despair.

Whatever despair is felt, however, will not be over Professor

Toynbee's intentions: they are manifestly good. Nor, for that matter, will it be over his insights: many of them are brilliant. It will be felt, rather, over the theological-philosophical hodge-podge that somehow emerges from the two.

Professor Toynbee's basic insight is a profound one: in modern history a new and terrible phenomenon has arisen, the phenomenon of a totalitarian materialism that takes the form of Nationalism and Communism. The root of this materialism is man's worship of himself. In the face of this, the great religions of the world, forgetting their ancient rancors, must stand together to vindicate their common vision of man.

Few reasonably enlightened theologians would oppose Profes-

sor Toynbee here. Where Professor Toynbee falls from insight to sentimentality is in his specific recommendations.

In his recommendations for Christianity, for example, Professor Toynbee says that "we ought . . . to try to purge our Christianity of the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique." He admits that this will be difficult, but it must be done, he says, if we are to purge Christianity of "exclusive-mindedness and intolerance."

The essence of the Christian religion is its conviction of its own uniqueness. The Christ has come. In its efforts, however well-intentioned, to explain that uniqueness away, Professor Toynbee's book seems a curious return to the banalities of an eighteenth century kind of rationalism.