

Britain

Reinhold Niebuhr

The influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on American social and religious thought was, to say the inevitable, inestimable. When he died in 1971 he left behind a number of unpublished manuscripts on various subjects that engaged his wide-ranging interests. With the gracious permission of his family we are pleased to make some of these reflections public. In our June, 1973, issue we published Professor Niebuhr's reflections on the past and future of Germany. In the following article, written in 1962, he reflects on the phenomenon that is Britain. In addition to reminiscing about dominant British personalities he knew well, he offers an analysis of the relative merits of British, American and Continental forms of culture and politics. The reader will probably succumb, as we have, to the temptation to speculate about what Niebuhr would say differently in light of the American Watergate and British postimperial bewilderment.—The Eds.

My first visit to England was in 1921, when the Macdonald Labor government had its first but brief reign by sufferance of the Liberals. I married an English girl in 1931, and my wife and I subsequently spent every other summer in Britain until 1939. I met the late Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of York, in a preparatory meeting for the Oxford Conference on "Church, Community and State" in 1938. My contacts with Britain were chiefly on the Left in both Church and State. Dr. Temple was a member of the Labor Party and, with Professor R. H. Tawney, one of the founders of the Workers Education Association. Temple was certainly partly responsible for the general diffusion of "labor" opinion through the middle classes of Britain and beyond the limits of the industrial classes to which socialism was confined on the Continent. This diffusion laid the foundation for the victory of Labor after the War, in spite of Churchill's great eminence as the architect of British victory. The slogan "Fair shares for all" represented the conscience of the whole war-impooverished nation.

Temple was not only the greatest theologian of the Church of England but its most eloquent spokesman in both religious and social issues. He was a man of great intellect and learning and had the respect of the whole nation. Temple was a rotund figure with a merry eye and a nice sense of humor. When he laughed his round body literally shook like a mass of jelly. He had not a line on his face and seemed to be the most untroubled of men. The present Queen Dowager, who was devoted to him, is reported to have said, when she was told that the

Archbishop had advocated the nationalization of the banks: "I don't know where the line is between religion and politics but wherever it is I am sure His Grace has transgressed it in that proposal." As a matter of fact, some economists in the Labor Party were not as sure as the Archbishop that the banks required nationalization.

For me the Archbishop, who in American parlance was a "Social Gospeler" but with more interest in theology than the average American of the school, was one of the many symbols of the ability of Britain to conserve ancient traditions by adapting them to new situations. A socialist Archbishop of York and subsequently of Canterbury was a possibility only in Britain, and even there it would not have been possible except that Temple was irenic rather than polemical. He could preach a sermon on the meaning of the Eucharist which seemed to make the transformation of the nation into a Christian brotherhood an absolute consequence of this central Christian act of worship. Of course, the sermon was not absolutely convincing to those who saw a greater hiatus between political facts and religious hopes than he did.

Incidentally, his selection for the Primacy while Churchill was Prime Minister was another triumph for the method of insinuating democratic reality into ancient forms at which the English people are so adept. The King appoints the princes of the Church, which means that the Cabinet appoints them, which means, in ecclesiastical affairs, that the Prime Minister appoints them with the advice of his ecclesiastical secretary. But the secretary takes a kind of Gallup

Poll of the bishops before advising the Prime Minister. In the case of Temple, the vote was so overwhelmingly in his favor that Churchill could not fail to appoint him, even though he was a member of the Labor Party. The fact that Churchill was the head of a coalition government and that the other leading candidate was tinged with pacifistic convictions may have helped.

The Labor Party was never purely Marxist. Insofar as it was not the product of the secular liberalism which John Stuart Mill exemplified (his liberalism had changed from individualism to collectivism in his later years), it was the product of the radical wing of Anglicanism and of the Methodist Church. Temple and Lansbury represented this radical Anglicanism. But the Methodist Church was a very potent force in the Labor movement. One of the ministers in the first Labor government declared that the Wesleyan Bible classes were essentially his working support in his constituency, and some of the best-known Labor ministers, notably Arthur Henderson, the Foreign Secretary, were lay preachers in the Wesleyan Church.

Sir Stafford Cripps, who was my other intimate contact with England and the Labor movement, drew his inspiration from the radical Christian sects of the Cromwellian period. He was a typical "Roundhead." The son of the great liberal leader Lord Parmoor, he became a convert to Labor and ended his career as the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the late Labor government. He was sent to Russia as ambassador by the coalition government and upon his return was given a place in the coalition cabinet of Churchill. Churchill respected him for his ability, but there was no affinity between the Roundhead and the Cavalier.

Cripps was an austere and highly disciplined man. He was regarded as the most eminent of all members of the bar in Britain; and his law practice was said to be the most lucrative in the nation. He conducted his legal practice every morning, spent the afternoons and evenings in the House of Commons, and prepared his cases presumably after midnight. He was probably a better advocate than parliamentarian, though he would have preferred it to be the other way around. I visited his law chamber the morning after the war was declared in 1939, and clerks were already busy packing his legal volumes. I asked him whether he was quitting law "for the duration." "Forever," he answered. "We are entering a period in which this kind of thing will be irrelevant, at least for me."

Cripps was disconsolate about the Chamberlain government. When I asked him whether there was not some chance of Churchill's becoming the head of the government, he answered sadly that there might have been if one could trust the government to one of such undisciplined habits as Churchill.

That statement was, of course, radically revised by subsequent history. But it represented the original reaction of a puritan who refrained not only from drink and smoke but from the eating of meat. Cripps confined himself to raw vegetables, not for moral reasons but because he had some rather esoteric dietary rules. In the period after the war, Cripps's peculiar diet received national attention. Churchill was complaining about the rationing system of the Labor government. "The government insists that we have enough food, and that may be so," declared Churchill, "but what kind of food? It is palatable only for rabbits and the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

I was giving some lectures at the University of Edinburgh before and after the outbreak of the Second World War and had occasion to hear some other interesting judgments on Churchill. It will be remembered that Churchill was made First Lord of the Admiralty immediately upon the outbreak of the War. But there was wide discontent with Chamberlain, and Labor finally forced the issue by refusing to participate in a coalition government except under Churchill's leadership. Two grand old men of Scotland, both retired principals of Scottish colleges, invited me to tea after a lecture. One said, "Why did we not appreciate Winston until this hour of crisis, seeing that he was right on all the issues all the time?" The other answered, "Don't forget, John, that he was wrong about India and wrong about Edward and that Simpson woman." Churchill's intervention in behalf of the hapless king was indeed responsible for a loss of prestige, just at the time when prestige was most needed.

To return to Cripps, he was a friend of Lord Halifax, and the latter sent him to India on an exploratory mission which finally bore some fruit when he later went to India for preliminary negotiations on Indian independence. At this time he cemented his friendship with Nehru and seemed to have agreed with him that the Hindu-Moslem dispute was blown up by British imperialism and would disappear once the imperial power had been removed. This was a rather too simple application of socialist doctrines to complex cultural facts, a simplism which history cruelly refuted. The refutation contributed to a certain estrangement between Cripps and Nehru. Cripps had been banned from the Labor Party before the war because of his involvement in a "united front" movement, but was restored to good standing at the beginning of the War. His first major assignment upon the German attack on Russia was as Ambassador to Russia. In that post he became symbolic of the partnership between the two peoples, and his prestige was tremendously enhanced in Britain. A witty and politically wise Oxford don speculated that his popularity in Russia was not equally great. "An idealist like Stafford," he declared, "would be about as popular in Russia as a maiden aunt at

an improper party." Khrushchev has more recently confirmed the truth of this judgment. On a recent visit to Britain he declared his preference for the Tories over the Labor leaders. Good socialists were then, as now, embarrassing reminders of the corruption of a dream.

Cripps was in one sense very British and in another sense not. He was untrue to type in his impatience with the endless compromises of parliamentary politics. He was a democrat by discipline but a revolutionary radical by instinct. But he was very British in his ability to measure the power factors of a political situation with great shrewdness in private, while in his public utterances he explained political realities in terms of bland moralism. Cripps came as close to being an anti-royalist as even the most radical Labor Party member ever allowed himself to go. Before the war he criticized "the influence of the Palace" in a Commons' debate. He was chided for this breach of etiquette by the *Times*. The next Sunday something happened which throws a light upon the interesting relation of the Church of England to the countryside and to the city. In the country the Church of England was undoubtedly, in the phrase of Maude Royden, "The Tory Party at prayer." Cripps was something of a local squire in the village of Filkins in Oxfordshire. He had a beautiful estate, "Goodfellow," and was engaged in erecting a whole series of model workers' homes. He was also senior warden of the village church, and in this capacity read the morning lesson in church. The parson of the church approached him before the service and asked him not to read the lesson. "It would give offence, you know, because we pray in this church for the royal family." Cripps left the church and promptly joined the local Wesleyan Chapel. But he must have been reconciled to the church, for during the war, after he had come back from Moscow and had become Minister of Aircraft Production, he spoke rather consistently as a lay preacher in the churches of his various clerical friends in London. These sermons were inevitably in our best "Social Gospel" tradition. They gave moral and religious reasons for the establishment of a socialized economy, and they never hinted at the power realities which underlay both the economic and the political realm; the realities he analyzed brilliantly and mercilessly in his home on the weekends when he invited his friends to "Goodfellows."

There was not a bit of dishonesty in this dichotomy. It was in the best British tradition. Cripps didn't separate religion from politics. In fact they were integral in his life as in the life of idealists of his kind. But he left the power factors out of consideration when he talked about politics religiously. That was a characteristic of thought not only on the Left but on the Right. Lord Halifax, a Tory, followed

the same rule in his religious and moral admonitions. These individual examples may express a general British attitude toward politics which has often prompted the Continental charge of "British hypocrisy." But there is no hypocrisy. The power factors are shrewdly calculated but not really acknowledged except in esoteric political circles. When he was delivering a religious discourse, one would never have imagined that Lord Halifax spent a lifetime in the service of the Foreign Office.

I remained on intimate terms with Cripps and saw him in the hospital in Switzerland shortly before his death from cancer.

I would not claim that Sir Stafford and Dr. Temple were the complete embodiment or perfect exemplars of the British Labor movement. The bulk of Labor votes was furnished by the Trade Union movement, and the late Ernest Bevin was the typical leader of that part of the Labor movement. But these two whom I knew intimately were typical of a force in British life which made the Labor Party, unlike the continental Socialist parties, more than a force of the industrial workers. It was the expression of the conscience of a whole nation in its confrontation with the facts and problems of an industrial era. They were the symbols of the vitality of the British culture, which was able first to absorb the bourgeois revolution into a feudal society and then take the second step of absorbing the industrial revolution in a bourgeois culture, without a serious rent in the culture. This is, I believe, the great achievement of the British historical and empirical approach to the problems of community. Other West European nations have equalled, but none have exceeded, the British achievement in doing justice to the organic aspects of community without becoming prisoner to the community as organism, as is the case in all forms of decadent feudalism.

In my first visit I looked upon the various feudal and royal traditions in which British culture abounds with the uncomprehending eyes of an American. I had absorbed conventional antimonarchical prejudices and regarded the institution of the monarchy as a quaint relic of another era. We had fortunately discarded the eighteenth-century republican convictions that monarchy was the symbol and engine of injustice. We were aware that history had transmuted absolute monarchy into constitutional monarchy and had exalted parliament into the potent instrument of democracy. But I did share the belief of many Americans that the British maintained the Royal House simply because they were loath to discard any historic institution. Further study of British history and acquaintance with British life prompted the conviction that constitutional monarchy was not simply a survival of an ancient and, fortunately, no longer potent institution, but that it was now a very creative organ of a free society. It symbolized the

majesty of the community in its organic continuity and in its unity above and below party strife, while the governments, made and unmade by parliamentary majorities, represented the present or momentary will of the majority. Constitutional monarchy wedded to parliamentary government was therefore the best possible instrument and symbol of the combination of continuing and momentary aspects of the majesty of government, of traditional and democratic sources of political authority, and of the important distinction between the majesty of government as such and the particular government.

Our own nation possesses neither the institution of constitutional monarchy nor that of parliamentary government. We get along fairly well by very different organs of government, particularly based upon the concept of the rigorous separation and independence of the three branches of government. If there are defects in this basic conception, I hope they will never be serious enough to prompt a change of the system. For only a revolutionary situation could alter our traditions. These traditions have achieved moral and political potency by the same organic and historic processes which are so well symbolized in the institution of constitutional monarchy. We cannot have the symbol because historic realities have exalted other symbols. The defect of our system is that the President is both the head of the nation and a party chief. That leads to considerable embarrassment at times, but not to great crisis. The question remains, however, whether a system of "parliamentary" responsibility cannot be elaborated within our system, even though the idea of a constitutional monarchy is completely irrelevant. Various schemes of giving cabinet members seats and voice in the Congress have been proposed. But they are all futile because the basic pattern is the rigorous separation of powers and the independence of the Presidency.

The Cabinet is merely the instrument of the President, and no "organic" or historical growth of custom can change this basic pattern. Fortunately, we have been providentially blessed with strong Presidents in hours of crisis. Otherwise the effects of a system of separation of powers might have become serious. But the radical difference between our form of democracy and the parliamentary systems which have developed in the whole of Europe must not blind us to the virtues of the democratic governments which have wedded parliamentary control with constitutional monarchy. This system is quite different from the one which the consistent monarchists intended and the consistent democrats strove for. But it has the merit of being more serviceable than the system of government which either side intended.

In the case of Britain, constitutional monarchy and an unwritten constitution is but one of the many products of the historical, organic and empirical approach to the problems of community. The common law is the other great symbol of this approach. It

has certainly borne richer fruits than the more abstract and rationalistic approach to the political order in France, the classical nation of the bourgeois revolution. France, as America, boasts of a "Bill of Rights" in its law. Meanwhile Britain has done rather better with its conception of the "Rights of Englishmen," that is, historically established and mutually acknowledged rights, than the more abstractly conceived "Rights of Man."

The empirical and historical approach of the British to the problems of the community is intimately related to the seeming failure of British statesmen and thinkers to deal with the power factors explicitly in their moral and religious theories while accepting them implicitly in their political calculations. Viewed in purely historical terms power is always prestige, the ability to win obedience, not to coerce it. No British thinker would deny the alloy of force in every system of majesty or prestige. But by centering upon prestige as the source of political power and by recognizing that justice is one of the sources of prestige which empowers the political authority, the British thought and practice is immune to those alternations between cynical and idealistic interpretations of political reality, alternations which have infected both French and German thought. The "idealists," whether of the French Revolution or of the Weimar Republic, have dreamed of justice as if power were not necessary to sustain it, while the "realists," whether Jacobin or Nazi, have tried to manipulate power as if prestige were not the chief source of power and as if justice were not the chief source of prestige. Thus British thought—at least the thought of the statesmen, whether Gladstone or Cripps—seemed naive or even hypocritical to the Continent. But British practice achieved a higher justice and a greater stability than France or Germany was ever able to achieve.

The defect in the British approach is revealed in the fact that the culture which is most "democratic" in its devotion to freedom and justice is also most "snobbish" in the sense that feudal class distinctions are more pervasive in British life than in more purely bourgeois cultures. The feudal distinctions of prestige have never been explicitly challenged. The flagrant injustices have been gradually corrected by the forces of a free society, but these developments have never challenged the basic feudal ethos of the culture. Hence the British are "snobs" even while they elaborate a system of liberty superior to that of nations which boast a "Bill of Rights." The British have no Bill of Rights, but the standards of justice embodied in such bills are contained within the historical standards by which British thought is guided. These standards guarantee every form of political justice, but unfortunately they do not guarantee freedom from snobbism in the nonpolitical relations of the community.