

Response to R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson

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Reinhold Niebuhr dedicated his life and writings to a theological project he described as “the defense and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age” (“Intellectual Biography,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 3). His formidable powers of persuasion captivated those in his orbit and can still be evidenced in the sermons, journalistic articles, and full-length works that remain with us today. A common thread throughout was his belief that his theocentric perspective could give meaning to the tumultuous events of the mid-20th century where man-made alternatives could not. Demonstrating this fact required Niebuhr to navigate the largely separate worlds of theology and politics with great dexterity and nuance. Indeed, his *Irony of American History* and its enduring legacy today can be seen as the apotheosis of this remarkable effort.

Aspiring public theologians would be well advised to emulate Niebuhr, but his methods are not above reproach. Niebuhr could be frustratingly vague about his own religious convictions and would on occasion submerge the theological presuppositions underpinning his political writings to appeal to secular audiences. Such reticence was partially a result of the fact that Niebuhr, like many post-Kantian liberal Protestants, found many mysteries of the faith beyond the epistemic reach of human understanding. Nevertheless, H. Richard Niebuhr, his brother and most insightful critic, has a more practical explanation: “[Niebuhr] speaks to men who do not know that they live between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and their own resurrection ... [a]nd in speaking to them he takes their ground ...” (“Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of History,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr, Theology, History and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 99).

Niebuhr’s remarkable popularity with today’s political class would appear to suggest that this approach continues to pay dividends. Look closer, however, and many so-called acolytes appear completely unfamiliar with his theological writings; much of what is labeled “Niebuhrian” amounts to a diluted or unrecognizable form of the original. The fact that historian Andrew Bacevich failed to mention Niebuhr’s theological grounding in his introduction to the 2008 republished edition of *Irony* has only perpetuated this misunderstanding. Moreover, Niebuhr’s occasional tendency to elevate the justification of the Christian faith over its

defense has left his fundamental religious convictions open to speculation from even those sympathetic to his thought. For instance, the late John Patrick Diggins believed, “Whether a supreme being exists was of less importance to Niebuhr than the hope that Christianity holds out for mankind” (*Why Niebuhr Now?* 110).

R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson would appear to disagree with such criticisms of Niebuhr’s approach. Christians, as they explain in their review, must translate religious motivations into universal values to gain currency in the pluralistic marketplace of ideas. The individual committed to speaking openly about his or her theological presuppositions appears left with a stark choice: either to “deman[d] the conversion from all members of the nation” or to “withdra[w] from [wider society].” Holder and Josephson surely believe there is more room in the public square for religious voices than that afforded by this construct; their writings in *The Irony of Barack Obama* suggest as much. A more fruitful model at minimum would be the conversationalist approach advocated by religious ethicist Jeffrey Stout, who rightly argues that our pluralistic society is robust enough to allow “[a]ll democratic citizens ... to express whatever premises actually serve as reasons for their claims” (*Democracy and Tradition*, 10).

Niebuhr was most authentic (and persuasive) when striking the right balance between defense and justification of the Christian faith or, in other words, speaking confidently about his Christian beliefs and explaining how they shed unique light on America’s role in the world. Such assertiveness did not prohibit him from allowing that those who did not share his theological presuppositions could reach some of his conclusions. Nevertheless, the eternal truths of the Christian faith held far deeper value for Niebuhr than their temporal relevance, as is especially clear in sermonic essays such as “The Suffering Servant and the Son of Man,” in *Beyond Tragedy*.

Perhaps the best judge of whether this critique is fair is Niebuhr himself. In correspondence with his first biographer, Niebuhr expressed regret over the fact that “people agree with me on political matters, if they do, without in any way taking my religious convictions seriously” (Reinhold Niebuhr to June Bingham, Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Room, n.d., Box 26). Such reception of Niebuhr’s thought — evident in his own day and widespread today — does a disservice both to the author and, more importantly, to a reader looking for greater meaning in an increasingly turbulent world.