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CHAPTER 19

After Niebuhr

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Between the time I agreed to write this essay and the time I began to put words on the page, I turned fifty years old. So, if this wasn't true before, I have definitely reached a time for thinking about how I want to spend a finite number of remaining years, how my life experiences and those of my students are diverging, and what legacies I hope to pass to upcoming generations. In sharp contrast to my parents and teachers who came of age during World War II, as well as my own experience growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, my students have no personal memories of the Reagan era, a key turning point in efforts by conservatives to dismantle the social contract represented by the New Deal. Only the oldest among my students remember the Persian Gulf War of 1991, and if a person's first memories of public events are from about the age of five, then such memories for a 2009 college freshman may well be of Fox News advocating Bill Clinton's impeachment for lying about sex. As far as I can tell, life after the Reagan Revolution is normal reality for this generation. Their normal religion has little to do with taking stands for democracy and civil rights in a style championed by Niebuhr, much less with the old-school social gospel against which he defined his early positions. Their normal religion refers to conservative evangelicals in alliance with Republicans. My students are not necessarily happy about this, but they have little experience of any other version of reality.

Niebuhr turned fifty during World War II. He grew up before World War I in a society without cars, television, consumer culture as we know it, voting rights for blacks and women, or the recognition of Jews and Catholics as 100 percent Americans — to say nothing of airports, iPods, or the Internet. Most of my students do not recognize his name. True, the idea of realistic or pragmatic compromise is part of their common sense (without giving Niebuhr credit for this, perhaps we can posit it as a Niebuhrian habit of mind) and, although they were born after the Cold War ended and may not know the meaning of the term "Munich analogy," they have been taught to fear appeasing people "like Hitler" and to support geopolitical struggle against "terror" and "Islamo-fascism." Nevertheless, when I consider what to teach them about the legacy of Niebuhr and the tradition of social Christianity in which he worked, I am not sure how to proceed. When I was in college, my mentors encouraged me to find my place within a living movement that we all presupposed was a live option for me; coming to terms with Niebuhr was part and parcel of deciding how to respond. But today it seems less clear that his tradition is alive as an option that students can seriously consider, and I am uncertain whether Niebuhr matters to them. Let's call them a generation after Niebuhr — not knowing much about him and not necessarily presupposing a background that would lead them to care. If one speaks to them of Niebuhr, their response is likely to be apathy based on absence.

At the same time, the word "after" in the phrase "after Niebuhr" does not solely imply absence. Consider how the terms "post-industrial" and "post-colonial" do not mean that industrial plants and the legacies of colonialism lack ongoing importance; consider also how the word "post-modern" often implies "hyper-modern" or "late modern" as much as it signals modernity's irrelevance. "After Niebuhr" has an equally slippery meaning. It may imply a kind of obsolescence, but may also call attention to a distinctive new stage within an ongoing legacy. All this remains to be seen.

It is risky to compare generations because differences within the same generation (based, for example, on race, wealth, or location on the globe) are typically more important than differences between generations. However, if we narrow our focus to a tradition of U.S. Protestant thought and its related institutions, which runs from the social gospel through mid-century Niebuhrians to liberation theologies to current trends in the world of liberal seminaries, church networks, religious activists, and academic discourse about political theology — then it may be useful to reflect on generational trends related to Niebuhr. There are many historical removes between Niebuhr and people today: from his early years around the turn of the century, to his classic work as a writer and activist responding to the

Great Depression and the threat of fascism, through his later work (variously described as mature, cynical, realistic, or neo-colonial) as part of a cold war liberal establishment in the 1940s and 1950s, to his declining health and moderate left turn in the 1960s coupled with the emergence of a generation of his students (some defensive of his reputation, others rebellious), through my own generation that was bombarded in the 1970s and 1980s with conflicting claims about what he would say, to recent years characterized by many forms of forgetting and remembering him.

For current purposes let us narrow this list to four generations: (1) Niebuhr's contemporaries at the peak of his influence after 1940, who were directly engaged with him in the context of the Cold War and optimism about the future of the New Deal; (2) a second generation mentored by the first group between World War II and the mid-1960s, for whom the dominant questions were how to relate to Niebuhr's prestige and adapt his ideas to changing circumstances; (3) a generation taught by the second one during the next quarter century, for whom the theme is ambivalence about Niebuhr in a context of conservative ascendancy and changes in academia; and (4) recent years in which the trend is absence and apathy, at times coupled with efforts to revive interest. No doubt, within each generation's internal complexity each of these four themes — direct engagement, relating to Niebuhr as a broker of cultural capital, ambivalence, and apathy — has described some people's experience all along. Moreover, it bears repeating that we should consider generational change only alongside (not as a substitute for) factors that cut across generations. Nevertheless, trends among these themes do matter.

For the first group, Niebuhr was directly present — often as a flesh-and-blood colleague, and at least as a major contemporary writer — and the dominant theme was an engagement at the opposite extreme from the apathy I have noted today. My goal in this essay is not to expand on the scholarly discussion of Niebuhr's work during this period. So much has been written about it that saying anything fresh or distinctive is difficult; I have little to add to what I wrote in *Building a Protestant Left*, my study of transformations in *Christianity and Crisis* magazine (*C&C*), which Niebuhr co-founded in 1941.[1] Given Niebuhr's emphasis on pushing as far

1. Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.) See also my "Reflections on the Future of the Protestant Left," *Religious Socialism: A Journal for People of Faith and Socialism* (Spring 2000): 9-11. I refer readers to my book for additional bibliography, but good orientations include Charles Kegley, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984); Richard Harries, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); and Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Remaking of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

toward praxis for justice as is realistic, the question of what counts as the "real situation" is critical for his method. By studying *C&C* we can explore Niebuhr's evolving sense of what counted as the priority issues in relation to which he sought to be realistic.[2] We can trace how Niebuhr himself, as well as a key group that carried his tradition forward after his death, related to emerging public events and shifting socio-political coalitions. However, this is not the place to rehash such issues, nor other aspects of Niebuhr's work that scholars have addressed using other methods and evidence. Let us simply assume a stage of direct engagement with Niebuhr as a baseline from which to explore later changes.

Turning to our second generation, the one taught by Niebuhr and his contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s, a key thing to notice is what the term "Niebuhrian" evoked for them: gatekeeping, cultural capital, and a sense of connection with a recognized insider to the liberal establishment. No doubt each generation should consider the trade-offs that this implies. However, the questions about such matters were acute for a cohort of students who were highly dependent on Niebuhr's prestige while at the same time they were confronting his limitations in fresh and contentious ways amid the conflicts of the 1960s. At this time Niebuhr was pressed in ways somewhat analogous to the way Greg Grandin later critiqued Henry Kissinger. Grandin commented in 2007 that Kissinger was willing "to say what those in power want to hear in order to gain not so much influence as the illusion of influence, the old man's 'advice' serving as cover for decisions already made."[3] My point is not to conflate Kissinger's and Niebuhr's

2. Niebuhr's long-time colleague, John Coleman Bennett, commented that to understand Niebuhr, "We must move back and forth between his books, which provide the theological frame for his thought, and his articles and editorials, which show his response to contemporary events. . . . The dialectical structure of his thought as a whole often leaves us with a delicate balance between opposite positions . . . [and] it is only in the light of his concrete decisions for action that we can be sure where his emphasis finally lies" (Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," in Kegley, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 100-101). *Christianity and Crisis* is a fruitful place to study how Niebuhr enacted this back-and-forth concretely.

3. Greg Grandin, "Sucking Up to P," *London Review of Books*, accessed 11/20/2007 at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n23/grano1_.html. See also William McGuire King, "The Reform

views — although *C&C* did endorse aspects of Kissinger's thinking at times, Niebuhr usually steered to his left — but rather to use Grandin's comment as a clue to the difficulty of assessing Niebuhr's impact in a world of privilege.

Building a Protestant Left underlines the strengths and benefits, as well as the compromises and limitations, that were bound up with Niebuhr's approach. Often, in retrospect, it is hard to assess the primary effect of Niebuhr's commentaries about political choices and the ambiguities of human striving in a fallen world. In some respects his analyses presupposed "what those in power wanted to hear" as part of realism, while adding little critique other than an idea that one should feel humble and slightly guilty about it, perhaps assuaged by an assurance of grace and a self-image of mature responsibility. At the same time, the access provided by Niebuhr's approach, plus his ability to throw his weight behind certain insiders more than others (e.g., Hubert Humphrey more than Kissinger), enabled him to make interventions that, while less ambitious than some people would have preferred, had the virtue of making a larger policy impact.

For example, after Niebuhr defended scenarios for destroying Russian cities with atomic bombs "in retaliation with all possible restraint," one critic complained that "Christian conscience in wartime seems to have chiefly the effect (certainly important but scarcely decisive) of making Christians do reluctantly what military necessity requires."[4] Yet when Niebuhr turned against U.S. Vietnam policy, even though he did not do so in radical terms, he made a larger impact than did most radical sermons by draft-card-burning seminarians. I am not calling for either/or choices among these judgments, but rather for analyzing the trade-offs pragmatically, case-by-case. Approached from this direction, there is limited formal disagreement between Niebuhrian methods and radical contextual theologies such as Latin American liberation theology. True, Niebuhrians tend to stress critical awareness of the ambiguities of all human striving, analyzed from a standpoint of divine judgment on pride. Liberation theologies, on

Establishment and the Ambiguities of Influence," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America,* ed. William Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 168-92, and my discussion in *Building a Protestant Left,* pp. xxxiv-xxxviii.

4. Georgia Harkness and Robert Calhoun, "Two Dissenting Opinions," *Christianity and Crisis* (December 25, 1950): 175. This was a response to the 1950 Dun Commission Report of the Federal Council of Churches on U.S. nuclear policy; for more discussion see *Building a Protestant Left,* pp. 30-34.

the other hand, tend to valorize their own cultural-political standpoints and charge Niebuhr with speaking primarily about elite white males while purporting to speak about God's perspective on universal experience. Yet, at key levels of their arguments, both emphasize targeted contextual judgments and effective interventions aimed at greater social justice. Although their tensions are real, these are based less on thinking carefully about context than on the particular standpoints and contexts they presuppose, or, in other words, the communities from which and to which they speak.

In any case, there is no doubt that Niebuhr, like Kissinger, did wield significant power, and both could use their influence for better or for worse; where we lack consensus is on the question of how to judge this. Here again we can clarify key issues by approaching Niebuhr's legacy in light of *C&C*'s transformation. John Coleman Bennett, who was not much younger than Niebuhr and whose leftward turn in the 1960s both broadly paralleled and significantly influenced Niebuhr's turn, became *C&C*'s top leader between Niebuhr's stroke in 1952 and his death in 1971. Bennett and people from the following generation, including both moderates and people who embraced liberation theologies, carried the journal forward until it folded in 1993. However, *C&C*'s writers also included some of the key neo-conservatives who, extrapolating from and recontextualizing aspects of Niebuhr's work in an effort to disassociate him from liberal positions, hijacked or rescued his reputation depending on whose story one accepts.[5] By studying the disputes of these factions in *C&C,* we can trace their process of polarization, beginning in the 1950s. The conflict reached a critical stage in the early 1970s, when, according to the journal's leaders, the neoconservatives were belatedly shown the door at *C&C.* From the neoconservative viewpoint, they abandoned *C&C* in disgust for more virtuous precincts such as the American Enterprise Institute and (after 1990) *First Things* magazine, places that have been markedly better connected with government and corporate elites in recent years.

All kinds of Niebuhrians — academic protégés, clergy who cited him in sermons to bolster a sense of public purpose and heroic masculinity, and "atheists for Niebuhr" in academia and public life whose sense of moral purpose was enhanced through reading him — had personal investments

5. For example, Richard John Neuhaus, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); for a critique see Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

bound up with the cultural capital his name evoked. Such investments could be straightforward and oriented to positive benefits; for example, one might land a job through a Union Seminary degree or uphold the reputation of liberal Protestants through emphasizing that they had a voice at the State Department and *The New York Times*. The investments could also be more conflicted and focused on evading negative results, insofar as Niebuhr played the role of gatekeeper deciding (or being invoked as a warrant for declaring) what positions were insufficiently "chastened" and thus beyond the pale of the "responsible." Either way, when Niebuhr became an authoritative father figure within a tradition of liberal social thought, this produced both fierce filial loyalties and explosive "Oedipal" reactions (in the broad sense evoked by neo-Freudian cultural theory) from young people who felt a need to "kill the father" whom he represented.

As the New Deal coalition fell apart in the 1960s and 1970s such dynamics intensified, with many attendant confusions, passions, and efforts by all sides to blame each other for the problems. Since Niebuhr's health was slipping in the 1960s and he died in 1971, anyone could try to claim his authority. By no means had the Oedipal tensions between generations, nor the battles among liberationist vs. centrist vs. neo-conservative Niebuhrians, ceased by the time my generation entered the picture in the two decades after 1970. Niebuhr was still invoked as a gatekeeper in many contexts that scholars of U.S. Christianity could not avoid, and in this regard the second generation's experience continued. However, things were changing. There was a growing perception that liberal Protestantism was declining, and Niebuhr conferred less cultural capital (at times even negative capital) in the academic world — in beleaguered liberal seminaries, religious studies departments in public universities that were cutting back on Christian studies and shifting toward more global and supposedly value-free modes of studying religion, and interdisciplinary networks such as American Studies that were often dismissive toward cold war liberals and mainstream religions of all stripes. Importantly, these shifts occurred at a time when the academic job market became so cutthroat that small differences in prestige could make or break entire careers.

By this time, people who worked in the tradition of social Christianity, for which Niebuhr was the standard-bearer from the 1930s to the 1960s, increasingly focused on Niebuhr's limitations. They continued to stress vigorous yet pragmatic work for justice, grounding in Protestant institutions, and using theological discourse to critique oppression. However, they

pointed to such issues as (1) Niebuhr's linkages to New Deal politics that were coming into question;[6] (2) his limited engagement with feminism, queer theory, racial/ethnic politics of difference, and related theoretical innovations such as post-structuralism and cultural studies, all of which transformed political and academic discourse after the 1960s; and (3) his grounding in nationalist and consensus models of U.S. society as opposed to global and post-nationalist models.[7] In addition, a gap steadily widened between Niebuhr's characteristic modes of communication (using print media and traveling by train to lecture at campus ministries) and emerging modes of networking and sharing information that were more Internet-intensive and popular-culture-savvy.

It was second nature for Niebuhrians to resist many of these changes on the grounds that the people advocating them should be more self-critical about the limits of human capacity for progress, less utopian in the sense of being unrealistic and counterproductive, and more hostile toward U.S. individualism. Despite the efforts of left-wing Niebuhrians to deploy such logic against the utopianism of free marketeers and military crusaders, the discourse often unfolded in ways that drew left-liberal Niebuhrians into defensive dialogues with religious people to their right, thus turning them away from conversations with potential allies on their left. This was a major cause of the decline in the cultural capital of citing Niebuhr. Within many scholarly conversations of the 1970s and 1980s, introducing Niebuhrian categories evoked an image of stale intellectual food: if it could be judged healthful at all, it already seemed well digested. Shifting the metaphor, citing Niebuhr had acquired so much baggage that it often functioned as dead weight holding back emerging discussions.

I first read Niebuhr as a college student in 1977, six years after his

6. By this time advocacy for the New Deal could decreasingly be presupposed either as a good thing (from the perspective of radicals) or even as an up-and-running reality (to be defended by those who supported it), as opposed to a historical artifact that had been decimated through a combination of sustained attack by Republicans and compromise by Democrats — a combination that moved the political center of gravity steadily rightward.

7. Analyses of Niebuhr's limits include Beverly Harrison, "Niebuhr: Locating the Limits," *Christianity and Crisis* (February 17, 1986): 35-39; Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 54-80; Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 144-54; and West, *American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 150-65.

death, a quarter century after his stroke, and forty-five years after he published *Moral Man and Immoral Society.* I did so at the urging of a Republican friend who hoped that *Moral Man* could turn me away from neo-Marxian social analysis and liberation theologies. A few years later, at Yale Divinity School (as I've recounted elsewhere),

> I commonly heard political and theological positions like *C&C*'s denigrated in neo-conservative terms: *C&C* was an example of the false consciousness of a new class of cultural elites, a long-discredited replay of an uncritically optimistic social gospel, a non-serious example of the decline of real theology, a betrayal of tradition disguised as an effort at revitalization, and an accommodation to a liberal culture that required transcendent critique. Niebuhr's name came up repeatedly as a warrant for these judgments. I was convinced that this was bad social thought, since I found pluralist and neo-Marxian approaches more illuminating than neo-conservatism on most issues. And since the theological arguments I found in the best texts of *C&C* bore such a tangential resemblance to the characterizations of "radical theologies" that were being rejected, I increasingly understood that the gap between these perceptions was a matter of paradigm conflict: liberation theologies were written to address one set of problems, and judged according to another.[8]

Did this paradigm conflict create an unbridgeable gulf between Niebuhr and emergent approaches? Here we must tread carefully since I am not trained as a theologian and this no doubt implies that Niebuhr's work has certain depths and weaknesses that I fail to perceive — just as my training in American Studies allows me to grasp nuances of his activism that specialists in religious thought may miss. By the time I entered the picture, so many theologians had written about Niebuhr that detailed study on this front seemed likely to yield diminishing returns, and I approached him more as a historian and cultural critic. However, despite the difficulty of translating between paradigms and the risk that my approach might miss certain theological nuances, I felt that some of Niebuhr's key theological ideas could inform insightful critique across both paradigms: in particular, his attention to the dangers of pride and sloth, his language about sin (defined in ways that are intelligible in terms of both theological-biblical and sociological-empirical verification), and his efforts to think about human action "from God's point of view" in relation to a long sweep of history.

8. *Building a Protestant Left,* p. 267.

In addition, some aspects of Niebuhr's critical approach — for example, his skepticism about liberalism and his propensity to destabilize overly simple and/or complacent assumptions about morality and identity — overlap considerably with a postmodern anti-progressive idiom that has been fashionable in recent decades; we might compare how one can make certain critiques of the mixed benefits of modernity by citing either Max Weber or Michel Foucault, even though it is now more fashionable to do so by citing Foucault.[9] Approached in this light, the question to ask about the paradigm conflict noted above is not whether it renders Niebuhr obsolete, but rather how to relate him concretely to new situations:

> Which *particular* sins, shortcomings, and prideful acts were under scrutiny? (In the postmodern idiom, which were being targeted for deconstruction?) Which underdogs in what power hierarchies were being supported? Were they the most appropriate ones? I dismissed pretensions to a neutral scrutiny of all the possibilities, whether these were pretensions of speaking objectively, as if from nowhere, or of speaking contextually but trying to be situated everywhere at the same time. . . . At its inception, *C&C* had appealed to the transcendent power of God to judge prideful human acts as made concrete in Adolf Hitler . . . [it] had launched attacks on the complacent acceptance of liberal capitalism — unambiguously in the 1930s, and as a significant theme (however overshadowed at times) even at the height of the Cold War. But at Yale in the Reagan era, the Niebuhrian God primarily attacked human pride made concrete — not in contemporary fascists and corporate oligarchs — but in the supposed accommodation of liberation theologians (and other radicals) to U.S. dominant culture. It was as if the German Confessing Church that opposed Nazism came back — but unable to distinguish between the pride of Hitler and the pride of Jews who resisted the Holocaust.[10]

9. To trace Niebuhr's dialogues with trends in philosophy, history, and critical thought see Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001); Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David W. Noble, *The End of American History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); and West, *American Evasion of Philosophy.*

10. *Building a Protestant Left,* p. 268.

In light of my analysis of power and policy in the U.S., it seemed to me reasonably clear that the best forms of liberation theology were (on balance) the most appropriate applications of the core Niebuhrian principles of working for justice and addressing tyranny by building countervailing power. I hoped that by tracing the application of Niebuhrian rhetoric over time, I could convince my colleagues of this point: they should stop using Niebuhr to resist radical theologies and start using him to learn from them.

Note how my address to "colleagues" in the previous sentence points my argument backward in the generational analysis we have been pursuing. It presses relatively conservative Niebuhrians to be less dismissive of liberationists. And, in general, it harmonizes with the first thing I ever wrote about Niebuhrians as I experienced them in the 1970s, which was a song called "Mexican Doxology." This song describes interactions among a beggar in the streets of Mexico City, a "preacher with a Bible and a Che Guevara hat" who urges the beggar to stand up for his rights, and a man passing by in a limousine who first tells the beggar, "it's just got to be this way" and then orders a death squad to assassinate the preacher. In the wake of the murder,

> The fat man told his wife meanwhile
> As they chomped away at a steak
> I'd like to tell that commie a thing or two about Jesus
> But now it's just too late
> Gotta keep the economy going
> Gotta keep the GNP growing
> Gotta keep this Cadillac rolling
> And praise our God from whom all these blessings are flowing.

As I dimly recognized from the outset and came to understand better over time, even a very conservative Niebuhrian would not perceive himself mirrored in my song's villain. My fat man is a composite of two things: a quasi-Niebuhrian rhetoric about how things "just have to be," blended with a complacent and relatively apolitical style of religion that all Niebuhrians oppose. Most Niebuhrians see themselves as not just rejecting the fat man's theology, but doing so in ways far superior to a radical preacher who quotes Bob Marley. (My lyric is partially open to such thinking; despite its clear outrage at the fat man, it gives mixed messages about

the preacher's pragmatics.) Thus my reason for mentioning the song is not because it offers a nuanced analysis of Niebuhr, but rather as a raw example of how I, personally, first experienced Niebuhrian rhetoric in the 1970s. I assimilated it as part of a standard repertoire of centrist Lutheranism; it came blended with a heavy dose of complacency, and I perceived the cutting edge of its criticism being directed against the left — including in Latin American contexts where this could be a life-and-death matter.

One might object that this was based on misunderstandings: I was badly taught or (more likely) a bad pupil. And, although I was not prepared to take back my critique of conservative Niebuhrians, by the time I finished my research for *Building a Protestant Left,* I had gained a great deal of respect for the contributions of Niebuhr's generation, especially during the 1930s. I also gained respect for the longer trajectory of their efforts from the 1930s through the early postwar era into the 1960s. John Bennett especially grew in my esteem; he emerged as something like the hero of the middle section of my book before passing the torch to younger people such as Dorothee Sölle and Cornel West, and by extension to their students.[11] Nevertheless, for whatever my experience is worth, it provides an example of how a student could begin by being groomed to join Niebuhr's tradition, yet end up ambivalent about his ideas. At the end of the century, the signals given by the word "Niebuhrian" were mixed; his ongoing strengths seemed to be roughly balanced by his limitations.

So, what shall we say if we focus less on looking back toward earlier generations and more on Niebuhr's legacy for the future? Today's students often have teachers from my generation, and many of the factors that fueled that generation's mixed response are still relevant. However, Niebuhr is less important today as a gatekeeper than he was in the past, especially for our second generation. Nor is he among the most promising figures to whom today's students would look, insofar as they seek role models for pushing as far as possible toward radical cultural criticism and social activism — although his work in the 1930s is a partial exception to this rule. When students are still required to read him, they are likely to respond to him as a voice from the past and as a cautionary critic (sometimes outright opponent) of many activist efforts since the mid-1960s. It requires con-

11. In this connection, although they were not major forces at *C&C*, I want to recognize my own beloved teachers David Noble, Roland Delattre, and Letty Russell, each from a generation between Bennett and West.

scious effort to relate him to current debates about such things as queer theory, post-nationalism, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and post-structuralism. Moreover, the matrix of institutions within which he worked has been reconfigured; no longer can we assume a New Deal coalition which once could produce presidents like Lyndon Johnson, nor the church networks allied with it such as Union Theological Seminary (once a national powerhouse), the National and World Councils of Churches (once prestigious voices) or mainline Protestant bureaucracies (once seen as reasonably authoritative and representative).

To evoke a new context for assessing Niebuhr's legacy, my conclusion to *Building a Protestant Left* quoted from Bruce Springsteen's record *The Ghost of Tom Joad.* It compared Protestant memories of Niebuhr's work from the 1930s to Springsteen's evocation of John Steinbeck's character from *The Grapes of Wrath.* Both are "ghosts" that we might remember and even "wait for," but not expect to see returning in triumph to the grim, lonely, and violent post-industrial landscape that Springsteen describes.[12] In this light, we need to rethink the common image of Niebuhr's representing a relatively pessimistic outlook toward progressive change, compared to more radical voices such as Springsteen's. In some ways Niebuhr appears so optimistic about the New Deal coalition that he appears almost utopian by today's standards.

Turning in this context to the question of how upcoming generations will relate to liberal Protestantism, it may be useful to contrast my passionate assault on the fat man of "Mexican Doxology" (a third-generation response to a legacy that seemed all too powerful) with Bob Dylan's resigned words about the future at the end of "North Country Blues."[13] Dylan narrates a contrast between earlier years when the "red iron ore outfits were plenty" and a current situation with "cardboard filled windows and old men on benches." The town has been decimated by corporate globalization as jobs go to South America, where miners will "work almost for nothing." Stores are going out of business, and the future of its youth is uncertain, "because there ain't nothing here now to hold them."

Although Dylan speaks about a town, his words evoke the situation in

12. Bruce Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," from *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Columbia Records, 1995).

13. Bob Dylan, "North Country Blues," from *The Times They Are A'Changin'* (Columbia Records, 1964).

many liberal churches. If we try to imagine a spark of hope in such churches, one that might keep their youth from drifting away with nothing to hold them, a key task is to articulate positive memories that connect past models of social Christianity to the present. When I speak of this generation's apathy about Niebuhr, I think largely about its limited investment in such traditions. By contrast, if I attend a jazz club or a concert in a musical genre such as alt-country or conscious hip-hop, I commonly have conversations with informed and engaged students about the musical influences on the artists; for example, the way a jazz group builds on Thelonius Monk and Eddie Palmieri, or the way a hip-hop artist relates to Stevie Wonder. If my students have not been exposed to a link in the chain of innovation leading to music that they love, they often follow up my suggestions with energy and passion.

Possibly I am jaded or traumatized by where I live, so I hope people from other places and social spaces can weigh in with contrary evidence. However, this is the sort of spark that I often experience as lacking on the religious front. My point is not to mark my fiftieth birthday by launching an old man's complaint about "these kids these days"; on the contrary, I am trying to clarify what strikes me as an understandable response. Here in the Bible Belt, left-leaning and intellectually vital students often assume that if they hope to maintain a self-image as both moral and religious, they need to distance themselves from orthodox Christianity, perhaps by embracing Unitarianism, Buddhism, or neo-pagan spirituality. This makes sense insofar as most of the Christianity they have experienced is often outrageously anti-intellectual and politically either complacent or overtly conservative. If such students try to rethink the Christianity they have learned — if, for example, they find a liberal church or study the history of social Christianity — they face suspicions that they must be slow-witted or right-wing if they are interested in Christianity. Exacerbating this problem, liberal Protestants are often behind the curve in engaging skillfully with popular culture and Internet-based networking; thus even if young liberal Christians can defend themselves as bright and progressive, they may still be perceived as boring and out of touch with popular culture.

Two aspects of Niebuhr's legacy may prove useful as part of strategies to recover some of the vitality I am trying to imagine. The first is his example of how one can thrive as a religious intellectual and activist, not in the sense of reproducing his exact ideas and activities, but learning from the general way he lived out his vocation. Niebuhr pursued sophisticated dia-

logues with leading intellectuals of his day, was deeply committed to socio-political praxis, and spoke frankly and profoundly about socio-political conflict and ambiguity — all at the same time. He sought to be both pragmatically effective in making day-to-day differences, yet to be guided by a vision of justice and grace to push as far as possible toward larger ideals, even in the face of awareness that the results would be imperfect.

Even those who find Niebuhr too cautious, technocratic, and/or limited by male Eurocentric standpoints can learn from this model of leadership and reflection. Often the intellectual food served by evangelicals strikes students as rather thin; in such cases Niebuhr's best books should be part of the menu. In contexts where direct action or social service models for religious praxis seem too limited (despite their undoubted importance) and people desire to couple them with work for underlying structural change, Niebuhr is worth studying both for the precedents he set and for his depth of reflection on the ambiguities involved. Moreover, even people who depart significantly from Niebuhr's model can understand his work in its best light, granting him the benefit of doubt for what he sought to accomplish in situations where (to evoke Marx) people make history but not under the conditions they might have preferred. For example, although *C&C* in the 1940s and 1950s was more cautious than the journals and intellectuals valorized by today's academic left, it was also more daring than the church-based readers to whom it hoped its views would trickle down. Its pragmatism played a significant role in keeping alive a tradition of democratic socialist and anti-militarist critique from the 1930s, through an era in which it was highly embattled, to its resurgence in the 1960s.

Second, and related more closely to Niebuhr's specific ideas, he may be a resource for people who desire to move beyond simply recalling "ghosts" of the 1930s, toward rebuilding a class-conscious politics reminiscent of the New Deal and democratic socialist tradition — a politics that works toward taxing the rich, redistributing wealth more equitably, supporting labor organizing and public control of the media, strengthening the social safety net through national health insurance comparable to other industrialized nations, and channeling resources toward parks, the arts, education, and other efforts to improve the quality of life and strengthen the public sphere. Even in Niebuhr's most conservative years, when he was equally prone to attack socialists as utopians and incipient totalitarians as he was to defend class-conscious aspects of the New Deal against Republicans, he presupposed a domestic economic vision that would place him near the left wing of to-

day's Democratic Party. In the 1930s he was a socialist who attacked the New Deal from the left and threw his weight behind a wide array of grassroots organizing efforts. Insofar as Niebuhr later embraced status quo economic policies as a reasonable compromise in a fallen world, he was making peace with policies to the left of most contemporary Democrats.

None of this implies that we should forget Niebuhr's limitations. Among the most serious is the frequent tendency of Niebuhrian discourse to link U.S. religion with neo-colonial military adventures. True, as the intervention in Iraq illustrates, it is useful to revisit Niebuhr's arguments about the need to conduct foreign policy with a realistic sense of limits to power and cooperation with organizations like the United Nations, not as an arrogant crusade based on ignorance, wishful thinking, and efforts at quasi-Christian mission (not to speak of criminal aggression based on deliberate lies). While Niebuhr did rethink his early support for U.S. Vietnam policy, it is not wholly edifying to evoke Niebuhr in this context, given how neo-conservatives and so-called liberal hawks promoted the attack on Iraq using far-fetched Munich analogies (Saddam Hussein as akin to Hitler, "Islamo-fascism" as akin to Nazism) and naïve or disingenuous confidence in U.S. leaders — stances all too easy to relate to ideologies from the 1950s that Niebuhr sometimes shared.[14] Thinking about quasi-Niebuhrian justifications for this war, we might recall Marx once again for his comment that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce, except that the consequences in Iraq are so much more grave than farcical. It would have been immeasurably better to listen before the Iraq War to voices who learned in the 1960s how to critique Munich analogies run amuck, as opposed to retracing Niebuhr's steps now for help in cutting our losses.

Another limitation of much Niebuhrian discourse is its tendency toward non-constructive nostalgia. If we try to imagine revitalized coalitions that can work effectively for economic equality, it is clear that these coali-

14. Peter Beinart, "Rehabilitation of the Cold-War Liberal," *The New York Times* (April 30, 2006), accessed online; Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 2003); Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See also Beinart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals — and Only Liberals — Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Anatol Lieven, "Liberal Hawk Down," *The Nation* (October 25, 2004): 29-35; Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *Atlantic Monthly* 300, no. 4 (November 2007): 82-96; and Gary Chartier, "Niebuhr's Ghost," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 5, no. 1 (2007): 91-115.

tions must avoid being paralyzed by divide-and-conquer tactics that have been perfected by the right and enabled by the left's internal divisiveness. Old-time Niebuhrian liberals tend to agree heartily with this admonition and then proceed to lay it accusingly at the feet of feminists and multiculturalists who stress identity politics.[15] However, it is better to proceed by avoiding an approach that blames the left's weaknesses mainly on the politics of recognition and imagines turning back the clock to golden years before such issues gained momentum. Although there is no doubt that certain aspects of multiculturalism have been useful for conservative divide-and-conquer tactics, and it will likely be impossible to evade all zero-sum choices between efforts at economic justice and cultural/legal recognition, I would stress two points. First, coalitions have split as often due to *resistance* to identity politics as they have from an excess of identity politics, and, second, it is often possible to minimize such zero-sum choices. People inattentive to multicultural issues — including the ways that injuries of class are lived through racialized and gendered/sexed experience — are no less complicit than multiculturalists in the success of divide-and-conquer strategies that weakened the classic New Deal coalition. We need forward-looking (not nostalgic) visions incorporating issues of both recognition and redistribution.[16]

As part of a generation ambivalent about Niebuhr, it is hard for me to judge his legacy for later generations that have experienced him less as a living authority and more as an absence. Without taking back my comparison between many liberal Protestant institutions and the town in "North Country Blues," since it is simply a fact that many churches fit this bill, two questions remain unsettled. How many people have given in to despair? What will be the response of those who have not given up? Also unclear is how to assess the growing strength of a group that we might call "stealth liberal Protestants" — self-identified evangelicals who are liberal by many measures (think, for example, of Jimmy Carter) despite the stereotype that most evangelicals are conservative and anti-intellectual. Many people overestimate the decline and underestimate the promise of liberal

15. For example, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992); see also Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

16. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

Protestant institutions. Despite their decreased power compared to the 1950s, we should not forget their substantial ongoing resources, both intellectual and institutional. Far more than pundits suspect, churches and associated networks that provide a sense of community and progressive commitments have significant potential to attract people who have been alienated by the complacency that often characterizes the mainline.[17] In this context, the memory of Niebuhr and his wider tradition is important and underdeveloped. I hope that upcoming generations will draw on Niebuhr's legacy to carry forward the best aspects, and leave behind the less helpful ones, of the tradition for which he was such a central figure.

17. For more on overall trends in U.S. religion, see my *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).