

Reinhold Niebuhr on Tragedy, Irony, and Politics

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"Man stands under and in eternity. His imagination is quickened by the vision of an eternal good. Following that vision, he is constantly involved both in the sin of giving a spurious sanctity to his imperfect good and in the genuine creativity of seeking a higher good than he possesses."1 [1]

Realism as an approach to thinking about politics in general and to international politics in particular has been challenged as no longer the best way to approach these subjects--if it ever was. To its critics, the realities which shaped its distinctive concerns have largely been superseded by new ones for which the realist world view provides little light and offers poor guidance. When the primary actors in international relations were nation-states, realism may have made sense. Now, because of the forces of globalization, sub-national and super-national actors must assume a prominent place in the story. Where realists tended to treat nation-states as unitary actors with domestic regime principles largely discounted, a substantial body of scholarship now supports a liberal democratic peace theory. Finally, where realists focused on a "high politics" agenda of national security, military power, and the strategic use of force, what many now say is required is sustained attention to the "low politics" of trade, economic development, global cooperation, multi-lateral diplomacy. What is needed is not the "hard power" represented by military force, but the soft power of cultural affinity or democratic idealism and the "sticky" power of economic exchange.2 [2]

Champions of realism have responded that: nation-states retain their standing as the primary units in international relations, military force retains its usefulness, a condition of anarchy will still create pressures leading to conflict, even among democratic states, and issues of high politics are still relevant. Moreover, at least some of them insist, realism at its core is a

1 [1] Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 65.

2 [2] Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: The Free Press, 1992); Joseph Nye, The Paradox of American Power (New York : Oxford University Press, 2002); Walter Russell Mead, " America 's Sticky Power," Foreign Policy (March/April 2004).

reminder that in politics, especially including international politics, you don't always get what you want and that when you do, you discover that you may actually be worse off. In short, realism is about learning to think tragically. Thus John Mearsheimer, one of the academy's most prominent realists, titled his 2001 book on international relations The Tragedy of Great Power Politics and Robert Kaplan, contemporary journalism's most self-consciously realist writer, observed several years ago: "It is only by thinking tragically that you avoid tragedy in the first place."³ [3]

Though often associated with political realism, the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, I argue, offers a different vantage point in making the case for the continued relevance of realism. Like the realists, Niebuhr saw conflict as endemic to the human condition. He took seriously the reality of tragedy, acknowledging that occasions inevitably arise when political actors must knowingly choose among evils, yet he argued that the tragic perspective also has its limits. For that reason, he insisted on "irony" as, finally, the more appropriate lens for the interpretation of history and politics. From the standpoint of both faith and experience, he affirmed the essential goodness of life and that it is not always necessary to do evil in order that we may do good. This exploration of tragedy and realism, then, not only involves Niebuhr's critique of classical and modern political philosophies, but includes a debate within the realist approach itself.

Re-reading Niebuhr's work today, one can readily see reasons for thinking he may have spoken well for and to his time but that we have moved on. The arguments he made against pacifism and for American military preparedness in the 1930's were vindicated by the Second World War and the defeat of Nazism. One can still find pacifists and isolationists, but the moral consensus Niebuhr helped to forge that force could legitimately be used to address great moral and political evil remains largely in place, though not necessarily in the pulpits of America's mainline denominations.⁴ [4] Similarly, Niebuhr offered a sustained critique of ideas of world government that were popular in the inter and immediate post war period; these essays, too, read as interesting historical entries more than as trenchant commentary on proposals actively under discussion. The Cold War challenge posed by the marriage of Soviet power and Marxist ideology is another preoccupation of Niebuhr's work; with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the demise of the Soviet Union those concerns are clearly no longer our own. Finally, Niebuhr's emphasis on the limits of human reason parallels similar themes among post-modern and "constructivist" thinkers, though it is doubtful that those thinkers would accept the theological

3 [3] John Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York : W. W. Norton, 2001); Robert Kaplan, " America and the Tragic Limits of Imperialism," The Hedgehog Review, Spring 2003, p. 61; see also David Clinton, "The Relevance of Realism in the Post-Cold War World," in David Clinton, ed., The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations (Baton Rouge : LSU Press, 2007).

4 [4] Jean Bethke Elshtain, Just War Against Terror (New York : Basic Books, 2003), p. 112.

warrants Niebuhr offers for his views.⁵ [5] Indeed, one of the challenges that proponents for the continued relevance of Christian realism face is precisely the use of theological terms and biblical texts in an era that thinks of itself as post-Christian as well as post-modern. On the other hand, "tragedy" and "irony" do provide a vantage point from which to evaluate claims about the transformations allegedly being wrought by globalization, the liberal democratic peace, and the confrontation with political Islam.

What does it mean to think tragically and what insight does Christian realism add? Niebuhr, in approaching these questions, drew extensively on evidence offered by philosophy, history, social science, and psychology as ways to confirm and supplement the truths of biblical revelation. Nevertheless, because he regarded empiricist methodologies when applied to the study of human beings as inherently flawed, Niebuhr insisted on the appropriateness of categories drawn from Greek drama and biblical narrative to interpret the meaning of political events and observed patterns in history. The scientific method, he wrote, works best when the research question involves specific and narrow ends, but "every specific end is enmeshed in a vast system of ends and means" and we cannot judge the desirability of a specific end "without making value judgments about the total schemes of meaning in which such judgments are made."⁶ [6] Judgments of value necessarily involve philosophical and moral understandings that go beyond what the scientific method can ascertain. The perspective that Christian realism provides is meant to be just such a larger framework of meaning.

Christian realism As a young seminarian during the Progressive Era, Niebuhr shared the liberal Protestant faith in progress and in the essential benevolence of human beings. The twin experiences of the disillusionment following World War I and his "real world" experience as a pastor in Detroit for thirteen years in the inter-war period, however, deeply altered his views. There, Niebuhr discovered that social peace depended in significant ways on coercion; Detroit's industrialists could and did bring ideological, institutional, and political force to bear on the working class to keep them subdued. Forsaking his earlier views as naive, Niebuhr sought an approach that would help him make sense of his experience. While elements of the Marxist analysis and critique of bourgeois liberalism provided some insights, it was only when he undertook a serious examination of the work of St. Augustine that he realized he had found an approach to understanding the nature of man and his social life that provided the convincing vantage point he sought: "whatever the defects of the Augustine approach may be, we must

5 [5] Robin Lovin, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 133-135.

6 [6] Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 88.

acknowledge his immense superiority both over those who preceded him and who came after him."7 [7]

Although Niebuhr sometimes found Augustine's political thought too realistic, what he found compelling in Augustine was his biblical, rather than rationalistic, conception of human selfhood, his understanding of the social effects of human egocentricity, and his approach to finding meaning within history. By taking the truth of revelation seriously, he accepted an ineradicable element of mystery in life not subject to complete human understanding. For him, classical thought associated with ancient Greece and Rome and modern thought that emerged in Europe with the Renaissance, in spite of profound differences between them, both shared a common faith in reason as the path to human development and harmony. If the dynamism of Western civilization is to be sustained, he believed, the case for the biblical-Christian view must continue to be made.⁸ [8]

Since the proof of the biblical perspective comes finally by faith and not by sight, accepting its truth necessarily goes beyond the limits of reason. Nevertheless Niebuhr believed that a limited rational validation of that perspective was possible first in uncovering the limitations of the historical alternatives and secondly in showing how the truth of faith provides a more comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of life, because it takes into account all of life's antimonies and contradictions. His treatment of the self, politics, and history each elaborate this approach; together these concepts present the essential elements of the Christian realist perspective. Any discussion of Niebuhr's treatment of tragedy must first address his conception of human nature and how that perspective affects what he has to say about politics and history.⁹ [9]

The Self: Niebuhr famously began his most searching exploration of human nature in The Nature and Destiny of Man with the observation that "Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?"¹⁰ [10] The response he offered was of the human being as simultaneously a part of nature--and therefore subject to its vicissitudes--and as a spirit that "stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world."¹¹ [11] What makes human beings unique in creation is their status as self-conscious mortals. The classical perspective, which emphasized human distinctiveness in the capacity for reason, led to a

7 [7] *Ibid.*, p. 145; see also "Intellectual Biography of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 3-23.

8 [8] Faith and History, pp. 14-29.

9 [9] Ibid., pp. 151-153.

10 [10] Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol 1. Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 1.

11 [11] Ibid., p. 3.

dualistic conception of human nature as good mind/evil body, whereas the Augustinian perspective affirmed the createdness and goodness of both mind and body. The focus of analysis, then, is the self, a finite being with the inborn capacity to stand outside itself. It "is something more than mind and is able to use mind for its own purposes."¹² [12] Thus freedom is not in opposition to a fixed human nature, but precisely is part of that nature.

Conceiving of the self as an integral unity of mind and body establishes within human nature the basis for human freedom, creativity, and self-transcendence but also offers an explanation for human wrong-doing as "self-love" and a distortion, rather than an assertion, of freedom. The freedom individuals in a particular time and place have is a natural capacity to imagine and create a new reality within a condition of finitude. Self-transcendence makes possible the self-giving love of God and neighbor that makes for true human fulfillment. Working within the conditions of a real but limited freedom, human goodness can be achieved by a recognition of the limits of our knowledge and power and by a just and loving response to conflicts that may arise.¹³ [13]

Yet, the complex, ambiguous combination that is human nature--freedom and finitude, creator and creature, angel and brute--produces in the self a condition of anxiety. Knowing they could be more than they are, but aware as well that they may cease to exist altogether, human beings are tempted to sin, either in denying their contingency--expressed as self-love or pride--or in denying their freedom--expressed as losing oneself in the mundane or "sensuality." In the biblical story of the Fall, the serpent tempts Adam to "break and transcend the limits which God has set for him." Yet in yielding to the temptation to defy these limits, Adam is not simply making an error, but is willfully asserting his independence. "His sin is never the mere ignorance of this ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits."¹⁴ [14] Evil resides, not in our natural impulses or in our finitude, but rather in our refusal to admit our creatureliness and to deny the ambiguity of our natures:

"[Humanity's} partial involvement in, and partial transcendence over, the process of nature and the flux of time . . . is not regarded as evil from which man must be redeemed. The evil in the human situation arises, rather, from the fact that men seek to deny or to escape prematurely from the uncertainties of history and to claim a freedom, a transcendence, and an eternal and universal perspective which is not possible for finite

¹² [12] Christianity and Power Politics, p. 121.

¹³ [13] Nature and Destiny of Man, I, 270-275; Lovin, p. 133, Kenneth W. Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Kegley and Bretall, p. 165.

¹⁴ [14] Nature and Destiny, I, pp. 180-181.

creatures. The problem of sin rather than finiteness is, in other words, either implicitly or explicitly the basic problem of life."15 [15]

Since the whole self is involved in this sin, the processes of the human mind must be seen as part of the problem. As Niebuhr sees it, both classical and modern rationalism fail fully to grasp the depth of the human problem because they miss the profound ways in which inordinate self-love distorts reason itself. Ideological thinking, self-deception, illusions, and idolatry all reflect ways that human willfulness harnesses reason to serve ends other than truth.

Power Politics:. Human collectivities are the receptacles for both our self-giving and our power-seeking impulses. On the one hand, we are social beings who require community for fulfilled lives and our creativity enables us to establish a "boundless variety" of them "in endless breadth and extent."16 [16] On the other, "having the intelligence to anticipate the perils" in which we stand, we invariably seek greater security by enhancing our power, which results in disharmony and destructiveness. Thus in every community we find both a "will to live truly" and a "will to power."17 [17] Since the possession of power and prestige by one man or group necessarily means encroachment on the power and prestige of others, conflicts ensue. Typically, these encroachments are justified in moral terms, raising the stakes and making resolution even more difficult. The inevitability of social conflict means that a coercive element will remain in all communal relations.

Just as man's sinful pride expresses itself in his individual behavior, so does it in his collective activities. The group pride that results is more intense because the group assumes authority over the individual and appeals to the individual's capacity for self-transcendence. Of all the groups, it is the nation state which has most effectively gathered up the instruments of power and symbols of collective identity so as to claim the individual's ultimate loyalty. Like the individual, then, the nation-state gives in to the temptation to claim for itself a value more universal than its contingent self. Through this claim, "human pride and self-assertion reach their ultimate form and seek to break all bounds of finiteness. The nation pretends to be God."18 [18]

Where classical political philosophy identified politics as the search for the highest human good through the *polis*, Niebuhr's theologically-informed view offers a more skeptical reading of political life. Summarizing Niebuhr's view, Robin Lovin writes: ♦we must face up to the fact that people acting in groups, people striving for power and forming governments are

15 [15] The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, 3.)

16 [16] Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 4.

17 [17] Ibid., pl. 21.

18 [18] Nature and Destiny, I, p. 212.

going to act in ways contrary to the requirements of moral life. The tempting prospect of using power to secure good must be rejected, because that is not how real power works. What we can do is to enter into politics as an act of service, risking our own inner peace to spare our neighbors the loss of outward peace."19 [19]

Modern conceptions of politics, based on the illusion that communities are primarily the instruments of atomic individuals, either mistakenly assume that human passions are naturally ordinate and limited or blindly trust that the interests of the rulers will be the same as the interests of the ruled. Since these modern theorists reject the Christian doctrine of original sin, they deny themselves access to the fact that there is no level of human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love. The result is that they miss the continuing role of self-interest and self-delusion that is often at work in political life. This is not to deny real gains for human freedom and for justice that modern politics has achieved. Modern constitutional democratic governments with societal and institutional balancing mechanisms in place to check inordinate ambition have achieved a modicum of justice and are worth preserving. Governments can do more than simply restrain evil. They also have a role in guiding and rechanneling conflicting and competing forces in the community in the interest of a higher order 20 [20] "Demonic" fascism and ♦idolatrours" communism are worth opposing and worth opposing with force. Relative distinctions must always be made in history, though these necessary distinctions "do not invalidate the general judgment upon the collective life of man, that it is invariably involved in the sin of pride."21 [21]

Beyond the nation-state lies the anarchical setting of international relations. Historically, two broad forces have been at work drawing human kind toward some kind of "world community." The first is the sense of universal moral obligation, first apprehended religiously in the monotheistic universalism of the prophet Amos but present in other religious and philosophical traditions. The second force has developed out of the technical achievements of modern science, which has led to greater social and economic interdependence. Together these have raised hopes that the anarchical elements in international relations will be overcome. Unless, however, one acknowledges the power of the particular, limited, and uniquely vital historical communities to work as centrifugal forces against the centralizing pressures of globalization and moral universalism, all efforts to establish global governance will fail. Yet, realists who recognize only these centrifugal particularities and speak only power and of balances of power miss the possibilities for establishing new structures of politics and open themselves to the dangers of moral cynicism. Instead, world community "must be built" not by

19 [19] Lovin, p. 167.

20 [20] Children of Light, p. 17, 56.

21 [21] Nature and Destiny, I, p. 214.

destroying self-interest, but by "deflecting, beguiling, and harnessing" it in working to establish significantly greater concurrence between self-interest and the general welfare.²² [22]

History: For Niebuhr, the biblical view "affirms the meaning of history and of man's natural existence on the one hand, and on the other insists that the center, source and fulfillment of history lie beyond history."²³ [23] The history recorded in scriptures recounts the progressive unveiling of God's acting in history to redeem fallen creation. Ultimately, only the divine forgiveness offered to all men can overcome the confusion of human history to make the whole drama meaningful. As men and nations see themselves under divine judgment and mercy, there is the possibility of the renewal of life and the destruction of evil. By contrast, Niebuhr believed that classical thought regarded the temporal world as locked in a cycle of recurrence; only the permanent ideas are worthy of intellectual contemplation. It equated history with the natural cycles of birth, maturity, and death and it located human freedom in the ability of the few to rise above temporal events. Niebuhr thought this underestimated the possibilities for human creativity to bring into being new patterns of human interaction and denied the moral significance of working in the world. History thus could carry a dimension of meaning through the cultivation of memory and the possibility of innovation not available to the classical view.²⁴ [24] As men and nations see themselves under divine judgment and mercy, there is the possibility of the renewal of life and the destruction of evil.

The modern view, like the biblical view, holds that both nature and human institutions are subject to development in time. The cycles of birth and death, of growth and decay, which classical culture regarded as eternal, are shown to be part of a broader evolutionary growth. However, the modern view takes this much farther and concludes that temporal growth fulfills the meaning of life and redeems its ills and errors. Moderns are tempted to think that history is the record of the progressive triumph of good over evil. In so doing, they succumb to the illusion that humanity can be freed from its ambiguous position as both creature and creator; they hope instead, that humanity can become the unambiguous master of its historical destiny, bringing history itself to an end.²⁵ [25]

Missing in the modern view is the recognition that human nature is self-contradictory in its sinfulness, that even the highest achievements of human civilization nevertheless contain the seeds of their own self-destruction.²⁶ [26] The truth in the myth of the tower of Babel is that it reveals the human drive to transcend finitude and to pretend for a particular culture or civilization a finality it does not have. One finds again and again cases in history where the great

²² [22] Children of Light, p. 153-162; 174-186

²³ [23] Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. ix.

²⁴ [24] Faith and History, pp. 19-28.

²⁵ [25] Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶ [26] Beyond Tragedy, p. 18.

are brought low by their over-reaching. Thus the Greek city-states, the presumed "complete association" were done in by the competition among them; Roman civilization eventually collapsed unable to cope with the consequences of its imperialism; medieval feudalism failed through the injustices perpetrated by the dominant landlords. Bourgeois capitalism gave rise to the industrial worker, who rebelled against liberalism's corruptions of the ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality. Marxism, which rightly discerned the imperfections of bourgeois societies, nevertheless turned a blind eye to the tyrannical abuses the concentration of power they demanded for successful revolution would require. "Thus man claims immortality for his spiritual achievements just when their mortal fate becomes apparent; and death and mortality are strangely mixed into, and potent in, the very pretension of immortality."27 [27]

Ultimately, of course, biblical faith discerns a divine power sovereign over history and which enters into history in mercy and love to search out and address the evil of human sin. "No society and no individual can ever escape the vicious circle of the sin which aggravates human insecurity by seeking to overcome it. All societies and individuals therefore remain under the judgment and the doom of God. Their hope must therefore always lie in a mercy which is able to over-rule the angry passions of men, in a Kingdom of God which will bring the kingdom of sin to naught."28 [28]

Tragedy and Irony: In all of this, Niebuhr acknowledged strong affinities between the biblical perspective and that revealed in Greek tragedy. The dramas of Sophocles and Aeschylus, like the Bible, emphasize the destructiveness of human pride, the moral ambiguities of political practice, and the wisdom of accepting limits. In biblical terms, "pride goeth before a fall;" in Greek myth, Nemesis attends the expressions of *hybris*. There is a mystery, perhaps even a chaos, beyond human knowing. In both there is no simple resolution of the conflicts that divide men and nations; in neither is the political community permitted to assume that it deserves one's ultimate loyalty. Both "measure life in depth," fully aware that the "titanic forces of human existence, whether they spring from below the level of consciousness or rise above the level of human limitations" can not easily be brought under the control of "some little scheme of prudent rationality."29 [29]

Important as the affinities are, Niebuhr nevertheless concluded that "tragedy is not the final answer" and offered "irony" as the more satisfactory alternative. The tragic view is superior to the modern "happy" view that everything will work out. It takes into account the persistence of evil, that sometimes hard choices have to be made and political leaders embrace courses of action that gets their hands dirty. Where the modern view encourages complacency, the tragic view with its reminder of the dangers of human pride engenders a sense of limits. However, it also engenders despair, which can approach, but is not the same as, the spirit of repentance.

27 [27] Beyond Tragedy, p. 41.

28 [28] Faith and History, p. 108.

29 [29] Beyond Tragedy, p. 165.

In its purest form the classic idea of tragedy is exemplified in the story of Prometheus in which the protagonist, to win humanity its place in the world, chooses to assert himself against his fellow gods by stealing the gift of fire for men. This act of defiance brings down on Prometheus the wrath of Zeus, who orders him chained to a rock on the "shores of Ocean in the trackless waste of Scythia ." As Prometheus tells it, "Of my own will, yes of my own will I erred--I will not deny it. By helping mortals, I found suffering for myself."³⁰ [30] The tragic hero, then, is one who deliberately transgresses an established boundary and who brings punishment on himself for this over-reaching. By extension, tragedy also applies to those situations where one must choose between two equally valid loyalties, necessarily sacrificing one value for another as in the case of Antigone.³¹ [31] Creon's decision to put the public good ahead of family loyalty results in his losing his entire family; Antigone's commitment to the "immortal unrecorded laws of God" leads to her death. For some good to be secured, the protagonist must do evil, accepting the costly consequences that will inevitably follow. For Niebuhr, threatening to use nuclear weapons in order to prevent their use is just such a tragic choice. The actual use of such weapons would be terrible and yet without such a threat, the other side might be tempted to use theirs and bring on a conflagration no one wants. Perhaps in our day, Niebuhr would find the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" on suspected terrorists to gain information to protect innocent civilians as another example.

In analyzing tragedy, Niebuhr identified the following elements: the tragic hero acts out of strength, the hero's transgression of the norm is done knowingly, and those who observe the tragic drama respond with pity and admiration. The pity arises out of sympathy for the suffering the hero endures; the admiration comes from the hero's assertion of human freedom against the hostility of the gods or the implacable indifference of the universe. Facing what the tragic hero faces, ordinary people would simply perish in weakness, frustration, and confusion; the tragic level of life is only for the few.³² [32] Even as it teaches the limits of human endeavor, Greek tragedy invites consideration of the greatness of those souls who dare to challenge those limits.

In irony, the protagonist is not as strong or as wise as he thinks he is. For that reason, the protagonist bears some responsibility for his situation, but we can also see that he is subject to illusions or vanity or pretentiousness. Both tragedy and irony involve failure; in tragedy the hero is brought low as the result of a conscious choice, but in irony the protagonist is largely unaware of a hidden weakness that leads to the failure. In tragedy, the hero acts in strength; in irony, the supposed strength or wisdom of the protagonist is shown to be weakness and foolishness. In tragedy the actors are the few and the strong; in irony, it may be that those supposed to be weak and foolish are the ones who reveal true strength and wisdom. Tragic figures know that they are guilty, but they act nevertheless; ironic figures believe they are innocent, only to learn otherwise. Finally, with irony, there is the possibility of repentance; in tragedy, despair seems to be the most

³⁰ [30] Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/AeschylusPrometheus.html>.

³¹ [31] Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 157.

³² [32] Beyond Tragedy, p 156.

appropriate outcome. Irony is on the side of life and growth because with remorse and repentance comes the possibility of the renewal of life in both the individual and the collective existence.³³ [33]

The fundamental problem with the tragic vision, for Niebuhr, is that "it does not know where the real centre of life lies." The freedom that the tragic hero asserts must be asserted against nature; the evil that we experience, then, is either in nature itself or in human freedom. From the biblical perspective, however, sin is not inherent in freedom but is a distortion of it. The great evils of history are caused by human pretensions which are not inherent in the gift of freedom. Life in its deepest sense is not only good, but it is also capable of destroying the evil which has been produced in it. What biblical faith declares is that evil is really a contingent defect in the soul of each man; "if he can realize that fact, if he can weep for himself, if he can repent, he can also be saved."³⁴ [34]

In The Irony of American History, Niebuhr argues that irony is more applicable than tragedy as a lens to use in thinking about the American situation. Through irony one is shown that presumed strengths and wisdom include illusion and self-deception; genuine strengths and wisdom exist in unexpected places; and there is moral meaning in American activity in the world. Thus, Americans explain the growth of American power as the result of their virtue, failing to recognize the part played by a fortunate geography and abundant natural resources. Further, the American creed emphasizes the centrality of individual liberty, preserving the illusion of classical liberalism that the competition of interests will make for justice without political or moral regulation; whereas in truth, "(t)he justice we have established in our society has been achieved, not by pure individualism, but by collective action."³⁵ [35] One discovers, ironically, that American practice has been better than its creed. Native common sense, which understands the persistence of self-interest and the wisdom of balancing power with power, has triumphed over the theories of the business and social scientific elite. "Weak" pragmatism has proved wiser than "strong" theory:

our actual achievements in social justice have been won by a pragmatic approach to the problems of power, which has not been less efficacious for its lack of consistent speculation upon the problems of power and justice. .. In our domestic affairs we have thus builded better than we knew because we have not taken the early dreams of our peculiar innocence too seriously."³⁶ [36]

In the contest with Marxist tyranny, the Americans faced an ideological opponent with even more extreme illusions of human perfection and mastery of history. Communist delusions of

³³ [33] Faith and History, p. 215

³⁴ [34] Beyond Tragedy, p. 168.

³⁵ [35] Irony, p. 10.

³⁶ [36] Ibid., pp. 34-35.

leaping "from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom" must result in a concentration of power rarely found in history.

The vantage point for irony is, finally, divine. God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between human and divine purposes, even on the highest level of human aspirations. When one has a religious sense of an ultimate judgment on our actions, one develops an awareness of one's own pretensions of wisdom, virtue, and power. Can nations have this? He acknowledges the difficulty, especially when facing an ideological foe: "we are tempted to meet the foe's self-righteousness with a corresponding fury of our own." Nevertheless, it is possible, as Lincoln showed, to maintain a posture of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment. Modern communist tyranny is certainly evil and ought to be opposed; but simply dividing the world into good liberal democracies versus bad communists "offers no insight into the corruptions of freedom on our side."³⁷ [37]

Whereas Niebuhr's Christian realism uses the lens of irony to analyze politics, Henry Kissinger's realism uses tragedy, as Marc Gismondi and others have shown. Because both thinkers understand tragedy similarly, comparing their analyses provides a way to show what difference these lenses make. For Kissinger, tragedy is when people get what they want, only to discover their success to be illusory or self-destructive. In his book Diplomacy Kissinger shows how even the work of the greatest statesmen include elements that result in the destruction of that work. Thus we learn that Count von Metternich's success in securing Austria's interests in the Congress of Vienna system made inevitable the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire in World War I. In the case of Chancellor Bismarck, we discover how the genius that brought about German unification and re-cast the pattern of international relations brought on the tragedy of World War I. Looking at the evolution of the Cold War, Kissinger shows how Wilsonian idealism led to the disaster of Vietnam and how the Soviet Union, tempted to over-reach in the wake of the American failure, found itself unable to resolve the internal contradictions brought on by its expansionism and collapsed.³⁸ [38]

Further, history has no inherent meaning or direction; it must be given meaning by those who exercise their freedom within it.³⁹ [39] This radical freedom invites new forms of creativity and human assertiveness at least for the few courageous enough to accept the mantle of responsibility. The heroic figures are those who construct new worlds for themselves, who look into the abyss and choose to try to bring order out of chaos or die trying. The statesmen that Kissinger admires are those like Cardinal de Richelieu, Bismarck, Theodore Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, who sought greatness realized through the pride of states within the context

³⁷ [37] Ibid., pp. 170-173.

³⁸ [38] Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp 131-136; 701.

³⁹ [39] Mark Gismondi, "Tragedy, Realism, and Postmodernity: *Kulturpessimismus* in the Theories of Max Weber, E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy and Statecraft, 15 (3), 2004: 435-464.

of an international balance of power system. Yet, even those who successfully establish new codes, new laws, new orders cannot truly overcome the fundamental purposelessness of the cosmos. Order and stability may be created for a generation or two, but in time, the forces of disorder will gain the upper hand. The tragic element of human life is, as Gismondi puts it, that "there is no cure for humanity's condition."⁴⁰ [40] Or, in Kissinger's words: "Life is suffering; transitoriness is the fate of existence. No civilization has yet been permanent, no longing completely fulfilled."⁴¹ [41]

Not only is the work of the statesman transitory, tragedy also teaches that they can expect to be misunderstood. The statesman, says Kissinger, is "like one of the heroes in classical drama who has had a vision of the future but who cannot transmit it directly to his fellow-men and who cannot validate its "truth" ♦ but "must act as if their intuition were already experience, *as if* their aspiration were truth." Consequently, statesmen will often share the fate of prophets: "that they are without honor in their own country, that they always have a difficult task in legitimizing their programs domestically, and that their greatness is usually apparent only in retrospect when their intuition has become experience."⁴² [42]

The lesson Kissinger draws from this emphasis on tragedy is similar to what Niebuhr says one can learn through irony: the importance of accepting limits and the difficulty of doing so. Those like Napoleon or Alexander I, who appeal to principles of universal rule and universal peace, visit tragedy on themselves and others. Those like Metternich and Castlereagh, who have more limited objectives than perfection and seek order and equilibrium instead, are true statesmen. Like Niebuhr, Kissinger cites the figure of "nemesis," the Greek goddess who punished human pride and over-vaulting ambition with ruin. Human pride and presumption makes it difficult for us to accept limits; our failure to do so results in overwhelming and irretrievable harm.⁴³ [43] Like Niebuhr, Kissinger calls attention to the dangers in the politics of righteousness, where leaders and nations presume they are acting in God's name or on behalf of universal moral principle. Thus, for both "American exceptionalism" is a problem, actually undermining the American position in the world.

Nevertheless, important differences are apparent as well. Because of his tragic outlook, Kissinger's focus is almost exclusively on the great, with little attention to the possibility in irony that those presumed to be weak or foolish may actually possess strength or wisdom. Thus, the role of dissidents and human rights activists in de-legitimizing Soviet power and contributing to communism's demise gets relatively little attention in Kissinger's treatment of the ending of the Cold War. Surely it was ironic that the opposition to communist rule in Poland was led by a

⁴⁰ [40] Ibid., p. 437.

⁴¹ [41] Henry Kissinger, The Necessity for Choice, pp. 312-315.

⁴² [42] Henry Kissinger, A World Restored, (New York : Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 329; italics in original.

⁴³ [43] World Restored, p. 1.

labor leader and that Marxist regimes rooted in dialectical materialism lost their legitimacy in part because they failed to provide material prosperity. Similarly, Kissinger's tragic overall assessment of American public opinion as parochial and unwise misses the possible ironic wisdom of "common sense." Of course, one can hardly expect the "man in the street" to accept the "tragic" truth that history is the story we invent to lay over chaos. By contrast, the ironic perspective offers some assurance that there is meaning in history and there is moral significance in what we do though we cannot know fully what that meaning is nor claim that our perspective is the same as the divine perspective. Niebuhr criticized George Kennan's proposal to make the "national interest" the touchstone of American diplomacy as wrongly making egotism the cure for the disease of American "legalism-moralism." The proper cure, he observed, is not to evacuate foreign policy goals of their moral content, but rather to act out of concern for "both the self and the other" at both the individual and the collective levels. It must be possible to conduct foreign policy preserving a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind," derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power."⁴⁴ [44]

Conclusion Niebuhr's Christian realism, then, does offer a distinctive vantage point for thinking about politics, one that parallels "tragic" realism in important respects but one that also opens up space to discuss ironic successes as well as ironic failures. Its strength is an account of human nature as both creator and created, angel and brute, free yet finite. It gives politics its rightful place as an activity where structures of proximate justice can be worked out, and it holds history to be a realm of moral significance for both the great and the commons. It reminds us that "We can neither renounce this earthly home of ours nor yet claim that its victories and defeats give the final meaning to our existence."⁴⁵ [45]

On the other hand, of course, as Niebuhr would be the first to acknowledge, Christian realism depends on insights grasped by faith: "We do not believe that the human enterprise will have a tragic conclusion; but the ground of our hope lies not in human capacity but in divine power and mercy, in the character of the ultimate reality, which carries the human enterprise."⁴⁶ [46] For those who wish to establish truths about politics using the methods of empiricist social science, this must be a weakness. Not only is faith beyond reason, it can be associated with dogmatism and cruelty. Niebuhr himself makes both points, which for him provide further evidence of the wisdom in Christian realism. Yes, religious faith, too, can be distorted by sin, but the faith that puts itself under divine judgment can issue in repentance and the recognition of the need for forgiveness. But also: the danger of scientism is that it leaves no place for human freedom. The reason that Christian realism will endure is because it does.

⁴⁴ [44] Irony, p. 148.

⁴⁵ [45] Christian Realism, p. 116.

⁴⁶ [46] Beyond Tragedy, p. 24.

