Reinhold Niebuhr, Modernity, and the Problem of Evil: Towards a Politics of Hope

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of "grace" in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.

-- Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*

I. Introduction: Re-Reading Reinhold Niebuhr

To be a theorist of modernity is by necessity to be a theorist of evil.1 [1] That is, it is

impossible to give even minimal consideration to the theory and practice of politics in Europe

since the fragmenting of Christendom and the passing of medieval society without confronting

the desolation and despondency of the twentieth century: its two world wars, the Holocaust, the

rise of totalitarianism, and the looming possibility of nuclear annihilation. It is unsurprising that

much of the most searching and profound political theory written since these events has been

preoccupied with them, and that there was a particular concern with providing coherent

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1 [1] I hesitate to use the term "modernity," believing it to be at times so promiscuously and varyingly used that to employ the word is to risk obfuscation. That said, I believe it is so thoroughly a part of the debates in which I want to situate the work of Reinhold Niebuhr that I cannot avoid it. I also hope what I mean by the term will become more clear as I proceed. See N.J. Rengger's *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity: Beyond Enlightenment and Critique* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 37-76 for a helpful overview of a number of the variety of ways modernity has been, or might be, conceptualized.

narratives or intellectual genealogies for such calamities. Perhaps the most distinctive element of twentieth century political thought was the urgent search for "the origins of dark times."2 [2] And even if sustained, *direct* reflection on these events was avoided, their lingering memory was inescapable -- surely in the austere, analytical character of much of contemporary liberalism, we find an oblique concern that they would not be repeated.

Among those who did not pursue such a strategy of evasion, especially those who turned to the history of political thought for guidance, modernity often was theorized in terms of declension or decline, with the tragedies of the twentieth century being the final, and possibly the inevitable, conclusion to previous philosophical, religious, and moral ruptures. It came to be understood as a series of "waves" ending in nihilism, historicism, and relativism; as the outworking of Gnosticism; or the result of a nefarious break with Aristotelian political reflection -- the decisive and most harrowing proof of the failure of "the Enlightenment project."3 [3] As

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2 [2] I borrow this phrase from the title of the second chapter of Ira Katznelson's brilliant study, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 47-106. Though my concern is particularly with the response of political theorists to these horrific events, Katznelson's somewhat broader consideration of how historians, social scientists, and economists reacted to them is immensely helpful as an introduction to and survey of the matter.

3 [3] Here I am thinking particularly of Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and, somewhat later, Alasdair MacIntyre, though certainly they are not the only figures that could be named. For Strauss, Machiavelli inaugurates a break with the ancients, the first "wave" of modernity that (perhaps inevitably) gives rise to its second and third waves, eventually leading to Nietzsche (and Heidegger). See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity" in *Six Essays in Political Philosophy: An Introduction to Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gilden, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbes-Merril, 1975) 81-98. For Voegelin, the West's wrong turn occurred with Joachim of Flora's Trinitarian eschatology -- the periodization of history into the ages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with the attending Gnosticism eventually resulting in the political religions of twentieth century totalitarianism. MacIntire, in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) believes us to "have now reached that turning point" whereby a

such, the evils of the twentieth century, for theorists adopting such a posture, were not simply fits of political fanaticism, perennial hatreds given new power and reach by the technological possibilities of industrial society, or the expression of our always already there capacity for sin and injustice. Modernity was a falling-away-from, and needed diagnosis more than defense. Put differently, the tragedies of the twentieth century somehow were modernity made truly manifest -- modernity's culmination rather than its betrayal. The tribulations of twentieth century, in this way of thinking, *exposed* modernity for what it truly was.

Given Reinhold Niebuhr's attentiveness to the problem of evil, concern for the American and European response to totalitarianism, and historical relationship to the events and ideas intimated above, he would seem a figure likely to be included in these discussions of modernity -- its identity, origins, and prospects.4 [4] He wrote expansive, demanding works such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *Faith and History*, texts that indicate the breadth of his concerns and the scope of his intellectual ambitions, and that were forged in the midst of crisis and war.5 [5] Niebuhr was a singular voice in American Protestantism, in persistent dialogue with a number of the most brilliant theologians of the twentieth century: his brother H. Richard

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coming "barbarism and darkness" probably is inevitable. Our choice is between Aristotle and Nietzsche!

4 [4] I am borrowing the language of "identity and origins" from Joshua Mitchell. See his *Not by Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993),* p. 1

5 [5] Indeed, during one of Niebuhr's Gifford lectures in Edinburgh, Scotland, his audience grew restive as they heard German planes bombing a naval base a few miles away. See Richard Wightman Fox's *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 191

Niebuhr, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, among others. And yet Niebuhr largely is absent from the

most serious debates about the meaning of the West's "dark times" and the contours of the

modern situation. He typically is understood as Cold War realist, a "vital center" liberal, and a

brooding dissenter from an American political culture often marked by a too consistent

optimism. But rarely is Niebuhr read as capaciously as possible -- as a distinctive interpreter, and

ultimately a defender, of modernity.6 [6] As the dualities of the Cold War no longer press upon

us, and a renewed concern for the relationship between religion and modernity emerges,7 [7] the

fullness of Niebuhr's work can now be considered.

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6 [6] Two exceptions to this are Charles T. Mathewes treatment of Niebuhr in his *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially ch. 3, "Sin as Perversion: Reinhold Niebuhr's Augustinian Psychology," where he both is read as part of a broader intellectual tradition that takes its bearings from Augustine and is compared to Hannah Arendt's understanding of evil, and Robin W. Lovin's brilliant study, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), where he argues for the continued importance of Niebuhr and extends his thought through an elaboration of what Christian Realism can mean for contemporary debates in political theory.

7 [7] There are signs that political and social theorists are beginning to grapple with the real complexity of both modernity and liberalism's relationship to religion. Obviously, there have always been voices that have handled questions of "religion and politics" or -- better yet! -- political thought and theology with admirable nuance. But in recent years, for obvious reasons, these reflections, I believe, have taken on new focus and importance. To note just a few examples, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religon, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), and Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). Of course, the greatest indicator of these trends is that even certain Rawlsians are trying to engage this conversation in new ways, most notably through the publication of Rawls' own undergraduate thesis, a work of Protestant theology. See John Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Niebuhr confronted the events of the twentieth century without searching for a moment where the trajectory of Western political thought and practice irretrievably went wrong. While never failing to criticize the naivety of much contemporary thought -- it would be impossible to consider him a simplistic or unqualified defender of modernity -- he evinces almost no longing for the ancient polis, Medieval Christianity, or the pretensions of an aristocratic order. Niebuhr in no way urges us to somehow return to or re-appropriate classical thought; he refuses to side with the ancients against the moderns. Nor does he advocate clinging to the old certainties of the natural law or otherwise returning political reflection to a search for foundations. Niebuhr resists the reactionary temptation and an impulse towards nostalgia or any form of political romanticism. His basic posture towards the modern world allows him to theorize its character and allude to its development with a measure of complexity and nuance that makes possible openness to its full possibilities. He meant to shift our understanding of what modernity actually could mean -- he consciously was attempting to enlarge the possibilities of what thoughts were thinkable for modern man. And so the subtitle of Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, "a vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense"8 [8] might be taken to somehow capture the ethos of his broader intellectual efforts. Rather than affirm modernity on the grounds of progress or the most facile belief in the sufficiency of Enlightenment rationalism, Niebuhr provides an alternative account of modernity that allow for its "vindication" while still allowing him to push against its na�ve defenders, all while resisting modernity's critics, those who saw its foundations as essentially flawed.

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8 [8] See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and A Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944)

What is perhaps most striking about this understanding and defense of modernity is the way it is connected to Niebuhr's grasp of the problem of evil. His theorization of modernity and his interpretation of evil are intrinsically connected; the former only can be sustained if the latter is minimally persuasive. A defense of modernity that cannot make space for an adequate appraisal of the persistence of evil has to be considered both philosophically shallow and utterly negligent of the basic historical facts of the twentieth century. And yet this rightful emphasis on evil cannot be the occasion for despair, or so dominate considerations of modernity's character that we are denied the resources for genuinely constructive theorizing. Niebuhr's work holds out the promise of allowing us to avoid a too critical account of modernity while still seriously considering the problem of evil, all with the aim of providing the rudiments of a sustaining politics of hope. The relationship between modernity, evil, and hope in Niebuhr's thought will be considered below, emphasizing the way he brought his understanding of them to bear on the requirements of political life.

II. From Babel to Modernity

Perhaps the best, if an unlikely, entry point into considering in more detail Niebuhr's elucidation of modernity, and the sources of its ultimate defense, is his understanding of the great, mythical account of human folly, the story of the Tower of Babel.9 [9] He provides a

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9 [9] See Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Tower of Babel" in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), pp. 25-46.

creative interpretation that is more than a simple reminder about human limits.10 [10] And because of its status as a religious tale, Niebuhr's insistence on its importance intimates his understanding of the continued relevance of the theological imagination for modernity. The most straightforward reading of the old myth, the easiest way to bring it to bear on contemporary history, would be to see modernity itself as a Tower of Babel, or to construe the various utopianisms of the twentieth century as manifestations of man's nearly unlimited ambitions. And yet Niebuhr does not do precisely, or only, that. He certainly sees the myth of the Tower of Babel as a critique of human pretensions -- his use of the story partakes of the traditional grasp of its meaning and import. But lurking in his interpretation, however, is a subtler theme that I believe is intimately related to his conception of modernity.

The Tower of Babel is a myth about fragmentation: God scattered the human race across the face of the earth, and confounded our ability to communicate with one another by creating a multitude of languages. Whatever primordial unity had once existed was, after man's attempt to reach up to the heavens, no longer extant. And it is precisely this prior unity, the sweet solidarity of a homogeneous community, which Niebuhr seems to find one of the most important elements of the story. Niebuhr, as noted above, certainly uses his essay to warn about "human pride" and

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10 [10] I am in part pushing against a reading of Augustinian political reflection that sees it primarily as a reminder of human limits, even if I occasionally slip into that language myself. Though I have learned immensely from Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), I think the language of limits, while helpful and appropriate as far as it goes, at times actually obscures the full range of resources the Augustinian tradition provides for engaging modern political life. I believe Niebuhr can help us recover elements of this tradition, and is its greatest advocate, even if a number of his own interpreters also add to this obfuscation.

"the tragic self-destruction of civilizations and cultures."11 [11] The Tower of Babel signifies

man's "pretentious disregard" of his "limitations" -- a disregard that, for him, is nearly always

inescapable: he held that in some way "every civilization and every culture is thus a Tower of

Babel."12 [12] But what is most important in Niebuhr's rendering of the myth is the *cause* or

source of this "disregard" for our limits. For him, "the peoples of the earth never had one

language," and so God's confounding of our tongues is not a literally true historical narrative, but

a way of drawing attention to the essential plurality of the human condition. Behind or prior to

the expression of human pride is our failure to recognize the inevitable finiteness and

fragmentation of our situation. The myth of the Tower of Babel, by dramatizing our descent into

diversity, attempts to put the "contingencies of nature and history"13 [13] at the center of our

self-understanding.

Niebuhr, then, uses his essay on the Tower of Babel to describe man's intellectual,

political, and spiritual responses to such contingency and fragmentation -- to sketch a

philosophical anthropology for a world irrevocably post-Babel. It is the occasion for one of his

most elegiac summarizations of what it means to be a human being: "Man is mortal. That is his

fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin. Man is a creature of time and place, whose

perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate circumstances. But man is

not merely the prisoner of time and place. He touches the fringes of the eternal."14 [14] For

11 [11] Niebuhr, "The Tower of Babel" in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp. 29-30

12 [12] Ibid., pp. 32, 28

13 [13] Ibid., p. 42

14 [14] Ibid., pp. 28-29

Niebuhr, we ceaselessly try to escape the contingency of our situation, to rise above the fragmentation of the world and seek a finally valid universal truth -- a truth that simply is not ours to have. Put differently, we try to go behind Babel, to achieve the manner of unity and universality that supposedly existed prior to that great exertion of human pride and ambition. He writes that "man is constantly tempted to forget the finiteness of his cultures and civilization and to pretend a finality for them which they do not have."15 [15] Niebuhr holds that we can never truly rise above self-love or decisively move beyond the limitations of our own culture or tradition. We touch the fringes of the eternal -- we have our reason to deploy and the capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism -- and so seek an escape from our particularity, but such efforts inevitably partake of some form of delusion. As he puts it, "The truth man finds and speaks is, for all the efforts to transcend himself, still his truth. The �good' which he discovers is, for all his efforts to disassociate it from his own interest and interests, still his �good.""16 [16] Niebuhr finds human history to be tragic, precisely because of man's perpetual blindness to the "taint" of his unavoidable finiteness and "the illusion that the measure of his emancipation is greater than it really is."17 [17] The myth of the Tower of Babel, above all, is a firm injunction *against* the prospect of overcoming our contingency, partiality, and the fragmented character of living in the world. For Niebuhr, the Tower of Babel is more than a story about pride; it is a delineation of the nature of our temptations.18 [18]

15 [15] Ibid., p. 28

16 [16] Ibid., p. 29

17 [17] Ibid., p. 30

18 [18] I consider, in other words, Niebuhr's understanding of the Tower of Babel akin to the way he tended to grasp the significance of the Fall: "The metaphysical connotations of the myth

Perhaps especially notable is the emphasis that Niebuhr, in the last section of his essay on the Tower of Babel, puts on human languages as carriers of man's contingency -- that is, he uses the phenomenon of language as a particularly incisive example of the broader human condition. Niebuhr writes that "the diversity of languages is a perpetual reminder to proud men that their most perfect temples of the spirit are touched by finiteness. Multiplicity of languages is the most vivid symbol of the fact that the highest pinnacles of the human spirit lie grounded in the contingencies of nature and history."19 [19] He finds the great works of European literature especially instructive on this matter: Shakespeare speaks beyond sixteenth century England; Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is not merely the vestige of a dying feudal order; and Goethe transcends German humanism and romanticism. And yet, for Niebuhr, the "universal notes" in these men's writings are merely "overtones," because the various European languages, however much their artistic use intimates experiences that transcend their particularity, still are reminders of certain times and places and as such "freighted with the long sad history of conflict" between the various "European tribes."20 [20] Languages point to the way man oscillates between universality and particularity, approaching the eternal without ever struggling free from the limitations of his finitude and contingency.

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of the Fall are, however, less important for our purposes than the psychological and moral ones." See his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), p. 46. This will be taken up in greater detail below as the discussion moves to an analysis of Niebuhr's understanding of evil -- and thus the Fall.

19 [19] Ibid., p. 42

20 [20] Ibid., p. 43-44

Niebuhr then goes on to excoriate a "rationalism" that "is always impatient with these barriers of language and with the irrationality of their divergences. It dreams of a universal language and of a universal culture."21 [21] And so, again, Niebuhr emphasizes our deep longing to escape from the essential diversity of the human condition, to impose on it a system that is rational, universal, and complete. The belief that we can arrive at principles, whether religious, moral, or political, that are finally valid, that are untouched by the particularity of our time and place and lack the distortion of self-love is, for him, "merely rationalism's penchant for Towers of Babel�the sign of human reason's failure to gauge its own limitations, of its proud and futile defiance of the finite necessities and contingencies which enter into even the proudest edifice of human spirituality."22 [22] It is vital to note here that these limitations are not, for Niebuhr, fundamentally mitigated by divine revelation -- indeed, "biblical religion" accentuates them. He does not close his essay on the Tower of Babel by chastising rationalism in the name of revelation. Instead, Niebuhr writes, "Every revelation of the divine is relativised by the finite mind which comprehends it�God, though revealed, remains veiled; his thoughts are not our thoughts nor his ways our ways."23 [23] There is, then, no earthly release from our condition of contingency and finitude. Our tongues will remain confounded, and our awareness of the divine, of the One beyond the many, only should enhance our recognition of this. Man, Niebuhr believes, "faces an inescapable dilemma in the Tower of Babel, which gives the profoundest versions of the Christian religion a supramoral quality. It imparts a sense of contrition not only

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21 [21] Ibid., p. 44

22 [22] Ibid.

23 [23] Ibid.

for moral derelictions but for the unconscious sins involved in the most perfect moral achievements."24 [24] Religious faith becomes, for Niebuhr, not a way of overcoming our contingency, but the most profound inducement to live in the knowledge of its ineradicable existence.

These insights of Niebuhr's, pithily expressed in "The Tower of Babel," but not only there, provide the essential preconditions for his qualified defense of modernity. Most simply, they largely preclude the possibility of critiquing modernity in the name of a virtuous past or a prior body of thought exempt from severe deficiencies. He makes a point, in the hasty tour of Western history he provides in the essay, of showing how the Greeks, Romans, and medieval Christians were all engaged in the building of Towers of Babel.25 [25] In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr begins not just by lamenting the insufficiencies of certain schools of contemporary thought -- here, chiefly meaning the excesses of Enlightenment rationalism -- but with sustained criticism of the classical view as well, particularly its lack of an understanding of human "individuality" and its articulation of a fateful "body-mind dualism."26 [26] Later in that volume, he goes on to describe the "inevitable" destruction of the "catholic synthesis" of the Middle Ages, especially Thomism, going so far as to write that "the full truth of the Gospel was

24 [24] Ibid., p. 45

25 [25] See "The Tower of Babel," pp. 30-34

26 [26] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 [1941]), especially ch. 1, "Man as a Problem to Himself," pp. 1-25. See also his criticisms of classical thought in *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), particularly ch. 4, "Similarities and Differences between Classical and Modern Ideas of Meaning in History," pp. 55-69

never fully known, or at least never explicitly stated in the church" until the Reformation.27 [27] The medieval edifice was, for Niebuhr, an "effort to achieve a perfection which stands beyond the contradictions of history" -- fundamentally, a monument to human pride, the ignoring of that element of the gospel "which negates and contradicts historical achievements�"28 [28] There is, then, a type of negative affirmation29 [29] of modernity at work in Niebuhr's thought. His criticisms of the past are so fundamental that an implicit appreciation of modernity is the theoretical and practical conclusion towards which he appears to be leading the reader.

There is also, though, a muted, but still real, line of thought in Niebuhr's work that goes beyond the merely negative affirmation described above. Without fully delineating his understanding of the Reformation and Renaissance, they clearly are two movements that he believed to embody genuine insights into the human situation. Modernity, for Niebuhr, at least partly begins with them, and as such is not fundamentally faulty; the truths they expressed necessarily meant the old had been superseded. This does not mean that either movement constituted a decisive break with the past -- both reworked certain Christian ideas and reinterpreted ancient texts -- but taken together they do point towards the fading of the medieval order. Though often for different reasons, the Reformation and Renaissance protested against the

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27 [27] Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 148-49

28 [28] Ibid., pp. 147-48

29 [29] This "negative" affirmation actually is rather typical of Niebuhr's method. See Robin W. Lovin's description in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3: "Niebuhr gives little time to definitions in his work. His aims are synthetic, linking related ideas into a complex whole, rather than strictly delimiting the individual elements. *His method dialectical, in the sense that concepts are clarified by stating what they exclude, and positions are explained by specifying what they reject*." (emphasis mine)

Catholic synthesis in the name of human freedom. In perhaps his best summary of the matter, Niebuhr wrote in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that "human history is indeed filled with *endless possibilities*; and the Renaissance saw this more clearly than either classicism, Catholicism, or the Reformation. But it did not recognize that history is filled with endless possibilities *of good and evil*."30 [30] All Niebuhr's protestations against the search for a permanently valid unity of thought, for principles not touched with our contingency, find expression here. Man's indeterminate freedom gives rise to history, the creative structuring of his environment elaborated in time. And, importantly for Niebuhr, there is a "growth" in this history: "history obviously moves towards more inclusive ends, towards more complex human relations, towards the technical enhancement of human powers and the cumulation of knowledge."31 [31] The understanding that human freedom and history's growth intimately are connected was, for Niebuhr, the greatest achievement and deepest insight of the Renaissance.32 [32] To deny this freedom would be to vitiate an essential element of what it meant to be human -- to choose some contingent, historically conditioned principle of restraint over human creativity.

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30 [30] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 2, p. 155 (emphasis Niebuhr's)

31 [31] Ibid., p. 315

32 [32] It should be noted that although Niebuhr typically is considered a realist or pessimist, he also has been criticized precisely for the reasons just noted -- his openness to man's creative possibilities in history, or rather, what is taken to be his progressivism or devotion to perfectionist liberalism. The best example of this reading of Niebuhr can be found in Wilson Carey McWilliams' "Reinhold Niebuhr: New Orthodoxy for Old Liberalism" in *American Political Science Review* (December 1962), pp. 874-885. See also Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 246-260, who describes Niebuhr as ultimately giving in to a form of optimism. Though a full response to these criticisms cannot be undertaken here, I do wish to note that they curiously affirm my interpretation of Niebuhr as a defender of modernity. That is, in his concessions to liberalism and history's "growth" he is taken to be too characteristically *modern* by McWilliams and Deneen.

For this reason, Niebuhr argues for putting the thought of the Renaissance and Reformation in dialogue again. Both stood against the permanent validity of historic achievements, but the Reformation, with its sober vision of the post-lapsarian world, could mute the optimism of the Renaissance, an optimism that Niebuhr believed was modern man's most characteristic mistake. If the Renaissance critiqued every historic achievement in the name of an openness to the new and the better, the Reformation did so on the basis of its understanding that every such achievement somehow was tinged with sin, was more contingent than realized and marred by the narrowness of the finite vision that produced it. The Reformation, then, grasped "the tragic aspect of history."33 [33] In one of the least remarked upon, but most important statements in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr stated that "the debate between Renaissance and Reformation must be reopened�the Renaissance was not as right and the Reformation not as wrong, as the outcome of the struggle between them would seem to indicate."34 [34] By this, Niebuhr meant that the most appropriate understanding of the human situation was that good and evil grow apace in history, that life is always getting better and worse at the same time.35 [35] The Renaissance opens us to history's growth and the endless possibilities of man's creative freedom; the Reformation, especially in its more pessimistic moods, understood that, because "evil is negative and parasitic in origin," history's growth "does

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33 [33] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 2, p. 155

34 [34] Ibid., p. 159

35 [35] See also Niebuhr's comment in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. 186-87: "�all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as fulfillment�" I borrow the terminology of life "getting better and worse at the same time" from Peter Augustine Lawler.

not solve the basic problems of human existence but reveals them on progressively new levels."36 [36]

Niebuhr's defense of modernity amounts to a plea to soberly rest in this tension, to neither deny the full extent of human freedom nor believe that history's "growth" brings with it the eradication of man's problems. History is not *simply* progressive for Niebuhr. But he especially seems to be concerned that, as indicated in his essay on the Tower of Babel, we would evacuate this ambiguity by longing for the coherence of our primordial condition -- in other words, he pushes against the impulse to give up on modernity, rather than engage its full possibilities by reopening the debate between the Renaissance and Reformation and living with the uncertainty that follows from accepting man's "endless possibilities." As he puts it, "Because both Renaissance and Reformation have sharpened the insights into the meaning of the two sides of the Christian paradox, it is not possible to return to the old, that is, the medieval synthesis, though we may be sure that efforts to do so will undoubtedly be abundant."37 [37] We cannot, in other words, escape from our post-Babel condition of fragmentation, plurality, and contingency. There can be no synthesis that brings together our confounded tongues in a permanently valid unity. As he wrote in *Faith and History,* we must not fall into "the error of claiming absolute and final significance for contingent, partial, and parochial moral, political and cultural insights."38 [38] For Niebuhr, this was not just a concession to a fragmented world, but a theological

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36 [36] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 2, pp. 318, 320

37 [37] Ibid., p. 207

38 [38] *Faith and History*, p. 196

principle -- and as such, together with the Renaissance and Reformation emphasis on man's freedom, constituted the basis for a defense of modernity.

III. At the Junction of Nature and Spirit: Freedom, History, and Sin

Niebuhr's partiality towards the Renaissance and Reformation's assertion of man's creative freedom must lead to a discussion of his understanding of evil, a term he often used synonymously with sin. That is, for Niebuhr the theologian, the problem of evil was best grasped through the Christian doctrine of original sin, which itself was constituted by a particular interpretation of "the contradiction of [man's] finiteness and freedom."39 [39] This basic tension, "the ambiguity of man's position"40 [40] as the being who dwells at "the juncture of nature and spirit"41 [41] underlies all of Niebuhr's discussion of sin and evil. It shows Niebuhr's profound debt to Kierkegaard, with the anxiety of human finitude being the occasion for, but not the cause of, sin. Niebuhr especially is concerned with providing a *psychological* account of evil, rather than a strictly metaphysical one.42 [42] This hardly is surprising given the themes emphasized in

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39 [39] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, p. 178

40 [40] Ibid.

41 [41] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 46

42 [42] In this I am following Charles Mathewes's emphasis in his discussion of Niebuhr in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, pp. 107-48. This emphasis is clear, however, in Niebuhr's work. Indeed, he specifically endorses a modified Augustinian understanding of original sin not because of its metaphysical tidiness but because it is more "true to the psychological and moral facts in human wrong-doing" than variants of Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism. See Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, p. 248

his essay on the Tower of Babel and described above. Attentiveness to the perils of exercising freedom under the conditions of finitude was perhaps his most consistently dwelled upon concern. Niebuhr once wrote that "where there is history at all there is freedom; and where there is freedom there is sin."43 [43] And so his justly famous account of "man as sinner" in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* begins with a description of the temptation that gives rise to sin.

By emphasizing the temptation that precedes sin -- that there is a situation or context for it -- Niebuhr was attempting to hold two positions in tension with one another: the *inevitability* of sin and man's *responsibility* for it. Though typically, and rightly, understood as some manner of Augustinian thinker, it is notable what Niebuhr grants to Pelagian doctrines in his discussion of original sin. Despite his ultimate disagreement with the Pelagian understanding that all sins are *deliberately* chosen, the emphasis on man's freedom of choice has the basic purpose of guarding "against conceptions of total depravity which destroy the idea of responsibility and thereby vitiate the very meaning of sin."44 [44] Indeed Niebuhr was critical of Calvin and especially Luther for denying free-will "to the point of offering man an excuse for his sin."45 [45] And so, similarly, Niebuhr was a persistent dissenter from the notion that original sin is an inherited corruption, because "its inheritance destroys the freedom and therefore the responsibility which is basic to the conception of sin."46 [46] Sin is always already there; following, again, Kierkegaard, Niebuhr insisted that sin posited itself, but does not have "an actual history of

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43 [43] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. II, p. 80

44 [44] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, p. 248

45 [45] Ibid., p. 244

46 [46] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 55

origins."47 [47] He wanted to retain the notion that sin was inevitable while discarding attempts

to construct "a history of sin." The myth of the fall was not an account of the *origin* of evil but

instead a "description of its nature." Sin was inevitable because of the complex nature of man's

spirituality, our real greatness and capacity to transcend, but not fully escape, our finitude.

Niebuhr held that original sin "is true in every moment of existence, but it has no history."48

[48] By arguing that sin had no history, Niebuhr was trying to maintain a posture of

responsibility towards human evil. The language of inherited corruption, for him, leaned too

much towards sin's *necessity*, rather than inevitability. If original sin is true in every moment, the

responsibility for confronting its nature and considering the factors that give rise to it also

becomes the imperative of every moment. To give evil a history was to evade responsibility for

it, to passively consign not just its origins, but the burden of accountability for it, to some

juncture in the distant past.

     Niebuhr argues, then, that the temptation to sin, though not sin itself, is always before us

in the situation of our finitude and freedom, with the notion of temptation given expression

through the presence of Satan in the Garden of Eden. For Niebuhr, the importance of Satan, the

serpent tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, was that it preserved the basic integrity

of the human situation in the sense that sin was not *merely* due to man's finitude -- to be finite is

not to be evil. "The devil fell before man fell, which is to say that man's rebellion against God is

not an act of sheer perversity, nor does it follow inevitably from the situation in which he

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47 [47] Ibid.

48 [48] Ibid.

stands."49 [49] There is an evil antecedent to any evil human action; temptation must intervene before our situation gives rise to sin. We do sin inevitably, but not *directly* because of our situation of dwelling at the juncture of nature and spirit. Niebuhr wants to avoid an otherworldly dualism where by man, simply by being involved in the flux of nature, of having a particular body and being bound to time and place, is sinful. This is why Niebuhr's political thought and theology, for all the charges of pessimism that are leveled against him, are far more affirming of the world than typically is understood. He consistently argued that sin is not necessary, despite being inevitable -- it is not intrinsically due *only* to our situation, or caused by it. The idea of being tempted by Satan puts evil and sin at a certain remove from our condition of being finite beings -- not only, then, is sin not intrinsic to our finitude, but the situation itself "would not be a temptation�if it were not falsely interpreted by �the serpent.'"50 [50] As Niebuhr argues, "it is not the contradiction of finiteness and freedom from which Biblical religion seeks emancipation. It seeks redemption from *sin*�"51 [51] And so sin, for Niebuhr, as understood through the myth of the Fall, occurs when the human situation is "falsely interpreted."52 [52] This false interpretation was to consider God as jealously guarding the knowledge of good and evil -- of putting a particular manner of knowledge beyond finite man -- the whole eludes man. The temptation encountered was thus "to break and transcend the limits which God has set for

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49 [49] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, p. 180

50 [50] Ibid.

51 [51] Ibid., p. 178

52 [52] Ibid., p. 180

[man]."53 [53] The serpent, in other words, made man aware, or at least newly and acutely

cognizant of, "the limited and dependent character of his existence and knowledge."54 [54] To

juxtapose God's perspective, and the knowledge possessed by God, with human finitude or man's

merely partial knowledge, was to occasion anxiety, which "is the internal precondition of sin"

and "the internal description of the state of temptation."55 [55] That finitude and freedom, for

Niebuhr, are the two elements of man's situation means that man is peculiarly aware of his

finitude, has the freedom to transcend natural necessity and can gaze upon his own contingency.

Anxiety is thus "a permanent concomitant of freedom," and gives rise both to the need to

interpret our situation and the ambition "to be something" over and against "the fear of

meaninglessness which threatens [man] by reason of the contingent charcter of his existence."56

[56] To argue that sin and evil occurs at or is indelibly related to the junction of nature and spirit

at which man dwells is to realize that man has both involvement with and transcendence over

nature. As Niebuhr expresses it, "Man knows more than the immediate natural situation in which

he stands and he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total

situation."57 [57] We seek to envisage the whole; and yet this attempt only can be undertaken

from a finite perspective. Our freedom, the manner in which we partially, but not fully escape the

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53 [53] Ibid.

54 [54] Ibid., p. 181

55 [55] Ibid., p. 182

56 [56] Ibid., p. 185

57 [57] Ibid., p. 182

contingencies of time and place, "is the basis of [man's] creativity but it is also his temptation."58 [58] It is the foundation for human creativity because, surveying our situation as we transcend nature and falteringly reach beyond our finitude, we respond to our situation, seeking security and protection against the perils and contingencies we anticipate. That is, we are involved in the processes of nature and must respond to them, even as we stand outside them and attempt to foresee what may befall us. And so, because of our freedom and through the creative anxiety spurred by the contingency of our situation, Niebuhr writes that man "seeks to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence."59 [59] To put this differently, man, again, can look beyond his immediate situation and "he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation."60 [60] But this cannot be done -- the finite perspectives connected to the his immediate situation mean that man's attempts to gain security and stability in the face of his contingency always ends by giving "an unconditioned value to contingent and limited factors in human existence."61 [61] Man gives himself a false center of existence, overestimates the degree of his sight and stretches his power beyond its limits. Man's greatness and weakness, his creativity and destructiveness are inextricably connected: in his freedom over nature, and in the creative response to the perils he faces as a finite creature, he anxiously senses his weakness and contingency, seeking security at the expense of other life and attempting to hide his ignorance and partiality by the pretension of

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58 [58] Ibid., p. 251

59 [59] Ibid.

60 [60] Ibid., p. 183

61 [61] Ibid., p. 184

claiming to be more completely in possession of the truth than he imagines. For Niebuhr, the sinful and evil response to the contradiction of man's finitude and freedom is a mixture of solipsism and idolatry, of a will-to-power that seeks to dominate others to gain security and a dishonest overestimation of the goodness or justice of one's perspective that ignores the One beyond the many that shows every emanation of our finite and contingent imaginations to be under judgment.

In this can be found, then, Niebuhr's interpretation of sin's *inevitability*. Every choice, every creative exercise of freedom -- even, or especially, those that seek a genuine good -- fall short of the final, ultimate, or total good. "For in the highest reaches of the freedom of the spirit, the self discovers in contemplation and retrospect that previous actions have invariably confused the ultimate reality and value, which the self as spirit senses, with the immediate necessities of the self."62 [62] Every good we choose is a lesser good; every response to the contingencies and perils of our existence is at least tenuously bound to our finitude and thus marred by self-love and the narrowness of a particular perspective: again, where there is freedom there is sin. But this, too, shows our responsibility: the exercise of a man's freedom is none but his own.

Niebuhr's delineation of the nature of sin and evil, its relationship to our situation of finitude and freedom and the attending anxiety of that situation lent itself to a particular analysis of political life, an analysis that especially would bear on what transpired in the twentieth century. The tendency for man to give himself a false center of meaning and existence, to search for a way to subside his felt weakness and contingency, meant that the lure of the state or nation

62 [62] Ibid., p. 258

to become this center was deeply powerful. "The nation," he put it, "pretends to be God."63 [63]

The "collective egoism" of the group outstrips that of the individual, because intrinsic to politics is a "temptation to idolatry" that is "implicit in the state's majesty." 64 [64] Niebuhr understood a state's legitimacy to be connected to a manner of "religious reverence"65 [65] that was more than the simple consent of the governed. The obedience and cohesion required to keep order and maintain a discrete collective identity was dependent on this majesty, as well as fear. Niebuhr especially was sensitive to the psychological dimension of communal identity and the allure of idolizing the nation or state; the individual can lose himself in a larger whole, and the power of the group offers possibilities for self-aggrandizement beyond the reach of the mere individual. He argues that "collective pride is thus man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it."66 [66]

But what also is needs to be stressed is that, despite this sensitivity to the dangers of collective life, and the understanding that the same tendency to transmute man's weakness, contingency, and finitude into sin on the part of the individual could give rise to political evil and a nefarious form of group egoism, a collective will-to-power, Niebuhr refused to give the modern tyrannies he saw a particular genealogy that would explain their coming into being. Because he understood evil as essentially negative and parasitic in origin, the evils of modernity were

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63 [63] Ibid., p. 212

64 [64] Ibid., p. 209

65 [65] Ibid.

66 [66] Ibid., p. 213

modernity's corruption, not its fullest expression. Niebuhr, in the final pages of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, wrote, "Modern tyrannies are not the end product of a long history of tyranny in which ancient evils have been consciously refined to their present consistency of evil. They are rather characteristic corruptions of a mature civilization in which technical instruments have become more effective tools of tyrannical purpose�It is so terrible because it presupposes potential or actual mutualities on a larger scale than those achieved in previous civilizations."67 [67]

The modern, political expressions of evil, like evil more generally, had no history. This is why Niebuhr refused to construct narratives of decline, or look for the origins of the twentieth century's calamities in the past. To do so, he believed, was to evade responsibility for them; to give them their beginnings in a particular locus that was out of our hands was to slip towards defeatism, and perhaps nostalgia or romanticism. His response to the twentieth century, then, was not to search for modern man's wrong turn, but to argue that in every moment of existence, our greatness and weakness are combined, and, as such, that every new good -- every new expression of man's creative freedom elaborated in history -- brought with it new problems. Rather than repress this freedom or condemn modernity, he aimed to construct an ethic appropriate to modern conditions. He sought to redeem modernity, rather than move behind or beyond it. What this political ethic for modernity consists of needs to be explored -- it is the vital counterpart to his insistence that sin and evil are always already there, lurking in real achievements of modern man. His theorization of sin and evil made possible his defense of

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67 [67] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 2, p. 319

modernity, but also left him with the constructive task of developing a response to the possibility of heightened perils.

IV. Towards a Politics of Hope

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr's first sustained reflection on political life, he set forth premises which he never fully abandoned, however much he may have shifted emphasis across the decades of his work and writing. In one of the most concise explications of his basic assumptions about politics, Niebuhr wrote, "Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and the coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises."68 [68] The necessity of coercion and the inevitability of force in politics are due at least in part to Niebuhr's pessimism about finding universal standards of justice, of being able to consider the good apart from our own self-interest. The finitude and contingency of our various situations, the fact that we are bound to a particular time, place, and social position, means that divergent accounts of proper political action are inescapable. As he describes it, "The limitations of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interests sufficiently to envisage the interests of their fellowmen as clearly as they do their own makes force an inevitable part of the process of social cohesion."69 [69] Because difference, and thus coercion,

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68 [68] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), p. 4

69 [69] Ibid., p. 6

are largely inevitable for Niebuhr, he never gives in to the rationalist temptation in politics -- he never believes that simply bringing reason to bear on political and social problems could ever yield a truly enduring justice or lasting peace. Politics necessarily will involve conflict. Reason always is tainted, is bound to some contingency, and thus at best only glimpses something approaching a finally valid principle of justice. And, even more, reason "is bound to justify the egoism of the individual"70 [70] -- it is not just the instrument of man's self-transcendence, but the tool for rationalizing his own interests and desires. This, really, is the translation into political terms of the various themes in his essay on the Tower of Babel: the hope for a truly universal perspective, of being able to rise above the contingencies of nature and history, is a futile one.

Niebuhr also understood that this inevitability of conflict -- that our tongues would remain confounded -- would be particularly tragic given the aforementioned "growth" he saw in history. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he notes that the "very extension of human sympathies has therefore resulted in the creation of larger units of conflict without abolishing conflict."71 [71] Niebuhr grasped the difficulties and dilemmas posed by the rapidly changing, ever globalizing patterns of modernity. He consistently affirmed that good and evil are intertwined in history, and so the scale, and profundity, of the problems confronting modern man would be tremendous, concomitant with the dazzling technological and material achievements that were evident in his day, and even more in our own. For better or worse, the preponderance of problems we now experience are somehow global problems; as Niebuhr wrote in *The*

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70 [70] Ibid., p. 40

71 [71] Ibid., p. 49

Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, "all aspects of man's historical problems appear upon that larger field in more vivid and discernible proportions."72 [72]

Part of the very structure of modernity, then, would be perils unimagined in previous ages. Our inevitable fallibility, combined with the "larger field" of some manner of world community, would mean that our mistakes would be severe. Nearly all of human experience, for Niebuhr, was heightened in the modern world -- our triumphs would be more remarkable, and our tragedies more costly. Modern life would require a real acknowledgement that human freedom and restless change are deeply connected -- that we cannot have one without the other -- and so would necessitate creativity and responsibility in responding to this flux. As Niebuhr described the matter in *Faith and History*, "The rapidly shifting circumstances of a technical civilization require the constant exercise of this responsibility, not merely in order to achieve a more perfect justice but also to reconstitute and recreate older forms of justice and community which the advent of technics tends to destroy and disintegrate."73 [73] This task would require both an openness to, and acceptance of, the instability that follows from admitting the full scope of human possibilities, while never believing history's growth would bring with it solutions to the new dilemmas that it poses.

Niebuhr grasped that the very source of this creative destruction, man's indeterminate freedom and position as creator of history, contained within it the tragic paradox of our ultimate insufficiency to the world, and to each other. The final chapter of *The Children of Light and the*

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72 [72] Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, p. 187

73 [73] Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 200

Children of Darkness bears eloquent witness to this fact, perhaps as much as any other of his writings. As Niebuhr puts it,

> The task of building a world community is man's final necessity and possibility, but also his final impossibility. It is a necessity and possibility because history is a process which extends the freedom of man over natural process to the point where universality is reached. It is an impossibility because man is, despite his increasing freedom, a finite creature, wedded to time and place and incapable of building any structure of culture or civilization which does not have its foundations in a particular and dated locus.

Only a few pages later he admonishes us to acknowledge that "the highest achievements of human life are infected with sinful corruption" and, as he closes the book, implores us to understand "the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements�" 74 [74] This in part is what made possible his defense of modernity -- he recognized the high and the low are curiously combined, and that our greatest possibilities and most frustrating impossibilities are of a piece with one another. The tribulations of the twentieth century, then, again, were not the inevitable d�nouement of a decline began centuries before, but the actualization of our always already there capacity for sin -- and, even more, the dark side of our achievements.

Niebuhr really was arguing for a theory of human failure, a way of understanding our existence and striving as being defined by perpetual, intransigent problems, problems that could not be "solved" but at best mitigated. And in the context of modernity, these failures would take on new dimensions -- the stakes would be higher, and so our awareness of the inevitability of sin, our pride and partiality, would become all the more vital. But Niebuhr, at his most profound, also argues for responding to these failures in a particular way. He does not leave us with mere

74 [74] Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness,* pp. 189-90

analysis, but urges us to adopt a particular political ethic appropriate to his description of those

problems attending history's "growth" -- a political ethic for modernity. If Niebuhr's

understanding of modernity, again, stresses our fragility and fallibility, then the more

constructive elements of his thought calls on us, above all, to develop the capacity for

forgiveness and charity. For Niebuhr, these were the supreme political virtues, and those most

necessary in the conditions of modernity. In perhaps his most striking summary of what it means

to gracefully respond to modernity -- to rest in its ambiguities -- he argues that

> There are no simple congruities in life or history�It is possible to soften the
> incongruities of life endlessly by the scientific conquest of nature's caprices, and the
> social and political triumph over historic injustice. But all such strategies cannot finally
> overcome the fragmentary character of human existence. The final wisdom of life
> requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and
> above it.

> Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved
> by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any
> immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do,
> however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No
> virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our
> standpoint. There we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.75
> [75]

That Niebuhr places the two parts of the above passage -- our inevitable partiality and the

hope for a "final form of love" -- alongside each other should be taken to point to something

essential. Any theory of guilt and sin, one that recognizes the inevitable conflict of various ideals

arising from our finitude and contingency, finds its completion in a theory of forgiveness. It is no

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75 [75] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 2008 [1952]), pp. 62-63

accident that Niebuhr dwells so much upon both charity and forgiveness, and that his political

model was Abraham Lincoln, the figure looming over the conclusion to *The Irony of American*

History and who embodied Niebuhr's ideal of charity. Searching American history, Niebuhr

could find no better example of the political ethic he was urging than that expressed by Lincoln

in his Second Inaugural.76 [76] In *Irony*, Niebuhr writes about the necessity of charity in this

way:

> The realm of mystery and meaning which encloses and finally makes sense out of the
> baffling configurations of history is not identical with any scheme of rational
> intelligibility. The faith which appropriates the meaning in the mystery inevitably
> involves an experience of repentance for the false meanings which the pride of nations
> and cultures introduces into the pattern. Such repentance is the true source of charity; and
> we are more desperately in need of genuine charity than of more technocratic skills.77
> [77]

Contrition, repentance, and forgiveness comprise the essence of Niebuhr's political ethic for

modernity. In an age where our inevitable mistakes are bound to be severe, the necessity for

cultivating an ethic of forgiveness becomes all the more vital. This does not mean we forsake

moral purpose; instead, it is to recognize the ultimate disjunction between God's purposes and

our own, and thus understand that our political striving needs to be concomitant with charity and

the capacity for self-criticism -- in other words, leavened with a form of grace. Politics, for

Niebuhr, was not a sphere for moralists. The children of light -- those sure of their own

righteousness -- always seem to incur the greater share of his displeasure. This should not be

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76 [76] My reading of Lincoln, with its emphasis on charity and forgiveness rather than his
Lockean or liberal understanding of equality, owes much to the interpretation found in Deneen's
Democratic Faith, especially the conclusion "A Model of Democratic Charity," pp. 270-87.

77 [77] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony*, p. 150

taken to mean he simply is arguing for a "politics of limits." For all his brooding, Niebuhr was

not a pessimist in any straightforward sense of the word -- indeed, he closes his essay,

"Augustine's Political Realism," by declaring that we secular moderns read Augustine too

cynically; he could just as well have written the same about his own interpreters.78 [78] And so,

instead of providing us with a too consistent realism, Niebuhr argues for inhabiting the world in

a particular way, for *engaging* political life with both love and justice in mind, fully aware of the

corruptions of power without abandoning the premise that it can be exercised responsibly.

For Niebuhr, a particular form of religious faith was the prelude to such an ethic. Rather

than alternate between moods of sentimentality and despair, his theological defense of modernity

urged a particular form of humility, one that, in recognizing the partiality and contingency of our

understanding of justice, was open to the endless possibilities inherent in "the gift" of human

freedom while still being aware of the pretensions that cause its "corruption."79 [79] He tells us

in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* that

> Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals.
> It requires religious humility. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all
> political ends are relative) is a threat to communal peace. But religious humility is no
> simple moral or political achievement. It springs only from the depth of a religion which
> confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties

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78 [78] This particularly is true of Augustine's secular interpreters. Niebuhr writes, "As for
secular thought, it has difficulty in approaching Augustine's realism without falling into
cynicism, or in avoiding nihilism without falling into sentimentality�Modern �realists' know
the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness."
See Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 140.

79 [79] Niebuhr, *Irony*, p. 158

and values, and persuades him to confess: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God."80 [80]

The seeds of both religious and political wisdom, then, are one and the same. The core of Niebuhr's political ethic was forgiveness; but this was only a possibility for those with contrite hearts. And all this was part of a posture of humility that he thought was more necessary than ever -- a humility that follows from a deep awareness of the tragic and ambiguous elements always found in our attempts to instantiate what we believe to be justice.

This ultimately was a politics of hope, for Niebuhr, because the same faith that led to humility, to a recognition of the inescapability of our contingency and finitude and that brought us to recognize our own fallibility, would allow us to live in history without attempting to complete it. We can thus exercise our creative freedom without illusion, and recognize the permanent problem of sin and evil without despair. It was the cultivation of this disposition that was Niebuhr's most fundamental response to modernity, and the precondition for a politics fit for its conditions. Faith allows us to perceive the meaning in the mystery, to believe in a purpose behind events even as a full grasp of that purpose eludes us. History has meaning not because of our own striving and pseudo-achievements, but because it is in the hands of one whose suffering love can overcome our corruptions. And so Niebuhr reminds us of the perennial necessity of what he described as that "fruit of grace" wherein "faith completes our ignorance without

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80 [80] Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, p. 151

pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope."81 [81]

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81 [81] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 2, p. 321