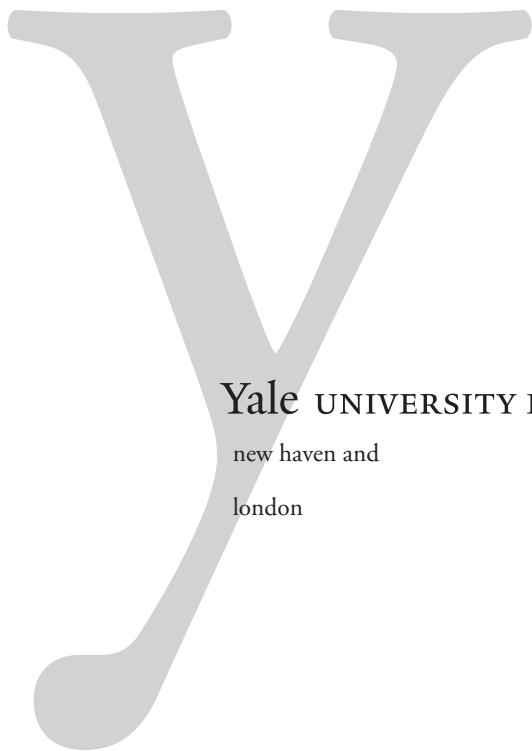


why niebuhr matters



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In memory of
Joseph C. Williamson (1933–2008)

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why niebuhr?

Late April, 2007, a prominent political writer for a major American newspaper interviewed a young and relatively unknown political figure. The writer asked the politician whether he had ever read Reinhold Niebuhr. He said he had, whereupon the writer pressed the point: “What do you take away from him?” The politician’s answer:

I take away . . . the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away . . . the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.

The writer, David Brooks of the *New York Times*, was impressed. “Pretty good,” said Brooks, condescendingly.¹ Two years later, the politician would be president of the United States.

Whether the young president governs successfully, much less in a Niebuhrian manner, will not be known for years to come.

Even his political enemies usually will concede that Barack Obama is smart. Yet sheer intelligence does not get at what was at least “pretty good” in his answer to Brooks.

How could it be that even a very smart American presidential candidate would be asked to summarize the ideas of a thinker whose time had come and gone when he, Obama, was but a schoolboy in Jakarta? Even more, how could Obama have had so ready a retort as to the point of Niebuhr’s thinking? More still, what, beyond personal temperament, might have caused him to use language more common to genteel religious thinkers like Niebuhr than to hard-bitten politicians?

“Evil”—much less “serious evil”—does not trip lightly from the tongues of personages of Obama’s liberal, even leftish, inclinations. Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” and George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” famously appealed in code to very different constituents. But Obama spoke openly, as Niebuhr had, to a deeper political philosophy. He called for stiff political work between naïve idealism and bitter realism—an insistence especially barbed in hard times. Late in 2009, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama addressed a world at war in similar terms. “We make mistakes,” he said, “and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil.”² Once again, pure Niebuhr. Why?

Since the first few years of the twenty-first century there has been a revival of interest in Reinhold Niebuhr.³ His books and essays are being reissued. His name is dropped by speakers and commentators. His work has become a subject of controversy.⁴ Why Niebuhr now? He was not a politician, nor even a political

theorist by training, but a Protestant preacher and teacher of an earlier time.

Niebuhr died in 1971. In his day, he was, as he might be in ours, a moral guide to a politics that took seriously the world as it is. At the height of his powers at mid-twentieth century, Niebuhr was one of a select few able and willing to challenge and rethink the nonsocialist Left in American politics. Today, after a full decade of the twenty-first century, socialism as such (as distinct from the catch-all “socialism” of a good bit of conservative blather) is off the political table, like so many of the applied ideologies that came into their short-lived own in Niebuhr’s day. What Niebuhr leaves to our time are his theories and practical politics of an honest, true-to-historical-fact realism—a political realism that refuses to abandon high moral principles to short-term practical compromises.

Why Niebuhr now? One reason for the Niebuhr revival is that these are times marked by two unsettling historical threats to a world system that had prevailed for a good half-millennium. One threat is the religious challenge to the modern ideal of political culture. In America until Obama’s election, the evangelical Right seemed to have had the upper political hand and still now remains a force defiant of liberal ideals of progress and democratic justice.⁵ Defiance of the ideals and practices of the still most powerful modern state is, of course, also a global phenomenon—and not just by Islamic extremists but by new religious movements in Africa and Central and South America as well as in the surprising Confucian revival in China and East Asia. One way or another, since at least the Enlightenment,

religion has been the thorn in the side of modern theories of history and human progress—a particularly irritating thorn because religion was both a source of many of modernity’s political ideas and an awkward reminder that the secular modern is rooted in the traditions of a not-so-dead past.

The second threat is the anxiety arising from evidence of a deep structural decline of the global dominance of the West. As the new millennium takes shape, the United States, but Europe also, has been politically challenged from the outside as never before—from the terrorisms of vaguely Islamic fringe actors, by the resource-rich nations from the Arctic and Venezuela to Africa and the Middle East, but also by the economic authority and diplomatic independence of East and South Asia.⁶

So far as one can tell in the short run, both threats are seismic shifts in the global order; and both are strangely connected in ways that are not easily explained by techno-troubles and economic crises—the dark underbellies of globalization.⁷

There have been threatening times before. Empires have fallen. Plagues have decimated civilizations. Many times over war has redrawn the map of the world. New technologies changed daily life. New ideas transformed how people thought. These blows, and more, have been absorbed as the centuries passed one into another. Whether the threats that seem so considerable in our days change us or our children’s children is for others after us to determine. All we can do, in the midst of it all, is ask the question that must be asked and answered, at best, partially.

What now? The question turns on the established historical fact that when the worlds change, those living in the transitional

moments must adjust how they live—their hopes and dreams, as well as their access to the necessities of daily life. Their most practically urgent question is indeed, *What-now?*—which is to say: What are we to do now that much, perhaps all, that we have been taught to assume as the givens of our lives may no longer apply?

For almost every *What-now?* moment in history there has been a thinker or leader able to pick up the thread of what was unraveling to weave a new cloak out of the remnants. When Rome fell, there was Augustine. When Roman Christendom shook, there were Martin Luther and John Calvin. When classical metaphysics lost its grip, there were Kant, Marx, and Hegel. When the Qing dynasty collapsed, there were Sun Yat-sen and Mao. And on it goes—Phillip, then Alexander; the House of David, then Isaiah and the prophets; Mary, then Elizabeth; Batista, then Castro; Leopold and the Belgians, then Lumumba and Mobutu. Not all who came after were good or helpful; but there were successors and for better or worse they gave what answers there were to *What-now?*

Why Niebuhr? How might his political theories from an earlier time help us to understand and respond to a changing present? His answer, in a word, would be a political realism that sacrifices neither ideals to mere pragmatism nor politics to bitterness and greed. Modern politics as they have been practiced by modern states have followed simply stated values—freedom, liberty, rights, among others of the kind. But these, such as they are in practice, are values that tip so toward the morality of the individual as to sink before the harshly amoral power of large structural forces—economic failures, fascistic

states, domestic turmoil, environmental collapse, and the like. For nearly a century now, since at least the dawning of the Great War in 1914, the classically modern ideology of the moral individual has suffered blows dealt by the twentieth century's wars, economic failures, and political extremisms. It has survived, to be sure, but in a much weakened condition as global structures continue to outrun both modernity's ideologies and its reluctance to engage what Niebuhr was inclined to call the evil wrought by large structures.

In his day, Niebuhr was widely celebrated for being the one who fixed the terms of a debate we have since lost sight of. In the decades since his death in 1971, realism has come to mean expediency, evil has become a throwaway term, religious enthusiasms have lost somber connection with their originating scriptures, liberal politics has found itself trapped in a cramped corner between rock reality and the hard place left by years of small-minded selfishness. The times call for intellectual seriousness in the face of realities none alive today could have been taught in childhood to imagine.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a figure of such political and intellectual importance that on the occasion of Harvard's 350th anniversary in 1986, then-professor of history Alan Heimert remarked that only two public figures of the century were of an intellectual and public stature sufficient to the occasion. Their mention cut neatly to the point in that both were dead. Niebuhr was one (the other was Walter Lippmann). But Reinhold Niebuhr is less well remembered today in inverse proportion to the charge his ideas might give to the current situation—a charge, that is, and not a shock.

why niebuhr matters

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Winters, the farmlands are barren. Time moves slowly. The setting sun softens the late afternoon for an instant. Dark falls hard. Months later, winter is forgotten. The land is flush with cattle and corn. Summer's heat throttles the pulse. The sun sinks late through the cruel humidity. The knowable world nods off for a time, exposing its sweaty nether parts to the night.

Into such a place in 1892 Reinhold Niebuhr was born. Wright City, Missouri, was then a small, isolated town on the near American prairies, huddled in the embrace of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers hard on America's first east-west trail. Today the trail is paved over by

a national highway. Interstate 70 crosses the Mississippi River to the west at St. Louis. Road and river cut and quarter the country as they did when the road was dirt. At St. Louis, North ebbs into South as West overtakes East. In Niebuhr's time the sections strained. To imagine Huckleberry Finn's float downriver from Hannibal, near St. Louis, deep into the South at Memphis, you must feel the bitter discrepancy that may never fade. America's South, while decidedly not North, is neither East nor West.

Niebuhr's Wright City is just fifty miles to the west beyond St. Louis, a city swallowed in the gathering currents, more a rest stop than a destination. In the nineteenth century, St. Louis, still young, was already a relic of America's European roots. Its stout German culture could not, even then, anchor it against the forces that tug at places like these. In American lore, vast but fixed spaces excite the restless. From the first openings to the West, American culture learned to think of hope and power as the special promises of these open spaces. Ordinary life, however, requires cramped virtues hardened by the realities of small, if boring, settlements. Getting by in close quarters demands endurance over hard time.

When Niebuhr was born, Wright City was far enough beyond St. Louis to have been where pioneers began to sense the dreadful thrill of the West. Even now, when fields far from city lights are bare, you can feel the difference. Winter's northwesterly winds cut to the bone, thirsty for the rivers they had been seeking since they left the Rocky Mountains. In the nineteenth century, the land and the waters produced strong but modest young men and women, willing to husband the land and cultivate the nation.

They were the stock that came from afar to claim the land and a new life. To them Reinhold Niebuhr was born. From them, he learned that America had to outgrow the innocence it was reluctant to shed.

Gustav Niebuhr, Reinhold's father, had come to the United States from Germany in 1881. After casting about in Illinois, farm and city, Gustav studied for the ministry. He was eventually assigned a parish in California, where he and his wife, Lydia, had their first two children. He was, however, a German immigrant destined for life in the Midwest, to which they soon returned. Reinhold, their third child, was born in Wright City just more than a decade after his father came to America. Thereafter, when the family moved, it would be easterly but always to small towns—first to St. Charles, closer to St. Louis; then to Lincoln, Illinois.

In Illinois, Reinhold passed his boyhood to good effect. When his father died in 1913, Reinhold was twenty, at the beginning of adult life. The father's sturdy character toughened the son's interior sense of purpose. Had Gustav lived a long life, he probably would have remained well within the Teutonic geography of the American interior. But Reinhold, heir to his father's moral culture, would obey a different conscience. He admired his father, but he set an independent course.

At the time of his father's death in April 1913, Reinhold was intent on moving east to Yale Divinity School. That fall, after spending the summer filling his father's vacant pulpit, Niebuhr made the move to Yale. There he would receive his only serious

scholarly training beyond the parochial schools of his youth. The Niebuhrs, father and son, lived in times different by more than a generation. The son would be a pioneer of another kind—more restless in his way, determined to unsettle the map of America's moral geography. Reinhold's idea of *the* Church, for example, was surely aroused by his father's faithful service to local parishes. But Reinhold would serve only one parish for any length of time. His primal space was the Church universal—a spiritual dimension eerily like the American idea of space, a place everywhere in time.

Gustav Niebuhr had been a pastor in the German-speaking Evangelical Synod—a denomination of fewer than 200,000 members, most of them then in settled churches in Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio.¹ For this smallish number there were some seven hundred pastors, making the average congregation remarkably large for a day when many frontier towns could not count three hundred inhabitants. This robust ratio of pastors to communicants reflected two basic facts of church life in the near West late in the 1800s.

For one, out there pastors served as community leaders much as the Puritan divines had in the colonial era. Preachers were more, much more, than preachers. They too were frontiersmen—farmers, cowboys, even outlaws when conditions demanded. They were among the true men of their villages—closer to Clint Eastwood's preacher in *Pale Rider* than to the milquetoasts of lesser cinema. In immigrant congregations where worship and business were conducted mostly in German, the pastors were, by training and position, the ones most likely to speak English.

They were thus interpreters of the interests of the German community to the dominant English-speaking society to which they had joined their fates.

The second telling feature of church life in these frontier communities was the pastor's home—a singular institution the importance of which reached beyond a pastor's standing in the community. The parsonage, a uniquely Protestant kind of home, is an uncommonly important social institution for the nurturing of both religious and secular leaders. Growing up under the righteous gaze of a moral community instills a kind of self-awareness not well learned in domestic seclusion. The parson and his family must display a moral perfection expected but not widely practiced in the community.

Imagine the effects of the parsonage on its children. They grow up in a panopticon, a community of judges inspecting the preacher's life for flaws that might excuse their own. The preacher, as in earlier times, is meant to be the *parson*—literally *the person* who models the community's improbable standards of human conduct. Anyone able to endure childhood in the parsonage will stand up well to one of life's significant tests. Many fail. But a preacher's child who passes is likely to have learned how to be an independent yet responsible person.² No wonder so many leaders in various fields are preacher's kids.

This was certainly true of the Niebuhr parsonages. All three children, and a good many of *their* children, went on to leadership positions in American religious and cultural life.

Reinhold's older sister, Hulda (1889–1959), became a national leader in Christian religious education. So, too, did Reinhold's

eventual wife, Ursula (1909–97), who founded the Department of Religion at Barnard College. Their daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, is one of the most respected literary editors in American publishing and author of a most wonderful book on her father's political and religious work, *Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (2003).

Reinhold's younger brother, Helmut Richard (1894–1962), became the Sterling Professor of Theology and Christian Ethics at Yale. Helmut would be known formally as H. Richard Niebuhr, author of still-classic works in the social and theological history of American religion: *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), *Kingdom of God in America* (1937), and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960).

Helmut's son and Reinhold's nephew, Richard Reinhold Niebuhr, would become the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard and, like his father and uncle, one of America's influential theologians. Helmut's grandson, Gustav, was for many years a prize-winning *New York Times* religion editor before becoming a professor of journalism and religion at Syracuse University.

Parsonage upon Niebuhr parsonage turned out children who became national leaders. Yet in so distinguished a family, it was Reinhold who led American religious and political thought to new, if still unrealized, possibilities.

It is not often that one can trace so grand an adult life as Reinhold Niebuhr's to the child's family experience. Families do not determine what is to come from the child; but they can, for better or worse, set the individual on a life course. In Niebuhr's case, his life's work was a creative effort to map the unstable

middle ground between social justice and individual freedom—social values that do not naturally grow in ordinary soil. Gustav and Lydia Niebuhr's small-town family in Illinois was one of the rare domestic plots in which they did.

One often repeated story of the family is of Reinhold as a boy. When his father asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, the child said, as boys often do, that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps—in this case to be a minister. Astonished by the seriousness, if not the originality, of the boy's response, Gustav asked why. Reinhold said, again without apparent hesitation: "Because you are the most interesting man in town."³ Interesting, no doubt; especially in towns like those of rural Missouri and Illinois, where, I can say from personal experience, very little is interesting.

Yet what must have been more deeply interesting, apart from the father's role in the community, was Gustav's way of dealing with his children. He was, by all accounts, a strict authoritarian in the family; but also, in Reinhold's experience, a man of surprising grace. When Reinhold was but ten, Gustav surprised him by asking the boy's advice on the prospect of moving the family to a parish in Lincoln, Illinois. In German families in those days such a thing was not done. Fathers were keepers of the line meant to hold children and women to the straight and narrow. Gustav's readiness to take seriously a boy's opinion was, Reinhold would later say, a measure of the father's "passion for American egalitarianism and American freedom, which for him, meant freedom in the family."⁴

As the father, so the children—the Niebuhr family were, in their way, bred on the contradictions of their religious denomination.

They were as able to obey the strict Calvinist discipline as to enjoy the Lutheran idea of Christian liberty. By later standards, these were a strange breed of evangelical, but evangelicals they were. They were not alone among American evangelicals, but surely they stood out for their discipline in keeping faith with the two contradictory wings of Protestant Christianity.

This sort of cultural double-consciousness is encouraged in immigrant communities where the old ways and the new must somehow work together; all the more so among Germans like the Niebuhrs. Their tolerance of religious differences was consistent with their honest willingness to hold true to their German culture (then, early in the 1900s, the pinnacle of intellectual and cultural authority around the world), while at the same time taking on the new American values (then still the brash but honest values of individual freedom). Religiously, Calvinism demanded judgment (as did the Germanic culture), hence the rule of justice; Lutheran principles of spiritual liberty spawned resistance to domination (like the spirit of the American pioneers), hence the heart's openness to freedoms.

In Niebuhr's day, German-Americans were—as through much of American history—the largest group of non-English immigrants.⁵ Religiously, the Germans came in all denominations. Mennonites predominated in rural Pennsylvania, Lutherans in the upper Midwest, and Catholics in the big cities. Those of the Evangelical Synod of North America (or, to be geographically precise, of the American Midwest) were unlike other German religious groups in the way they held together the opposing elements of Reformed and Lutheran thinking.

From the secular outside, this may seem to be a distinction without a difference. But historically it is a difference of religious traditions as distinct as that between the Shi'a and the Sunni—both of the same religious faiths, each with a difference as to how religious doctrines are to be understood.

Reformed Protestants are of the lineage of John Calvin (1509–64), the French theologian and founder of theocratic Geneva whose teachings led to Puritanism. Lutherans, of course, follow in the tradition of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the German priest who broke doctrinally with Roman Christianity. As Calvin's teachings led to religious dissent, Luther's led to one of the more tradition-bound of the Protestant sects. Both wings of the early Protestant movement were evangelical. Together they disestablished Roman Christendom in Europe. Each, thus, was radical in its way. But while Calvin's God was stern, he was also a god of dissent and hard work in the world. Luther's God was more generous and forgiving, but a god who meant to enforce a strict line between church and world. Thus, appearances aside, the Puritans were dissenters, hence political trouble for the authorities. The Lutherans were traditionalists, conservatives who made trouble only by accident of their religious beliefs.

Imagine, then, the improbability of a religious group like the Evangelical Synod of North America. Though smallish and remote, unlike other nineteenth-century sects this group of evangelicals kept its poise in the crosswinds of Protestant disputes. Others hunkered down in one or another doctrinal corner. Niebuhr's Evangelical Synod stood against both currents—one religiously traditional, the other dissenting. Churchgoers of this

temperament are ready to tolerate substantial differences in the rules and conditions of religious life.

As time went by, the German Evangelical Synod joined in 1934 with other denominations of like disposition to become the Evangelical and Reformed (or, E and R) Church, which in time joined with the Congregational Church to become today's United Church of Christ. Naturally, through the transitions the pure contradictions of the nineteenth-century Evangelical Synod softened or fell away. Still, when the E and R merged with the Congregationalists in 1957, Niebuhr drew upon a lifetime of experience with religious differences in his own evangelical tradition to say:

The union of the Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed churches represents . . . a rather unique achievement in the history of Protestantism and not only of American Protestantism. That achievement can be most briefly designated by recalling that all previous Protestant mergers have been "family reunions"; that is, they have united or reunited churches of the same faith such as Lutherans, Methodists or Presbyterians, who had become divided by some historic contingency. This church merger unites two churches which had a different polity, theological orientation, and a different cultural history. They had little in common, in short, except the common element which ecumenical Protestantism has increasingly developed, particularly in the religious pluralism of our nation.⁶

By "cultural differences" he meant the Germanic discipline that predominated in his Evangelical and Reformed Church and the English traditions of liberty and dissent that were stronger among the Congregationalists in America.