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“Being Wrong and Being Right: A Response to Larry Rasmussen and Robin Lovin”

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**BEING WRONG AND BEING RIGHT:
A RESPONSE TO LARRY RASMUSSEN AND ROBIN LOVIN**

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ABSTRACT

Larry Rasmussen and Robin Lovin have offered compelling perspectives on Reinhold Niebuhr's legacy, asking whether he was wrong or right on the economy, and whether Stanley Hauerwas's analysis of Niebuhr's work is wrong or right. In this reply, Scott Paeth argues that Niebuhr was a complex theological thinker and social critic, and is best understood as a "pragmatic idealist" who was willing to change strategies in response to changing circumstances. He was also quintessentially a public theologian who, contrary to the arguments of Stanley Hauerwas, was a vociferous critic of his social context rather than an assimilated spokesperson for it. Finally, Paeth offers some suggestions about what Reinhold Niebuhr's legacy might mean in light of the American election of 2004.

The blessing and the curse of studying Reinhold Niebuhr is often simply the difficulty of figuring out *which* Reinhold Niebuhr it is that you're studying. He was a thinker who exhibited in his work a "courage to change"¹ over time and in light of new circumstances, and any analysis of his thought that treats him, as Professor Rasmussen notes, as a static figure, is bound to get the whole wrong even if it is right about a particular part. In that sense, then, it seems inevitable that any short article, and therefore any

1. The phrase "courage to change" comes of course from Niebuhr's famous "Serenity Prayer," in which he petitions God for the "Serenity to accept with grace the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." The history of the Serenity Prayer is recounted by Elisabeth Sifton, Reinhold Niebuhr's daughter, in her recent book, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003). The phrase is also the title of one of the earliest biographies of Niebuhr, Jane Bingham's *The Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

response to a short article is bound to get Niebuhr wrong in some sense simply by virtue of failing to be encyclopedic.

With that caveat in mind, there are three facets of Reinhold Niebuhr's identity as a person and a thinker that become clearer in reading the articles by Larry Rasmussen and Robin Lovin, and I would like to organize my response around those facets. The first is Reinhold Niebuhr's role as a social critic. The second is his character as what I would like to call a "pragmatic idealist," and the third is his approach to understanding theology as a particularly *public* task. I will conclude by asking briefly what this then means for us.

Niebuhr the Social Critic

Larry Rasmussen's article reveals once again the moral substance of Niebuhr's social criticism. He was no cold analyst of events, nor was he simply attempting merely to offer a descriptive account of the relationship of Christianity to questions of social responsibility. One consistent theme that runs through the development of his thought, even as he evolved from the relatively "hard" socialist of the 1930s to an acceptance of New Deal social democracy in the 1940s and 1950s, was his rejection of economic dogmatism, and his desire to find economic solutions that would result in the creation of a more just society.² In contrast to the Hegelian determinism of a Francis Fukuyama, for whom cold analysis is often a mask for ideological passion, Niebuhr wore no masks. He was out to change the world, and the changes in his own understanding of socialism and democracy were a reflection of how he believed concrete change for the better could be achieved. This can be seen, for example, in his commentary on the death of Franklin Roosevelt:

Roosevelt was no systematic political thinker, but he saw the main issue clearly and acted upon his convictions with as much consistency as the confused state of American public opinion would allow. Even his lack of consistency and his infinite capacity for improvisation had their virtuous sides, for it

2. The second volume of Gary Dorrien's history of liberal theology in the United States ably traces some of those developments. See Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900–1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 435ff. Other useful testimonies to the evolution of Niebuhr's social and moral vision can be found in Charles Brown's *Niebuhr and His Age* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2002), and Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Niebuhr's own "Intellectual Autobiography" in the *Festschrift* by Kegley and Bretall touches only lightly on his socialism, but maps in broad terms the general development of his anthropology and its relationship with his ethics. See Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 3ff.

is a question whether a more consistent or doctrinaire exponent of his policy could have achieved as much national unity around his central purpose as he achieved. While it is much too early to assess his place in American history adequately, one may hazard the guess that future historians will regard his administration as a new level of maturity in domestic policy. Here the nation became aware of the depth of the problems of justice in an industrial society and of the necessity of dealing with them politically.³

Niebuhr's admiration for Roosevelt's improvisatory talent reflects Niebuhr's own irenic spirit. It was not adherence to political doctrine that was important, but simply the creation of concrete solutions to pressing problems.

In that regard, Professor Rasmussen is right to note John Bennett's appeal to keep asking the socialist questions even if we must reject the socialist answers.⁴ The "socialist questions" were always at the forefront of Niebuhr's thinking about economics: How can we ensure economic justice? How can we empower workers to struggle for their rights in the workplace? How can we make work socially meaningful and preserve the dignity of those who work in squalid conditions? How do we put a dent in the problem of poverty on the national and ultimately the global scene?⁵

If the term "socialism" continues to have a meaning in the "post-socialist" world it is as a moral critique of the objectifying tendency that seems to be inescapable in capitalism. It is objectifying in the sense that as a system it transforms us into commodities and consumers, and doesn't have the capacity to view us as much else. At their best, socialists have sought to maintain human identity in every sphere of our common life, including the economic sphere. In this regard, Karl Polányi's description of socialism as the resistance of society to domination by the economy is worth noting; Niebuhr's socialism is of this character.⁶

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *A Reinhold Niebuhr Reader*, ed. Charles C. Brown (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 63.

4. Until reading Professor Rasmussen's article, I had not known that Bennett was the source of this phrase. I first encountered it in the words of William Sloane Coffin, on whom Bennett's influence was evident. See John Bennett, *The Radical Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 151; William Sloane Coffin makes reference to his dialectic in an interview with Bill Moyers, the transcript of which may be found at www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript310_full.html.

5. References to these issues can be found distributed rather generously throughout Niebuhr's corpus, and are often represented in his shorter occasional writings. See, for example, the short pieces collected in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957); *A Reinhold Niebuhr Reader*.

6. See Karl Polányi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957).

As a social critic, Niebuhr possessed a capacity for moral clarity while at the same time displaying a talent for political nuance. Getting the economic questions “right” for Niebuhr was a central component of creating a society that more and more closely approximates the highest possibilities of human potential. It is the desire to strive for such approximation in the context of the concrete social situation that makes Niebuhr a “pragmatic idealist.”

Niebuhr as a Pragmatic Idealist

At first blush, the description of Niebuhr as an “idealist” of any stripe might seem to be surprising. A great deal of Niebuhr’s energy during the peak of his career was taken up with the critique of the various “idealisms” to which Christian theology was subject. In particular, Niebuhr’s entire project of Christian Realism was dedicated to the proposition that the idealism of the social gospel movement failed to grasp the depths of the problems of human sin and egoism, and turned too optimistically to a consideration of what it was possible for humans to accomplish in terms of achieving social reform. Is it not then slightly strange to label Niebuhr an “idealist” of any sort?⁷

I use the term “pragmatic idealism” to describe Niebuhr’s approach with some caution. If “idealism” is taken to mean the political naivety that was typical of the Christian liberalism of the early 20th century, then Niebuhr was of course no idealist. But in condemning this brand of naïve idealism, Niebuhr nonetheless left a place for the ideal in the formulation of a political ethic.⁸ Niebuhr’s realism cannot be reduced to *realpolitik*, and this is precisely because of the important place that idealism holds in Niebuhr’s thought. His realism is realistic precisely in its desire to discern that which is really morally possible in light of our highest ideals. This means taking account of relations of power within society. Thus, in a typical passage from *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr writes:

All social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. While no state can maintain its unity purely by coercion neither can it preserve itself without coercion. Where the factor of mutual consent is strongly developed, and where standardized and approxi-

7. One needn’t look far in the corpus of Niebuhr’s writings to find evidence of his scorn for that brand of idealism that believes religious principles can be applied without remainder to the problems of social life. This brand of idealism is often associated in Niebuhr’s writings with sentimentalism, utopianism, moralism, and illusion. See, for example, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 257ff.

8. This point is also accentuated by Gabriel Fackre in his volume, *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), chapter 4, “Realism and Vision.”

mately fair methods of adjudicating and resolving conflicting interests within an organized group have been established, the coercive factor in social life is frequently covert, and becomes apparent only in moments of crisis and in the group's policy toward recalcitrant individuals. Yet it is never absent... 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.⁹

Robin Lovin helpfully points us to the pragmatic dimension of this by accentuating Niebuhr's debt to the pragmatism of William James. This pragmatism is once again tied to a desire to determine what social strategies are concretely feasible in light of who we are as people and where we are as a society. But pragmatism in this sense does not define the boundaries of moral truth for Niebuhr. Rather it merely serves to define the boundaries of the socially possible. Truth as the discernment of our Nature and our Destiny exists apart from questions of workability for Niebuhr and is tied to our ethical ideals.

Whenever religious idealism brings forth its purest fruits and places the strongest check upon selfish desire it results in policies which, from the political perspective, are quite impossible. There is, in other words, no possibility of harmonizing the two strategies designed to bring the strongest inner and the most effective social restraint upon egoistic impulse. It would therefore seem better to accept a frank dualism in morals than to attempt a harmony between the two methods which threatens the effectiveness of both.¹⁰

To be a Christian for Niebuhr is precisely to perceive in the person and the teaching of Jesus Christ an ideal human possibility which is attainable only through individual sacrifice. This is not to say that such idealism can't have socially beneficial effects, but as a comprehensive social strategy it is beyond human capacities.¹¹

The reason for this can be seen clearly in Niebuhr's anthropology, in which sin is an inescapable but not inevitable part of our human condition.¹² Caught as we are in the tensions between our finitude and our freedom, it is nevertheless *possible* to live within those tensions and refuse to sin either through pride or self-abnegation. However, each of us inevitably succumbs to that tension, and falls into sin. Our evaluation of what is socially possible needs to be based upon an assessment of ourselves as sinners, not saints, and thus our moral ideals stand as a sort of limit principle against which to measure our actions in light of our possibilities. This

9. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 3–4.

10. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 270–71.

11. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 266–67.

12. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), I, 251ff.

leads, in a sense, to Niebuhr's well-known slogan, quoted by Larry Rasmussen, that our capacity for justice is what makes democracy possible while our capacity for injustice makes it necessary.¹³

It is also at the heart of his assessment of the role of egoism within society. Niebuhr's early acceptance of pacifism was at least in part based on a belief that it represented a moral strategy for public engagement—perhaps the *only* moral strategy. Although Niebuhr had been a vocal supporter of U.S. involvement in World War I, his first-hand experience of its aftermath turned him definitively against war, though not against politics or a robust U.S. foreign policy.¹⁴ And his ultimate rejection of pacifism was a result of a recognition that it was *not* the only moral strategy, and that it could itself become a mask for the pretensions of group egoism and self-righteousness. Thus, in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* Niebuhr writes:

The Christian who lives in, and benefits from, a society in which coercive economic and political relationships are taken for granted, all of which are contrary to the love absolutism of the gospels, cannot arbitrarily introduce the uncompromising ethic of the gospel into one particular issue. When this is done we may be fairly certain that unconscious class prejudices partly prompt the supposedly Christian judgment. It is significant, for instance, that the middle-class Church which disavows violence, even to the degree of frowning upon a strike, is usually composed of people who have enough economic and other forms of covert power to be able to dispense with the more overt forms of violence.¹⁵

No organization, institution, or strategy is finally free from the influences of egoism and self-assertion, and so love *cannot* be the law of life in society. But love *can* provide the motive force for greater and greater fulfillments of the promises of social justice, as long we recognize that justice is only the approximation of love in the midst of our fallen condition.¹⁶

The “practical idealism” of which I speak is one that encompasses this dialectical character of Niebuhr's thinking—always motivated by a deep sense of human potential for the greatest good, and yet cognizant of human capacities for the greatest evil. As a result, social strategies need to take place

13. 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), xiii.

14. See Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 442–45.

15. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1963), 114. See also Niebuhr's discussion of the role of nonviolence in the thought of Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian independence movement in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 241ff. and his essay “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” reprinted in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102ff.

16. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II, 247.

in the murky middle of our human condition, neither as imperfect perfectionists nor Machiavellian realists, but as *Christian* realists, caught in the paradoxes of our fragile human nature.

Niebuhr as Public Theologian

Martin Marty coined the term “public theology” to describe Niebuhr’s work, and it seems as though an entire industry has developed to figure out what he meant by it.¹⁷ What’s clear is that Niebuhr’s theology was always strongly motivated by a concern to make Christianity socially relevant. Of course, this is also the root of much of the criticism of Niebuhr offered by Stanley Hauerwas and others.¹⁸ Can Christianity be self-consciously socially relevant while maintaining its specifically Christian identity? If the Apostle Paul could become “all things to all people,” can Christianity follow his lead and address itself to society in terms that society can comprehend? Hauerwas says no, while Niebuhr clearly believed the answer was a qualified yes.

The basis of Hauerwas’s critique of Niebuhr is a contention that Niebuhr’s Christian Realism simply appropriated without criticism the liberalism of the early 20th-century social gospel. Niebuhr, argues Hauerwas, “always worked within the ‘givens’ of Protestant liberalism.”¹⁹ As a result, there is little in Niebuhr’s theology that could stand critical scrutiny from the perspective of a confessional and christologically rooted version of the Christian narrative. Absent a theology rooted in the practice of the Church, argues Hauerwas, Niebuhr’s theology devolves into a mere projectionist religious humanism, ultimately indistinguishable from that of Feuerbach: “Niebuhr’s theology seems to be a perfect exemplification of Ludwig Feuerbach’s argument that theology, in spite of its pretentious presumption that its subject matter is God, is in fact but a disguised way to talk about humanity.”²⁰

In light of Hauerwas’s arguments, it is troubling to contemplate the disconnection between Niebuhr’s own socialism and the various Christian socialisms with which he was acquainted. As Professor Rasmussen points out, this extends to a refusal to offer any substantial ecclesiology in which the church can be conceived of as a community of moral formation or a

17. Martin Marty, “Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience,” *The Journal of Religion* 54/4 (October 1974): 332–59.

18. Hauerwas’ most sustained attack can be found in his Gifford Lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001). See also John Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrianism,” in *idem*, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

19. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 87.

20. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 115.

model for a just and rightly ordered society. The protestant individualism for which Vida Scudder criticized Niebuhr offers no firm basis from which to develop a *theology* of socialism such as that developed by Paul Tillich or even Karl Barth.²¹ It is for this reason that Niebuhr, perhaps uniquely among 20th-century theologians, could produce a movement of self-proclaimed “atheists for Niebuhr.”²²

These concerns play directly into Hauerwas’ hands. If Niebuhr’s Christianity can be so neatly excised from his political thought, then in what way is it a particularly *Christian* realism at all? Perhaps, at best, it is a realism that takes seriously a secularized version of Christian values, but there is no sense in which God is a living reality in the midst of a called community here. Thus, for Hauerwas and many others who share his disposition, Niebuhr finally *is* in thrall to his context, even if he refused to be assimilated to it.²³

But let us not let Hauerwas off the hook quite so easily. There are a number of problematic elements to his reading of Niebuhr, many of which have been pointed out by Professor Lovin in his article. In the first place, it should be noted, as Professor Lovin puts it, that if it seems that Niebuhr’s later theology strongly reflects the world of 1950s America “that is in part because he built the house.” However, Hauerwas’ strategy of associating Niebuhr so closely to his cultural context does not withstand close scrutiny. As noted by Professor Lovin, as well as Gabriel Fackre and Langdon Gilkey, what distinguished Niebuhr’s theology from the liberal mainstream in the 1930s was precisely how thoroughly he *rejected* the cultural context of liberal society.²⁴

Additionally, it is simply not credible for Hauerwas to attempt to paint Niebuhr as a “naturalist” for whom God was simply a projection of human desires and virtues and Christ was simply a good man. When Hauerwas makes such statements as “Niebuhr’s god is not a god capable of offering salvation in any material sense,”²⁵ one wonders how Hauerwas can interpret such Niebuhrian statements as “the significance of a Christ is that he is a

21. See Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Several of Karl Barth’s reflections on socialism can be found in the anthology *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) as well as in *Community, State, and Church* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968).

22. See Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism: 1919–1941*, 2nd edn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), xx.

23. See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 96.

24. See Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, as well as most other treatments of Niebuhr’s theological development. See also Gabriel Fackre’s point-by-point refutation of Hauerwas’ analysis, found on Fackre’s website: <http://home.comcast.net/~gfackre/Stansley-Hauerwas.html>.

25. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 138.

disclosure of the divine purpose, *governing history within history*,”²⁶ or “the self-disclosure of God in Christ is significantly regarded by Christian faith as the final ‘word’ which God has spoken to man. The revelation of the Atonement is precisely a ‘final’ word because it discloses a transcendent divine mercy which represents the ‘freedom’ of God in quintessential terms.”²⁷ On the contrary, as Gary Dorrien puts the matter:

Epistemologically, Niebuhr posited a divine ground of meaning and coherence beyond all finite notions of meaning and coherence; ontologically, he asserted the transcendence of God’s being over all contingent and temporal being while affirming that God is continually present to God’s creation in the workings of providence, the history of judgment, the grace of renewal, and the stirrings of individual moral conscience.²⁸

Similar criticisms can be offered against Hauerwas’s critique of Niebuhr’s Christology.²⁹ Hauerwas’s selective reading of the literature allows him to cherry-pick those passages most favorable to his own reading, while ignoring the great portion of Niebuhr’s work that stands against it. Hauerwas’s strategy of reading the entirety of Niebuhr’s theological career through the lens of his B.D. thesis gives him ammunition for conflating Niebuhr with James, yet completely ignores the major transformations that Niebuhr underwent throughout his career.³⁰

26. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, II, 5. Italics added.

27. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, II, 67.

28. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 468. It would certainly come as a surprise, no doubt, to scholars of Niebuhr such as Langdon Gilkey and Charles Brown to find Niebuhr’s theology reduced to a version of religious naturalism. Given Niebuhr’s own emphasis on the human need for and longing for God as emerging from a realization that we are incapable of attaining our highest possibilities, it is difficult to understand how he could possibly see any version of “naturalism” as providing a solution to the problems endemic to the human condition. One might understand if Niebuhr were to reply in the spirit of existential resignation, that the human condition is insoluble, but to posit God as the solution to the particular problems that Niebuhr identifies necessitates a rejection of religious naturalism, not an embrace of it. Gabriel Fackre also responds to the charges of religious naturalism levied by Hauerwas in “Was Reinhold Niebuhr a Christian?” *First Things* 126 (October 2002): 25–27.

29. As, for example, Gabriel Fackre has done in “Was Reinhold Niebuhr a Christian?” 26, in pointing to the exchange between Niebuhr and Paul Lehman in the Kegley and Bretall Festschrift, in which Lehman refers to Christology as a “leitmotiv” in Niebuhr’s theology. See “The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 252–80, as well as Niebuhr’s appreciative reply.

30. The details of those transformations are more than adequately documented in any number of studies of Niebuhr. See, for example, Bingham, *The Courage to Change*; Brown, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Age*; Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*; Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*; even Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY:

However, Hauerwas's criticism of Niebuhr's ecclesiology is more accurate and more germane to a criticism of how Niebuhr interpreted Christian public responsibility.³¹ While it is clear from the mass of biographical data about Niebuhr that he was deeply involved in the life of the Church, from his pastorate in Detroit, to his career-spanning practice of acting as a traveling guest preacher, to his role in the founding of the United Church of Christ and the World Council of Churches, one can find only a few traces of the church in the entirety of his theological writing.³² However thoroughly the Church was integrated into who Niebuhr was, it seems to have offered him very little basis for reflection on its social significance. Thus, the critique made by Vida Scudder to which Professor Rasmussen makes reference.

At the same time, it must be said that the issues and themes that motivated Niebuhr's public project were explicitly and self-consciously Christian in their content. While the "atheists for Niebuhr" may have believed that they were accurately reflecting the core of Niebuhr's own viewpoint by embracing his political pragmatism and discarding his religious commitments, they were in fact distorting it.

Niebuhr's public theology was rooted in a Christian commitment to the idea that morality is a *civic* enterprise, rooted in, but not chained to, the life and activity of the Church. As such, our obedience to the imperatives of Christian morality may be judged by how well we live our lives in relation to our neighbors, and in relation to society as a whole. Far from being "resident aliens" in the midst of a society that doesn't really concern us,

Cornell University Press, 1985, 1996). This last is a seriously flawed work, but even so represents a number of the key transformations of Niebuhr's theological development. Since Hauerwas relies on it almost to the exclusion of other biographical resources, one may well wonder how he could conclude that Niebuhr's theology remains largely static from the time of his B.D. thesis.

31. However, this is not to suggest that Hauerwas himself has an adequately formulated ecclesiology. As Jeffery Stout has pointed out, despite Hauerwas' claims that his ecclesial ethics do not lead to sectarianism, his combination of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of modernity with John Howard Yoder's Mennonite conception of the church cannot escape this charge: "*One cannot stand in a church conceived in Yoder's terms, while describing the world surrounding it in the way MacIntyre describes liberal society, without implicitly adopting a stance that is rigidly dualistic in the same respects that rightly worried Hauerwas in 1974.*" Jeffery Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 149. Italics in original. Stout's criticisms of Hauerwas' inconsistent conception of modernity, which extends to the very media through which Hauerwas most commonly expresses himself, represent a substantial challenge to the entirety of Hauerwas' project.

32. Gabriel Fackre finds the best evidence of Niebuhr's ecclesial identity in the collection of sermons and prayers assembled by Ursula Niebuhr after his death. See Fackre, "Was Reinhold Niebuhr a Christian?," 26.

Niebuhr demonstrates how Christian commitment can call us to a responsibility that does not seek solace in pristine moral purity.³³

Does this imply that Christians must undertake moral risks in the effort to speak meaningfully and efficaciously to modern society? Might those risks perhaps even include risk to our very souls? Yes and yes. Yet I would still say that I would rather risk the fallacy of cultural captivity with Niebuhr and have something meaningful to say than maintain a Hauerwasian purity and risk the concomitant fallacy of indifference in the name of moral purity.³⁴ If Hauerwas was serious when he suggested at the 2003 Meeting of the American Academy of Religion that the proper response of the Christian to September 11th was, echoing an old joke, “what do you mean ‘we’, white man?” then it is clear to me at least that whatever deficiencies may exist in Niebuhr’s public theology, they are far superior to the dead end of self-reflective Hauerwasian enclosure.

33. One might almost believe that Niebuhr was envisioning Hauerwas when he wrote: “The religious idealist, confronted with these stubborn obstacles to the realization of his ideals, is tempted either to leave the world of political and economic relations to take the course which natural impulse prompts, or to assume that his principles are influencing political life more profoundly than they really are. He is tempted, in other words, either to defeatism or sentimentality. We have previously considered the social indifferentism which results from a too purely religious interpretation of sin. Very closely akin to this indifferentism is the defeatism which results not from a purely religious conception of good and evil but from a definition of the ideal in such pure moral terms (i.e., absolute love) that the more complex political and economic relations are clearly outside of the pale of the religio-moral ideal. Religion, in short, may be indifferent toward or despair of the politico-moral problem not only when it makes an unequivocal contrast between the divine and the human but when, remaining on the human and moral level, it adopts a rigorous perfectionism in stating its moral ideal.” Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 76.

34. Jeffery Stout makes an acute point about just how pure Hauerwas’ ethics in fact are. He writes: “Hauerwas’s theological ethics can succeed on its own terms only if it faithfully espouses the life and teachings of Jesus in their entirety. With the pacifism in his position receiving the emphasis he has always intended it to have, his main challenge now will be to explain more clearly than before why some apparently strict teachings from the New Testament warrant a rigorist emphasis while others do not. He has taken a clear stand against abortion, which is not mentioned in the New Testament but strikes him as obviously incompatible with a commitment to nonviolence. Perhaps he has somewhere drawn morally rigorous conclusions on topics concerning which the New Testament would seem to be a costly teaching for many of the people in his audience—remarriage after divorce for example, or the chances of a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. If so, the pronouncements have escaped my notice.” Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 160. In this vein, one is again reminded of Niebuhr’s admonition that one cannot selectively apply the teachings of Jesus in the name of Christian perfectionism while rejecting them when they are socially inconvenient. If the Church is a community of character set apart from the world by its adherence to the teachings of Christ, what would that imply for the panoply of moral issues that Hauerwas has heretofore ignored?

What Does This Mean for Us?

Near the end of his written remarks, Professor Rasmussen wisely refrains from editorializing about the current state of the world in light of some of what we have to learn from Niebuhr. I make no claims to such wisdom, and so I feel compelled to tie some of this discussion about getting things right and getting things wrong regarding Niebuhr to the prospects of a United States in a second Bush administration.

For those of us who take the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr seriously, there is an obligation to remain tied to what one Bush administration official has derisively called the “reality-based community,” that is to say, the community of those who are not held in thrall to the ideological commitments of movement conservatism, particularly its *laissez-faire* economic policies and expansionist military policies.³⁵

Niebuhr, I think, would have been happy to be counted among the members of the reality-based community. In light of the huge differentials between the richest and the poorest in the United States and throughout the world; in light of the entrapment of so many social goods to a perspective that maintains that the private sector can do no wrong and the public sector can do no right; in light of the daily reports from Iraq of a large and increasing body count of Americans, British, and Iraqis; and in light of the commitment of an increasingly large portion of our government to policies that would roll back many of the New Deal reforms that made capitalism a viable vehicle for the establishment of social justice, I think Niebuhr would indeed continue to press the socialist questions, and would indeed continue to remind us of the self-delusional dimensions of nationalism and imperialism. Above all, he would have reminded us that we have a moral responsibility in society to act on behalf of justice for all, and to face with courage the realities of the world in which we live. In light of that, I believe he would encourage us, if he were analyzing our situation as he so adroitly analyzed his own, to struggle for those changes that would begin to make the world more fully just, while recognizing always the limitations that self-interest places on even our deepest aspirations. After the election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, Niebuhr wrote the following, which may serve as a reminder for us in 2005:

In short, the election campaign, taken as a laboratory test, reveals political man as capable of rational analysis of our common fate and of moral estimates of his own and his neighbor's rights. But the rational and moral considerations are in every instance colored by interest and passion. The democratic process

35. See Ron Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 17, 2004), 44ff.

is, therefore, not so much a meeting of the minds in which the truth prevails, as it is a contest of interest dominated by the fortuitous circumstance and not by rational argument. Democracy must be regarded, on the one hand, as a system of government which men's rational and moral capacities make possible, and on the other hand, as a system of checks and balances which the corruptions by interest and passion make necessary. For these corruptions as revealed in the campaign are precisely those which make life insufferable in a tyrannical regime and which are robbed of their virulence by the checks and balances of democracy.³⁶

While this is perhaps not the highest note on which to end, it is nonetheless a hopeful note, and leaves us to reflect on the questions of morality and power which were the stuff of Niebuhr's work throughout his life. Human capacities being what they are, we can never ensure the rightness of our own course of action. Yet responsibility demands that we set a course nonetheless, with all of the wisdom, fortitude and courage we can muster, to bring about a greater justice in a world of need.

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36. Niebuhr, "The Republican Victory," in *idem, Love and Justice*, 65. In private, it seems, Niebuhr was even less optimistic than this passage indicates. According to Elizabeth Sifton, Niebuhr was deeply discouraged by Eisenhower's election. She reports of his correspondence with Felix Frankfurter: "'For the first time in many decades,' Pa had confessed, 'I feel seriously concerned about the future of this great country, because the two men who seem to be guiding its destiny [Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles] seem both to be stupid. The one is amiable and the other not, but the stupidity is equal.' Frankfurter was apparently able to keep his tongue firmly in his cheek. He responded to Niebuhr through Ursula: "When Reinie speaks of stupidity, remind him that 'Gegen die Dummheit kämpfen selbst die Götter vergebens' [Against stupidity even the gods fight in vain]. And when stupidity is mixed with self-righteousness we have devil's bread." *The Serenity Prayer*, 331–32.

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