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Davis & Good: Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics

Daniel Clifford

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BOTH FAIR AND FAR

REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON POLITICS. His Political Philosophy and Its Application to our Age as Expressed in His Writings. Edited by Larry R. Davis and Robert C. Good. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960. xviii, 364 pp.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON POLITICS is an excellent putting together of the political theology of Dr. Niebuhr in his own words taken from a large number of books and articles. Such syntheses tend to have a patch-work quality, but this one forms a coherent, smooth-flowing whole. There is much erudition, a sympathetic tolerance for those things with which he does not agree, an eminent fairness in his judgments. For instance, how many times does one hear it said without qualification of any kind that separation of church and state is written into the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States? But listen to the qualified statement of Dr. Niebuhr:

Thus our constitutional fathers quite obviously and quite rightly wanted to prevent the establishment of religious monopoly. That is the clear meaning of the First Amendment. It is not at all clear that they sought to prevent the state's support to religion absolutely, provided such support could be given equitably to all religious groups. Whether that should be done is a question of public policy upon which we may have different opinions. It may well be that the religious heterogeneity of America is such that the state support of religion is not advisable.

But we ought not to prejudice that issue in the name of a principle of 'separation of church and state' which in exact constitutional terms goes no further than the prohibition of the establishment of one religion and the suppression of others. Though it is important to resist pressures which would give any religious group a special advantage in our nation, it might be worth noting that there is no ideal solution of the relation of church and state. Our American principle of complete separation is a valuable heritage; but no one can deny that the price we pay for it is the official secularization of our culture.

It would be difficult to find a fairer statement than that anywhere, and in this and many other statements in the book Catholics will feel a bond of understanding with the author. They will agree with many of his particular analyses, very acute and balanced. But with the thesis of the book they must disagree. This thesis cannot forge a basis for agreement between Protestants and Catholics in the realm of politics. For it is a very detailed and profound application of the theological conceptions of the Reformation to politics; it involves very different notions of nature and the supernatural, of sin and grace and faith. The Natural Law which in general can serve as a basis for common action between Catholics and non-Catholics is rejected chiefly on theological grounds. Let me not be misunderstood as saying "on narrow or sectarian grounds". On the contrary. Dr. Niebuhr is the first in the history of Protestantism who seems to have thought out profoundly and in detail all the implications of the guiding principles of the 16th-century reformers (prescinding from certain excesses and exaggerations as they apply to politics) and to have organized

them into a coherent whole. Of those principles Dr. Niebuhr is profoundly convinced.

The primary mistake of Catholic theory is precisely the sharp and absolute distinction which it makes between natural law which states the requirements of man as creature and the *justitia originalis* which states the requirements of man's freedom. It speaks of an original righteousness which was lost in the Fall and a natural justice which remains essentially uncorrupted by the Fall. This distinction obscures the complex relation of human freedom to all of man's natural functions, and the consequent involvement of all "natural" or "rational" standards and norms in sin. There is therefore no uncorrupted natural law, just as there is no completely lost original justice. The freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities, and the sin of man perennially insinuates contingent and relative elements into supposedly absolute standards of human reason.

Perhaps nowhere in the book is the profound and irreconcilable difference of views clearer than in this passage. For a Catholic, human nature is a good even were it never elevated to the supernatural order. Because the supernatural order is something higher and better, nature does not for that reason become something bad. That nature is from God. Objectively certain things are in conformity with that nature; other things are not. The more important of these goods in the moral order are known to men (at least to those who have reached the age of reason) through their moral conscience. And this is their understanding of what St. Paul says:

The gentiles who have no law do by nature what the Law prescribes, these having no Law are a law unto themselves. They show the work of the Law written in their hearts.

This notion of an unwritten law which is the foundation of every positive law was known to the Greeks and the Romans. It is found in *Antigone*, in Socrates at his trial and in his discourse before his death. But it is found especially in the philosophers, in Zeno, Plato and Aristotle. It recurs constantly in the writings of Confucius. For a Catholic, this is an argument for the truth of the doctrine of Natural Law. For Dr. Niebuhr and many non-Catholic writers the fact that such pagans held it is an added argument against the validity of the doctrine of Natural Law.

Human nature, then, on the natural plane is a good. God could have created man and allowed him to remain on this purely natural plane. There was nothing in man that gave him a right to anything more. But, the Catholic believes, God did raise that nature to a kind of participation in Divine Life, raised man's faculties to a capacity to know what only God by right should know, to love what only God by right is able to love. But grace built on the natural and preternatural gifts, to which man's nature had no right, was lost. But his human nature, as nature, was not changed. Supernaturally he was infinitely badly off. Except for the mercy of the redemption, man was incapacitated forever to perform any act supernaturally meritorious. But his nature was worse off only in having lost that to which it had no right in the first place. On the natural level human nature was still capable of knowing truth and on the natural level of doing good.

Because this good is less good than supernatural good does not make it no good, does not make it evil. But for the reformers of the 16th century, reason lost its capacity for truth; the will lost its capacity for good. Niebuhr rejects this extreme pessimism about human nature.

Karl Barth's belief that the moral life of man would possess no valid principles of guidance if the Ten Commandments had not introduced such principles by revelation is as absurd as it is unscriptural.

But still for Dr. Niebuhr human reason and the absolute natural law are a kind of impertinence toward God, a form of human pride, of human wisdom, which is foolishness to Divine Wisdom.

In *The Blue Cross* (G. K. Chesterton), Flambeau, the jewel-thief, disguised as a priest, had met Father Brown. Later he wanted to know how Father Brown knew he was not a priest...

"But, as a matter of fact, another part of my trade, too, made me sure you weren't a priest."

"What!" asked the thief, almost gaping.

"You attacked reason," said Father Brown. "It's bad theology."

Our point here is not whether Dr. Niebuhr is right or wrong. The point is that after World War II in 1946 and 1947 there was a great deal of discussion in Protestant circles about the natural law and whether that might be a basis for agreement among Christians of different religions, but especially between Christian and non-Christians, a sort of least common denominator for men of good will everywhere. This was more or less in the footsteps of those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States: "We hold these truths to be self-evident... That man is endowed by his nature with certain inalienable rights..." Such a statement is based on an awareness of the natural law as fact. In 1947 a rapprochement was sought among the peoples who differed in their religious beliefs but had at least certain basic principles like that of the Natural Law in common. It was believed that such basic principles could furnish a ground for joint action in many fields. But Dr. Niebuhr (though in a less radical manner than Karl Barth) rejects any absolute natural law. In this he is perfectly coherent with historical Protestant theological positions. But his rejection means that this hope for a common basis for action between Christian and non-Christian peoples through acceptance of the Natural Law can no longer be maintained since a large segment even of Christians does not accept it.

But Catholic disagreement with Dr. Niebuhr on his general thesis does not preclude agreement on many of his conclusions arrived at by a different road. A Catholic will find the book endlessly stimulating, forcing him to re-examine his own ideas; he will find much to agree with in the critique of Catholic attitudes on practical questions.

However, though Dr. Niebuhr seems to recognize that the Catholic Church is not monolithic (for instance, that the ideas of what kind of political structure ought to exist may differ in the United States from those generally held in Spain), he cannot understand the various degrees of unity that exist in the Church. In all that certainly is a matter of the faith there is unity, and so also in the larger problems of morality. Immediately below this level there is again a large area of unanimity, but below that there is still a larger area wholly open for opinion and discussion. Finally, there is the area of practical action, and in this area neither churchmen nor laity always follow the directives of the Holy See. Dr. Niebuhr does not allow for these degrees of variation as, for instance, when he seemingly asserts flat alliance between the common doctrine and some one class of society.

The first is the old power of the landlord who dominated the agrarian society... The Catholic faith had historic affinities with this first class. This affinity placed Catholicism in frequent alliance with feudal-agrarian conservatism and in opposition to both the liberal-democratic forces and Marxist-labor forces.

This was true enough in France, for instance, during the reign of Leo XIII. What Dr. Niebuhr seems unaware of is that Pope Leo XIII used every prudent means at his disposal to try to get the hierarchy and the Catholic monarchists in France to forget their ostrich attitude, get into the realm of practical politics which they disdained as too dirty, and change the republic of France from within. Did he succeed? At that time, not at all. Not only the laity but even the hierarchy, without being openly rebellious, then as now sometimes dragged their feet, showed massive listlessness. Is it fair, then to say "the Catholic faith" about some section of the Church where the directives of the Holy See are not being implemented? "Catholicism?" The Catholics in a certain area or nation or period of time are not the Church. Witness what is happening today to the social doctrines of the Church. There are today Catholic places where very little attention is being paid to teachings put forth so firmly in the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI. Lip-service is paid to the doctrine but practically nothing is done to carry it out. Therefore the Church, as such, is against the mitigation of social evils?

In speaking of the social doctrine of the Church, incidentally, the only thing Dr. Niebuhr finds to quote from the revolutionary encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, is his defense of private property:

In the modern day, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* defines private property as a necessity in terms which can hardly be distinguished from those of eighteenth-century liberalism...

But both Catholic and Protestant social theory tended to make the right to property much too nearly absolute.

Again, is it books of individual Catholics or the official doctrine of the Church that he is speaking of? Of Catholic social doctrine in the official documents of the Church I think Dr. Niebuhr could not say this in fairness.

Therefore, though Dr. Niebuhr perceives in certain instances that the Church is not "monolithic," he compliments Catholics by assuming that they practise a much greater loyalty, a much greater obedience than does, as a matter of fact, exist.

Sometimes one cannot help but feel a little impatient. Dr. Niebuhr, for instance, brusquely dismisses the synderesis ("Good is to be done, Evil avoided") as useless.

It is equally impossible to derive any specific criteria from the general Thomistic proposition that we ought to do good and avoid evil.

Whoever said you could- One cannot derive the whole of reality from the notion of being nor all science from the principle of contradiction. But neither can one form any notion without the notion of being, nor make any statement without implicitly stating the principle of contradiction. Equally one cannot make any moral judgement which does not contain implicitly the synderesis, the first principle of moral theology: "Good is to be done, Evil avoided."

Despite such minor annoyances — sometimes because of them — the book is constantly stimulating. There are penetrating insights into almost every aspect of politics and extremely well-informed comments on many associated practical situations.

DANIEL CLIFFORD, S.J.

IRRELIGIOUS RELIGION?

A BURNT-OUT CASE. By Graham Greene. New York: Viking Press, 1961. viii, 248 pp.

Numbness of soul is not an uncommon experience. It comes to persons who are deeply hurt — perhaps beyond power of healing. A sensitive soul may be hurt so often as to lose all sensitivity and a person not normally sensitive can be shocked into a kind of numbness. This may be mere callousness; but there is also an ultimate condition in which a person no longer cares about anything. What happens to him or to anyone else is no longer of any interest. Nothing matters.