

Reinhold Niebuhr Theologian Profile by David Petty Constructive Theology – Dr. David Scott & Dr. Elizabeth Coody

Reinhold Niebuhr is considered one of the most influential Christian ethicists of his day and his works are relevant to today's ethical concerns as well. Of "Moral Man and Immoral Society", Cornell West said the work "Remains the most important text in Christian Ethics to this day".¹ During his life, Niebuhr's work influenced some of the most prominent change-makers, systematic theologians and even Presidents of the United States of America.² His works on ethics and war ranged from pacifist writings to later writing that violence must always be a possibility.³ His most recognizable work was a prayer asking serenity for unchangeable things in life. The Serenity prayer is now used by AA groups.⁴ Niebuhr's greatest contribution to society may exist more in the leaders his works have influenced than in his own right. Martin Luther King Jr., Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jimmy Carter and more. In 1961, he was referred to as "the greatest living political philosopher of America".⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr was born June 21, 1892 to two German immigrants in Missouri. Reinhold attended Elmhurst College, Eden Theological Seminary, and eventually Yale Divinity School. After earning his MA, Niebuhr would serve a small church in Detroit during the first World War. From 1915 to 1930, he saw the church grow ten-fold and would also see the working conditions of the industrialized auto industry. In his book "Ten Years that Shook My World", Niebuhr speaks often of power differences between the industrialist and the worker. Niebuhr wrote "An industrial overlord

¹ An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. PBS.org. April 02, 2017. Accessed May 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/video/2365984011/>.

² An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. PBS.org. April 02, 2017. Accessed May 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/video/2365984011/>.

³ Niebuhr, Reinhold. Moral man and immoral society a study in ethics and politics. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932. 172.

⁴ "Serenity Prayer." Wikipedia. May 21, 2017. Accessed May 22, 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer.

⁵ Carey, Patrick W., and Joseph T. Lienhard. Biographical dictionary of Christian theologians. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002. 389.

will not share his power with his workers until he is forced to do so by tremendous pressure. The middle classes, with the exception of a small minority of intelligentsia, do not aid the worker in exerting his pressure. He must fight alone”⁶ During his time as a pastor, his theology became more concerned with the well-being of the working class, the power-structures of society as a whole and seeking to bridge these gaps.

In Detroit, Niebuhr became aware of inequality between white people and people of color. He wrote about it on page 250 of his 1932 work “Moral Man and Immoral Society” where he draws a comparison between India during Gandhi’s time and the modern plight of people of color. He called for a non-violent movement within the African-American community. This text would inspire Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” more than 30 years after Niebuhr wrote those words. King wrote: “as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals”⁷. Although Niebuhr’s earliest work would later inspire a young non-violent civil rights activist, his own world-view and theology would shift over the years and eventually he would criticize pacifism. He left Detroit to take up teaching at Union Theological Seminary in 1928. There he would shape theology and intellect of students including Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Paul Tillich began his journey within what would eventually become WWII Germany. Hearing that Hitler had hostile intentions toward Tillich, the faculty of UTS arranged to bring him on-board at the sacrifice of 5% of their salary for Tillich’s first year.⁸ Although Tillich is brought back from what eventually turns into WWII Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would go back to Germany and become a key figure on his own.

At the prestigious Gifford lectures, Niebuhr presented his work entitled “The nature and destiny of man: a Christian interpretation”. By the time he returns to Scotland in the fall, the world is

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr: major works on religion and politics. New York, NY: The Library of America, 2015.

⁷ “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” University of Pennsylvania Website. Accessed May 20, 2017.
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

⁸ Rice, Daniel F. Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence. Cambridge University Press, 2013. 13.

at war and bombs are dropped as closely as Edinburgh.⁹ Seeing war first-hand, he changes tone and begins to critique pacifism in “Christianity and Crisis”. He would later even reject Martin Luther King Jr’s request for help because of this shift. Niebuhr had changed. Although ties with socialist groups would land him on the FBI watch-list, he would eventually be asked to help the US State Department think about a post-war world and he would receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom from LBJ. This post-war world also involved the creation of the state of Israel. He would find himself deep into studies of Jewish theologians and eventually he would develop a close relationship with Rabbi Heschel. Rabbi Heschel would eventually be asked by Niebuhr to read the eulogy at his funeral. Rabbi Heschel said of Reinhold Niebuhr: “For many of us, the world will be darker without you. Your life was an example of one who Did Justly, Loved Mercy and Walked Humbly with his God.”

Reinhold Niebuhr was a pioneer of social-justice focused theology and liberal Christianity. He was a heavy critic of Nixon’s use of Billy Graham to “bless” his politics because the focus was too much on the individual instead of on society. Niebuhr held that sin and evil were inherent in the world and while inescapable, the best people could do was to try to change the social structures in place that were immoral. A theologian and pastor by trade, his work on ethics, philosophy, socialism, power, and morality would be his life’s greatest achievement. His work was, for a time in America a sort of moral and ethical conscience that would guide the hardest questions of their time. Although he passed away in 1971, his work has influenced the thoughts of presidents such as LBJ, Jimmy Carter and Barrack Obama.¹⁰ As long as there are people in turmoil wrestling the questions of good and evil and whether they live in the individual or society, Reinhold Niebuhr will have a place in theology and politics.

⁹ An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. PBS.org. April 02, 2017. Accessed May 20, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/video/2365984011/>.

¹⁰ Obama’s Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr. May 4, 2009. Accessed May 22, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/04/obamas-favorite-theologian-a-short-course-on-reinhold-niebuhr/>

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