

Democracy and Sin: Doing Justice to Reinhold Niebuhr

Joseph E. Hartman

Published online: 25 July 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the most influential and celebrated American public intellectuals of the last century. During a career that stretched from World War I to the Vietnam War, he authored numerous books, sermons, and articles both journalistic and scholarly. His thought ran the gamut from pithy opinion editorials on current events¹ to brilliant theological meditations offered in weekly sermons such as “The Tower of Babel” and “The Wheat and the Tares”² to the scholarly political theology of his Gifford lectures, delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1939 and later published in two volumes as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.³ He is even credited with writing the famous Serenity Prayer.⁴

From 1928 to 1960 Niebuhr taught philosophy of religion and applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he famously captivated his classrooms. In 1948, he graced the cover of the

¹Many of these essays and opinion editorials are collected in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957).

²Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Tower of Babel,” in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), 25–46; “The Wheat and the Tares,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 41–48.

³Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941, 1943).

⁴See Fred R. Shapiro, “Who Wrote the Serenity Prayer?” *Chronicle Review*, April 28, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/Who-Wrote-the-Serenity-Prayer-/146159/>. In its most well-known iteration, the prayer reads: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Joseph E. Hartman is a Ph.D. candidate in government at Georgetown University; jeh93@georgetown.edu. He is currently writing his dissertation, “In His Image: God and Man in the Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr.” He holds a J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School and a B.A. in American government from the University of Virginia.

twenty-fifth-anniversary issue of *Time* over the caption “Man’s story is not a success story.”⁵ In 1962, University of Chicago political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau, a founder of twentieth-century political realism and one of Niebuhr’s many intellectual admirers, described him as “the greatest living political philosopher in America,”⁶ and upon his death in 1971, *Time* eulogized Niebuhr as “the greatest Protestant theologian in America since Jonathan Edwards.”⁷ More recently, in 1998 Modern Library’s editorial board ranked *The Nature and Destiny of Man* as the eighteenth most important nonfiction work of the twentieth century, well ahead of such titles as John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.⁸

Though his outsized influence waned by the time of his death, the past decade has witnessed a renewed interest in things Niebuhr. Since 2004, several of his prominent works have been reissued,⁹ new volumes such as *Why Niebuhr Matters* and *Why Niebuhr Now?* purport to explain Niebuhr’s relevance for our time,¹⁰ and reflections on Niebuhr recur in the prominent journals of the educated class.¹¹ In 2007, presidential candidate Barack Obama revealed to David Brooks that Niebuhr was one of his “favorite philosophers,”¹² which

⁵*Time*, March 8, 1948, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601480308,00.html>.

⁶Hans J. Morgenthau, “Niebuhr’s Political Thought,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*, ed. Harold R. Langdon (Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1962), 109.

⁷“Death of a Christian Realist,” *Time*, June 14, 1971.

⁸“100 Best Nonfiction,” Modern Library, Top 100, <http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-nonfiction>, identifying the Modern Library editorial board’s list of the one hundred best nonfiction books published in the English language since 1900.

⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (1944; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

¹⁰Charles LeMert, *Why Niebuhr Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011); John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹¹See, for example, Paul Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” *Atlantic* (November 2007), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/a-man-for-all-reasons/306337/>; David Brooks, “A Man on a Gray Horse,” *Atlantic* (September 2002), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/09/a-man-on-a-gray-horse/302558/>; James Neuchterlein, “Getting Right with Niebuhr,” *New Criterion* 31, no. 9 (May 2013), <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Getting-right-with-Niebuhr-7631>; Brian Urquhart “What You Can Learn from Reinhold Niebuhr,” review of *The Irony of American History*, by Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, by Andrew J. Bacevich, and *The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy (Just Not the Way George Bush Did)*, by James Traub, *New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/mar/26/what-you-can-learn-from-reinhold-niebuhr/>; and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/books/review/18schlesinger.html>.

¹²David Brooks, “Obama, Gospel and Verse,” Opinion, *New York Times*, April 27, 2007, <http://nyti.ms/wXygrp>.

prompted a burst of Niebuhrian reflections and speculation when Obama won the presidency the following year.¹³

What are we to make of Niebuhr today? His boundless energy and prodigious output renders the evaluative task difficult, not to mention that theology hardly holds the central place in American public life it did at midcentury. In addition, many of his policy positions evolved in response to the exigencies of the matter at hand, leaving writings that have provided grist for both sides of the political aisle: advocates and opponents of America's decade-plus involvement in the Middle East have claimed the Niebuhrian mantle in print, and conservatives and liberals alike have marked him for their own.¹⁴

Trying to categorize Niebuhr as a political revolutionary¹⁵ or a neoconservative, a hawk¹⁶ or a noninterventionist,¹⁷ however, will not do.¹⁸ At the heart of Niebuhr's thought we encounter neither a political liberal nor a neoconservative, but rather a thinker steeped in the philosophical and theological traditions of the West who offers a penetrating assessment of the human condition in the modern world. Niebuhr

was convinced that at the heart of any philosophy, however explicitly it might be based on scientific inquiry or rational speculation, lay its views on

¹³Reinhold Niebuhr and *Contemporary Politics: God & Power*, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴For conservative opinions, see, for example, James Neuchterlein, "Sin, Theodicy, & Politics," *First Things* (November 1998), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/11/001-sin-theodicy-amp-politics>: "Niebuhr's theological perspectives can be made to comport with a number of political positions, but at whatever point on the ideological spectrum they are applied, their influence will inescapably tend in a conservative direction"; Michael Novak, "Needing Niebuhr Again," *Commentary* (September 1972): 52, in which Novak claims Niebuhr as a kind of patriarch to neoconservatism; and John McCain and Mark Salter, *Hard Call: The Art of Great Decisions* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 319–39. Liberal viewpoints include Daniel Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: His Theology in the 1980s," *Christian Century* (January 22, 1986), 66–68; and Brown, introduction, *Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, xxi, xxii: "It remains curious (and painful) to those who knew Niebuhr and whose thought was shaped by his that many in the new generation...use him to support extreme conservative positions he would almost surely have opposed."

¹⁵Cornell West, foreword to Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xi–xiv.

¹⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 60–61.

¹⁷Andrew J. Bacevich, introduction to Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, x–xx.

¹⁸Keep in mind that this was a man who in the course of his long career ran for office as a socialist in the 1930s only to become a dogged anti-communist Cold War liberal. Niebuhr's varied positions prove less inconsistent than at first glance, however, and reflect the need to respond to distinct historical and political moments. In this vein Niebuhr once commented that "[o]ur problem, both in foreign policy and in other affairs, is how to generate the wisdom of true conservatism without losing the humane virtues which the liberal movement developed." "Conservatism and Liberalism," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems: Essays on Political, Social, Ethical, and Theological Themes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 67. But "perhaps it is as useless to define the ideal conservatism as to restore exact meaning to the word liberal...we will be the more successful if we are not too anxious about the exact political source of wisdom, whether from the traditional right or the traditional left," 72–73.

these human issues, on the questions of the meaning of life. For him each philosophy's understanding of fate and the tragic, of human evil and human renewal, shaped all of its other speculations about reality and knowing.¹⁹

In short, Niebuhr insisted that our philosophical systems ultimately rest on subterranean, nonrational presuppositions, or “faiths,” regarding the meaning of life and the nature of man. Thus for Niebuhr, to comprehend and address our religious, political, and cultural challenges, we must first assess the strength and validity of our accounts of human nature, measuring them against “the obvious facts of history”²⁰—tragic facts largely concerned with what Hegel termed history's “slaughter-bench.”²¹ Niebuhr held that human nature presents our first-order problem, and it is only when we take into account *man as he is* that we can essay an approach to the second-order problems of politics.

Man as Sinner

Niebuhr famously began *Human Nature*, volume 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, with this conviction: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.”²² Not politics, not culture, not even philosophy, but *man* presented the central question and the central problem for Niebuhr. He contended that the history of modern thought is largely a history of man's misapprehension of himself—hence *Time's* caption “Man's story is not a success story”—and he attributed much of the political chaos the West confronted in the twentieth century to a naïve and misplaced optimism in human reason and the basic virtuousness of man. Against all evidence, Niebuhr argued, modern man blithely affirmed the capacity of human rationality not only to ameliorate but to solve the problems of politics and culture. Whether through scientific and technological advances and reforms in education and social conditions, modern man *actually believed* that his increased knowledge could finally vanquish human evil, which was not regarded as an innate condition but a historical artifact:

The hope that everything recalcitrant in human behavior may be brought under the subjection of the inclusive purposes of “mind” by the same technics which gained man mastery over nature is not merely an incidental illusion,

¹⁹Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 21.

²⁰Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:4.

²¹G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 27.

²²Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:1.

prompted by the phenomenal achievements of the natural sciences. *It is the culminating error in modern man's misunderstanding of himself.* Thus the principle of comprehension by which modern culture seeks to understand our present failure belongs to the misunderstanding about man's life and history which contributed to that failure. The spiritual confusions arising from this misunderstanding constitute the cultural crisis of our age, beyond and above the political crisis in which our civilization is involved.²³ (emphasis added)

Modern man, despite his significant technological achievements, fundamentally misunderstood himself, and therefore fundamentally erred in his assessment of potential solutions to political and cultural problems.

The unwarranted optimism at the center of this failure Niebuhr attributed to the rejection of the purportedly outdated biblical doctrine of original sin in favor of a naïve confidence in the essential goodness of man.²⁴ Sin, of course, is a term that relatively few take seriously today, despite Niebuhr's famous observation that "the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith."²⁵ Niebuhr made the case that however disfavored the term, however much it affronts and antagonizes our self-regard, it is a necessary component of a realistic picture of human nature. But when Niebuhr spoke of sin, he didn't envision it as a moralistic weapon deployed by a crabbed clergy or resentful bourgeois, but as the best available description of the human tendency toward outsized self-importance, partiality, failure, and moral corruption. In short, by sin Niebuhr meant the bent toward self-deceptive pride that infects the corrupted human will. The evidence, he pointed out, is everywhere, however we wish to avoid it. Niebuhr insisted that recovery of the language of sin offered a way to understand the limitations of our capacity and our projects yet pursue them nonetheless. Armed with this insight, Niebuhr believed, we become more aware of the possibilities and perils of political life and can establish a stronger foundation to our democracy.

²³Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 12.

²⁴It was liberal Christianity's overly optimistic estimation of human nature and its avoidance of the doctrine of original sin that led Niebuhr to reject the Social Gospel movement of which he had earlier been a part. His 1932 volume *Moral Man and Immoral Society* laid out his repudiation of the Social Gospel movement as terribly naïve regarding the complexities of human nature, and by the time of his 1939 Gifford Lectures he no longer maintained any "sentimental" illusions regarding the possibility of bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2:158.

²⁵"I still think the 'London Times Literary Supplement' was substantially correct when it wrote some years ago: 'The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.'" Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man's Personal and Social Existence* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 24.

Realism and Democracy

Niebuhr's renewed emphasis on the concept of original sin caused him to question and eventually to rethink what he understood to be the theoretical basis for democratic politics: its dependence upon idealistic claims regarding the nobility and greatness of man.²⁶ And yet, his more sober-minded assessment of sinful human nature did not lead him to conclude that democracy must give way to authoritarianism. As he famously commented, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."²⁷ Niebuhr thus grounded his defense of democracy upon the ambiguous truth of the human condition rather than on one of the discredited modern mythologies of human progress or perfectibility.²⁸ For Niebuhr, "the same radical freedom which makes man creative also makes him potentially destructive and dangerous...the dignity of man and the misery of man therefore have the same root. This insight...justifies the institutions of democracy more surely than any sentimentality about man, whether liberal or radical."²⁹

Democracy, Niebuhr argued, offers a means to exercise our divinely given freedom while preserving political order as a bulwark against the rise of antinomian anarchy. Notwithstanding this strong endorsement, Niebuhr remained cognizant that "even the best human actions involve some guilt."³⁰ Thus he cautioned those with ambitious projects to remake societies:

Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning. Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in the world than the mature man is in his

²⁶Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 40.

²⁷*Ibid.*, xi.

²⁸:"Niebuhr's understanding of democracy rested fundamentally on a recognition of human equality born of the shared recognition of our insufficiency, and hence of our mutual humility....Niebuhr identifies democratic humility with the long tradition of religious humility, thereby calling both to task for the overestimation of their own sense of righteousness." Patrick Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 254.

²⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, "Democracy, Secularism and Christianity," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems: Essays on Political, Social, Ethical, and Theological Themes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 101–2.

³⁰Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 19.

wider world. The pattern of the historical drama grows more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation.³¹

Confronted by the limitations of human agency in the face of epistemological uncertainty and human fallibility, Niebuhr developed an approach to democratic politics grounded in the simultaneous strength and weakness of human character.³² To aid this approach, he insisted upon the need for the theological virtues of humility and forgiveness, which he considered necessary lubricants for the contentious world of politics.

Politics and Humility

In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr observed:

Democracy...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 and values, and persuades him to confess "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God."³³

Recognizing divine perfection and human fallibility, the appropriate response, Niebuhr argued, is not sinful pride in the rightness of one's position, but humility regarding the penultimacy of one's political ends. To be clear, this is *not* to suspend all judgment regarding the relative good of particular ends—such

³¹Ibid., 3.

³²In this Niebuhr's political theory is in accord with that of Madison and the other authors of *The Federalist*:

Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

Federalist 51, in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and John Madison, *The Federalist*, Gideon Edition, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), 43.

³³Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 151.

judgments are the necessary constituents of political life—but rather to *acknowledge their relativity*. In consequence, no political actor or movement can consider itself and its ideals ultimate or perfect. One can vigorously advance a political agenda while gracefully tolerating one's opponents—a political attitude sorely lacking in today's polarized climate.

While Niebuhr recognized the political destructiveness of moral cynicism, he worried as much about the blasé self-certainty of moral idealism that tends to obstruct tolerance. The failure to recognize the “corruption which insinuates itself into the statement of [moral law] by even the most disinterested idealists”—the failure to recognize their own sinfulness—leads to the naïve and politically dangerous “conviction that their own ideals are perfect.”³⁴ In theological terms, Niebuhr recognized the tendency to thoughtless pharisaism even in the most dedicated moral reformers. An awareness of the pervasiveness of sin in all human endeavors, he argued, reinforces the tolerance of political opposition so necessary to the mechanics of democratic politics. Absent this humility, one's relative political opponents become one's absolute political enemies, and the temptation to leverage the full powers of the state upon the recalcitrant becomes too strong to resist—with all the destructive consequences that inevitably follow.

Despite Niebuhr's effort to carve a middle ground between what he perceived as this tendency to arrogant moral absolutism of the idealists—the “children of light”—and the insidious moral relativism of the cynical “children of darkness,” some have taken Niebuhr's critique of the moral arrogance of idealism for a brief in favor of moral relativism.³⁵ Niebuhr would have rejected this view—though a realist, he would never self-identify with the “children of darkness”—and the characterization of Niebuhr as a proto-postmodern relativist unfairly misconstrues his thought. Niebuhr assessed human achievements, whether scientific, cultural or moral, as contingent not because he endorsed relativism but because he understood all human endeavor as always already subject to the final

³⁴Ibid., 152.

³⁵See, for example, Edward J. Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 130: “Niebuhr is a master at showing the excesses and extremes of his opponents. And every generation needs its gadfly. But one looks in vain in the corpus of Niebuhr's works for any compelling reason why the same charges which are hurled against certain expressions of the natural law cannot be applied *mutatis mutandis* to all other forms; until in the end one is left with an absolute relativism.” Gustave Weigel, SJ, “Authority in Theology,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 451: “A Catholic with gentle malice might ask Niebuhr if his transcendental principle of relativism is *absolutely* valid.” Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in Political Thought and Life,” in *ibid.*, 212: “Relativism was, of course, the inevitable result of [Niebuhr's] belief that original sin tainted all human perception and knowledge.”

judgment of God.³⁶ By beginning with God and not man, Niebuhr revealed himself as neither modern *nor* postmodern. Against the moderns, he believed that all perspectives, from the most secular to the most religious, begin with a presupposed faith rather than a rational foundation.³⁷ Against the postmoderns, he would insist upon the possibility of dialogue across perspectives—dialogue in which we can adjudicate the superiority of one view over another³⁸ to the extent that it better comports with “the actual facts of the human situation.”³⁹ Indeed, a commitment to such persuasion was central to his apologetic approach.⁴⁰ In short, Niebuhr contended that while the reality of sin commends our humility, it does not liberate us from exercising judgment, albeit judgment informed by the revealed knowledge of God, in political and moral matters. After all, Niebuhr wrote, “Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God.”⁴¹

Forgiveness and Hope

It is in this confrontation with God that man becomes fully cognizant of his evil. Knowledge of God begets awareness of sin,⁴² and if man is a sinner the obvious consequence is that he will sin and may, even in his most well-intentioned endeavors, harm the interests and offend the rights of others. Our tendency toward pridefulness leaves us blind to the pervasiveness and ill effects

³⁶Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1:126.

³⁷See, for example, *ibid.*, 1:141.

³⁸Terry D. Cooper, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology: The Ambiguities of the Self* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 122.

³⁹Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 1:131.

⁴⁰Niebuhr’s student Langdon Gilkey explains this well: “This is the heart of his apologetic: he does not seek to prove this vertical dimension or the relatedness to God which it implies. Rather he seeks to persuade us that we cannot make either human nature or history intelligible without that dimension, that other viewpoints contradict themselves or the facts, and that a biblical understanding rightly interprets the common but otherwise incoherent facts of experience.” *On Niebuhr*, 80.

⁴¹Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:131. Here Niebuhr undoubtedly draws on Kierkegaard, who wrote a work on man’s confrontation with God in which he argues that the self can only be a true self when it “rests transparently in God.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, tr. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1849; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 82. Niebuhr also acknowledged Martin Buber, “whose book *I and Thou* first instructed me and many others on the uniqueness of human selfhood and on the religious dimension of the problem,” and who “perceived the realities of both human and divine ‘selfhood’...more acutely than any Christian theologian.” *The Self and the Dramas of History* (Lanham, NY and London: University Press, 1955), 11, 100.

⁴²Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:131. “Only in that confrontation [with God] does [man] become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him. It is for this reason that Biblical faith is of such importance for the proper understanding of man.”

of our own self-regard.⁴³ It is only through awareness of our sinful self-interest that we can develop and maintain a healthy humility in our public endeavors. Given the technological scope and scale of modern society, however, the mistakes of the well-intentioned are likely to be both significant and numerous. Even our grandest achievements will be stained with imperfection and limitation. As a consequence of this reality—that we and our projects are fragile and fallen—Niebuhr argued that the capacity for forgiveness is critical. Indeed, forgiveness is the only proper response to “the contrite recognition that our actions and attitudes are inevitably interpreted in a different light by our friends as well as our foes than we interpret them.” It is the “final oil of harmony in all human relations.”⁴⁴

In a broken world, the final truth, the “general judgment upon the collective life of man, [is] that it is invariably involved in the sin of pride.”⁴⁵ History reveals to us injuries done and harms caused that cannot adequately be addressed through a system of remedial justice. Here we find the proper relationship between forgiveness and faith, hope and action:

The hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.⁴⁶

For Niebuhr, only by recognizing the final contingency of all human projects and acknowledging in faith our dependence on God for their completion can we fully accept the tension between the imperative for action in the world and the recognition of the ultimate imperfection and finitude of all human plans. This leads to an ethic of humility, a willingness to forgive, and a serenity that looks beyond history for fulfillment of hopes that must otherwise flag. As Niebuhr reminded us:

There are no simple congruities in life and history....It is possible to soften the incongruities of life endlessly by the scientific conquest of nature's

⁴³Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 42.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:214.

⁴⁶Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 189–90.

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. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 63.