**The 1940s – Global War and Global Responsibility.**

Abstract.

The 1940s were a remarkably active and productive decade for Niebuhr. Two of his most important books were published during this period, the two volume, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and *The Children of Light and Children of Darkness*. He worked with others to establish a new journal, *Christianity and Crisis*. Alongside this he was instrumental in setting up two campaigning organisations, first the Union for Democratic Action and then Americans for Democratic Action. This chapter provides an historical overview of the decade detailing these achievements. It then examines Niebuhr’s contribution to the nascent ecumenical movement, in particular his chapter on social ethics written for the Oxford Conference of 1937, his address to that conference, and then his preparatory chapter and address to the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam 1948. In these contributions Niebuhr argued that the underlying cause of the global crises was secularism, in response to which the Church should preach a message of redemption.

Keywords

Union for Democratic Action; Americans for Democratic Action; Ecumenical Movement; Oxford Conference 1937; World Council of Churches; Amsterdam Assembly 1948; secularism; redemption.

The 1940s were an extraordinarily active and productive decade in the life of Reinhold Niebuhr. It was during this period that his most famous and important books were published, in particular, the two volume classic, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, based on his Gifford Lectures, and his fullest, systematic reflection on political theory, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. Also published were the less well regarded collection of sermons entitled *Beyond Tragedy* and the book *Faith and History*. In addition, Niebuhr was involved in an endless round of political organising and campaigning. It was during the 1940s that he founded, with others, both the Union for Democratic Action (UDA) and then later, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). His involvement in these groups was, in part, a consequence of his final break with the Socialist Party and movement towards the Roosevelt New Dealers. As if all this were not enough, Niebuhr maintained his Union Seminary academic responsibilities, as well as preaching regularly around the country, writing for popular publications, and establishing a new magazine entitled, *Christianity and Crisis*. By the end of the decade Niebuhr was a globally significant figure, illustrated by the fact that in 1948 he appeared on the 25th anniversary cover of *Time* magazine and was a keynote speaker at the inaugural Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The 1940s was the decade that consolidated Reinhold Niebuhr’s identity as the leading US theologian of his day, an influential political theorist and campaigning activist, popular preacher, and inspirational teacher. In other words the Niebuhr most people think of when they hear his name was the Niebuhr they emerged during this period.

In this chapter we shall examine the formation of this identity in two major sections. In the first section an overview of Niebuhr’s most important activity will be provided including both his political campaigning and a history of his major publications. However it is not my intention to examine the key ideas in the books in any detail as these will be discussed in more depth by others in this handbook. Rather what might be thought of as an orientating overview will be offered. Then, in the second part of the chapter, Niebuhr’s less well-known contributions to the nascent ecumenical movement will be discussed, especially his contributions to the Life and Work Movement’s Oxford Conference of 1937 and then the World Council of Churches Amsterdam Assembly of 1948. Although Oxford 1937 is a little before our period one thing we shall show is that the work of this conference and the first assembly of the WCC were intimately related. In particular the question of how to respond to the rise of secularism occupied both Oxford 1937 and Amsterdam 1948, shaping the theological response of the churches to the crises of WWII and the developing hostilities with Soviet Russia. Niebuhr understood the emergence of secularism as a key factor in the political success of both Nazism and Soviet Communism, meaning that the global crises of the 1940s were essentially theological crises, to which Christianity provided the only possible response.

Political Activity.

The 1940s saw a change of direction in Niebuhr’s politics, away from the left-wing position of the 1930s, to one closer to the political (and later Vital) centre; albeit on left of the Democratic Party. Throughout the 1930s Niebuhr had been the leading figure on the Christian Left (Fox 168). However in June of 1940 Niebuhr announced that he had resigned from the Socialist Party overtly because of a clash over foreign policy. Niebuhr could not support the pacifism and non-interventionism of the socialists, especially Norman Thomas (Brown 100). However it was not only foreign policy which was causing Niebuhr to move towards the Democrats as, despite his initial skepticism, he was increasingly coming to admire Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. Niebuhr was not politically homeless for long. In May 1941 he joined with other former socialists and those liberals who supported US involvement in the war, to form the Union for Democratic Action (UDA). Niebuhr was appointed the first Chair (Brown 102). The UDAs priority was to make the case to help supply Britain as it sought to withstand the enormous German blockade. Niebuhr used his position as Chair to promote US support for Britain, for example appearing on NBC Radio’s ‘Town Meeting of the Day’ to debate the issue with the isolationalist John T. Flynn (Fox 199). The UDA appointed an executive secretary to run the office, James Loeb, whilst Niebuhr worked endlessly to raise funds, recruit supporters and deliver speeches (Fox 199). The UDA was never big, in the sense of having a mass membership, but it was able to lobby on some very important issues. It campaigned to allow persecuted European Jewish people into the US. Niebuhr’s advocacy on behalf of Jewish refugees stands out amidst a more general apathy amongst politicians, church leaders and intellectuals, and won him life-long friends in the Jewish community. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, and the German declaration of war, ended the interventionist, and to a large extent, the pacifist debate. During the war Niebuhr used his position to support the Allies with ethical arguments whilst continuing to campaign for Jewish immigration.

The UDA tended to be a New York based operation, despite efforts to reach a national audience. With dwindling finances, and with a desire to exert greater influence in the Democratic Party nationally, Niebuhr and Loeb decided to disband the UDA and establish a broader based, and better financed, organization (Fox 229). This was the ADA, formed in early 1947 and including figures such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Hubert Humphrey who were to be both leading figures in the Democratic Party and life-long friends of Niebuhr (Brown 128). Niebuhr was involved in the ADAs work, always a popular and inspiring speaker, but it was not at the same level as his UDA activity, not least because whilst the ADA focused on nationwide Democratic Party politics Niebuhr remained more concerned with New York politics (Fox 231). But this is not to say that in the late 1940s Niebuhr stood idle, or ended his political activity. He remained busy, one example being his appointment to the Council on Foreign Relations’ (Brown 129). He was also a deeply contextual commentator who understood the importance of day to day politics and the significance of specific, individual policies, about which he wrote continually and relentlessly. This inevitably leads people to view Niebuhr as a thinker whose value is limited to the particularities of his times. Such a view however fails to recognize the immense importance of his major published works, which were thought through and written amidst these same political challenges. Further, whilst it would be wrong to suggest history repeats itself, equally it is also fair to say that frequently what looks like a new set of challenges in fact have a remarkably familiar feel to them.

Major Publications.

It was during the 1940s that Niebuhr’s most famous, influential and significant books were published. The most important was his two volume classic *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Niebuhr 1996). It was soon followed by the highly influential, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (Niebuhr 2011). In addition Niebuhr published other works although these tended to be collections of articles and sermons which Niebuhr produced at a relentless pace throughout the decade.

The decade began with the publication of *Christianity and Power Politics*, a collection of article and addresses from the 1930s, predominantly later in the decade (Brown 98). Then in 1941 Niebuhr published the first volume of his *magnus opus*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The lectures which served as the foundation for the published volume, were the prestigious Gifford lectures, delivered in Edinburgh in 1939 (Sabella 50). The first series of ten lectures, on human nature, were delivered between April 24th and May 15th 1939, three per week. In contrast to some of his predecessors, and successors, Niebuhr energetic and engaging rhetorical style maintained excellent levels of attendance (Fox 188). The second series, on human destiny, were delivered between Oct 11th and Nov 1st, after Britain had declared war on Germany. They are famous for the fact that the German Luftwaffe bombed the nearby naval base during one lecture, causing understandable consternation amongst the audience, but not Niebuhr who was too engrossed in his text (Fox 191). Niebuhr’s habit was to speak from notes, rather than read a carefully crafted text, and so the published edition of the lectures would need some editing. The first volume was published in the March of 1941 and was received with much critical acclaim (Fox 201). The second volume was published in January 1943, again after much revision, including by Niebuhr’s wife Ursula, herself a well-respected theologian (Fox 213). The two volume work stands as a landmark text of twentieth century theology, rivaling works by contemporaries like Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, as well as later, if in some cases very different, theologians. Volume one on human nature makes Niebuhr’s argument that compared with the historic range of philosophical and political alternatives it is Christianity that has the most insightful and significant interpretation of human beings. Niebuhr’s case is both historically and philosophically comprehensive and deep, whilst also being mindful of the contemporary political crises and especially the rise of fascism and Soviet communism. What these totalitarian ideologies miss, as does liberalism, is that human beings are capable of both remarkable self-transcendence, so they can imagine a better future, and also fundamental selfishness, whereby they pursue a future geared to their own needs, and the neglect of others. It is Christianity that possesses this insight, which is why it has the most realistic understanding of human nature, and why political alternates can so easily lead to the horrors of the 1940s international order. The second volume repeats the confident assertion of the unique insightfulness of Christianity, but this time in relation to the broad sweep of history, and humanity’s specific ethical and political challenges. It is Christianity which offers the genuine fulfillment of human history, not the false idols of race, nation or class. In a pithy phrase which captures so much of the argument, Niebuhr writes that, ‘It is a good thing to seek for the Kingdom of God on earth; but it is very dubious to claim to have found it’ (Niebuhr 1996 [1943] 178). The problem with fascism, liberalism and Marxism being that in some key sense they claim to have found the final answer to human history. This is not within human grasp because, as was argued in volume one, human beings are sinful, even if they can simultaneously conceive of utopian futures.

The two volumes received widespread praise for their insight and depth of learning (Brown 89-91). Richard Fox, in his major biography of Niebuhr, cites the only significant contemporary criticism of the first volume by the theologian Robert Calhoun who suggested Niebuhr had been more prophetic than scholarly, there being ‘no cautious weigher of evidence here’ (Fox 203). Fox tended to agree with Calhoun, but they were very much in the minority; fans of Niebuhr like Charles C. Brown judged Calhoun’s review to be overly pedantic (Brown 90). In this instance it is probably the case that the majority view was correct, to judge Niebuhr for his lack of detailed and specific analysis of texts was to misread the purpose of the volume and restrict the notion of what constitutes a scholarly work to a very limited field. As Robin Lovin notes in the introduction to the 1996 two volume edition of the lectures what Niebuhr is offering is a Christian interpretation of humanity and its history, the sort of project which requires both the broad canvas as well as considerable knowledge (Lovin xv).

In February 1941 Niebuhr, together with Henry P. Van Dusen and Francis Miller, published a new journal entitled *Christianity and Crisis*. Niebuhr wrote the lead article of the first issue and it, like *Christianity and Power Politics*, heavily criticized the isolationism and pacifism of liberals such as Clayton Morrison who edited the new journal’s rival *Christian Century* (Fox 196). The new journal was never able to dislodge *Christian Century* as the leading Protestant magazine in the US but it did significantly dent its hegemony.

The second important book from this period is Niebuhr’s (2011) *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. The book is a revised version of his January 1944 Raymond F. West Lectures at Stanford University (Dorrien x-xi). They were intended to be, as the subtitle suggests, a thorough and effective defense of democracy in the face of its many existential threats. The book has been described as Niebuhr’s ‘most comprehensive statement of his political philosophy’ (Dorrien x). It was a deeply contextual work, globally democracy looked like one fragile option amongst others, its vulnerability only recently exposed by the rise of fascism, especially in Germany but also in Spain, Italy and Japan, and, perhaps more importantly and contemporaneously, by the challenge of the emerging Soviet Communist empire. Niebuhr’s review of the political alternatives to democracy, and other, mainly the liberal, defenses of democracy, was again both wide-ranging and erudite. His breadth of knowledge is very impressive, whilst those searching for detailed textual analyses would again be disappointed. Perhaps the most famous sentence from the book appears in the Foreword to the first edition when Niebuhr writes that, ‘Man’s (sic) capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary’ (2011 xxxii). Niebuhr was applying his theological critique to the contemporary situation, capturing again what heights humanity is capable of whilst simultaneously recognizing the depths to which it can plummet. The foundational analytical tool of the book was the categories of ‘children of light’ and ‘children of darkness’; the former being those who believe that ‘self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law’ whereas the latter are those who are ‘the moral cynics, who know no law beyond their own will and interest’ (Niebuhr 2011, 9). Again what is so important and impressive is that Niebuhr employed theological categories to analyze political history, theory and contemporary issues. This contrasts with those who employ sociological tools to analyze contemporary phenomena and then seek to apply theological ideas to the results of their analysis. In many ways Niebuhr was more confident of the ability of the theologian to offer new and exceptional insights because it was Christianity that properly understood humanity and its history.

At the end of the decade (1949) Niebuhr published the volume *Faith and History*, which was a revised version of the 1945 Beecher Lectures (Fox 231 & 237). Fox (237) cites and agrees with criticism that this was not a good book, that many of the ideas would have been very familiar to readers of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *The Children of Light and Children of Darkness*. This he makes as part of a broader argument that Niebuhr was exhausted by the end of the decade and in need of recuperation and reinvigoration. Others have rejected this argument, whilst still recognizing that Niebuhr worked at an incredible rate combining political organizing and campaigning with lecturing, preaching, popular writing and the production of scholarly books. The limitations of space mean it is only possible to identity some of the highlights of this immense activity and productivity. What is without question is that Niebuhr was the leading theologian of the day, at a time when there were many other worthy claimants to that title, and that there is a case for saying he was one of the most influential public figures in the West. It is difficult to think of another theologian who had such a high public profile, playing a role in mainstream politics in a way that influenced those with power. Niebuhr status was such that he was bound to be involved in the formation of the nascent ecumenical movement, he was the figure that could command the world stage.

Niebuhr and the Ecumenical Movement.

Niebuhr was one of the keynote speakers at the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Amsterdam in 1948. He had first become involved in the global ecumenical movement when he contributed a paper to the preparatory material for the Oxford Conference of 1937. Oxford 1937 was the second major conference of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, the first was held in Stockholm in 1925. The second meeting was very different from the first, both in terms of social and political context, and in terms of its theological approach. Whereas Stockholm 1925 addressed the social problems caused by high levels of unemployment, and theologically was shaped predominantly by the social gospel movement, Oxford 1937 was focused on the rise of Nazism and how the churches could respond to what they analysed as a religious threat (Rouse and Neil). The change in theological direction came with the appointment of Bishop George Bell as Chair of the Life and Work Movement, and then his appointment of Joseph Oldham to lead the preparations for the conference (Smith 113). Oldham set in place a three year preparatory process in which he sought to harness the greatest minds of the day to address the global political crisis. Oldham had been a missionary and then secretary of the International Missionary Council (IMC). He had been significantly influenced by an address given by the Quaker Rufus Jones at the IMC’s meeting at Jerusalem 1928 on the subject of secularism. Oldham believed that secularism was the underlying cause of the problems confronting the West. In fact W.A. Visser’t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC, was later to call Oxford 1937 Oldham’s ‘post-Jerusalem crusade’ (Smith 120). Oldham thought that Nazism, and also Soviet Communism, were political, and false, religions. They looked and behaved like religions, with the painful exception that they were far more successful at gaining adherents. For Oldham the response to this was a missionary response, to promote Christianity as the one true religion, thereby drawing people away from these political religions to a faith that was not leading to global catastrophe. As war loomed, and as the Nazi threat grew ever more sinister, so Oldham was determined to use Oxford 1937 as a vehicle to educate the churches to challenge secularism. He set in place an enormous intellectual exercise, seeking to gather papers from leading academics and church figures on a range of topics crucial to the global future, which he then hoped would be discussed and critiqued by other leading thinkers (Smith 136/137). The results were mixed, some of the original authors of the preparatory papers took on board comments and sought to discuss them, including Niebuhr as we shall see below, whilst others were less welcoming of criticisms and merely reiterated their original points. The final papers resulting from the process were published in the ‘Church, Community, and State’ series comprising seven volumes examining topics such as the Church, human nature, history, social ethics, community life, education and international affairs. Details of the series and the results of the conference were published in the final conference report (Oldham 1937).

Henry ‘Pit’ Van Dusen, assisted by John Bennett, was responsible for attracting leading thinkers from America and it was they who insisted that Niebuhr be invited not only to contribute a preparatory paper but also speak at the conference itself. Before progressing to Niebuhr’s contributions it is important to note the link between Oxford 1937 and the first assembly at Amsterdam 1948, not least because Oxford 1937, strictly speaking, falls outside the period covered by this chapter. The preparatory process for Oxford 1937 was long, complex and thorough. Falling as it did so soon after the war, Amsterdam 1948 was not in a position to replicate these preparations, and in some ways its preparatory process is a pale imitation of what was achieved before Oxford 1937. Niebuhr recognizes that Oxford 1937 was more thorough in a footnote at the end of his main contribution to the Amsterdam 1948 preparatory volumes when he states that, ‘Most of the problems with which we deal are considered more fully in the reports and findings of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State held in 1937’ (Niebuhr 1948, 28 fn1). When he reflected later in life on the development of a social ethic in the ecumenical movement it is Oxford 1937 which receives the most significant attention (Niebuhr 1963). All of which means that if we are to understand Niebuhr’s contributions to Amsterdam 1948 fully, then it is very helpful to understand first Niebuhr’s contributions at Oxford 1937.

Oxford 1937.

Niebuhr made two contributions to the Oxford Conference of 1937. The first was a chapter entitled ‘Christian Faith and the Common Life’ which was part of volume IV of the Church, Community, and State series, with the same title, and concerned with the question of social ethics. In many ways this chapter was unremarkable for those familiar with Niebuhr’s ideas. The purpose of the chapter was to ‘relate the moral ultimate of Christian faith, the law of love, to the facts and necessities of daily existence’ (1938, 69). The chapter was divided into three sections with the first looking at ‘The Law of Love’, the second at ‘The Fact of Sin’ and the third, and largest, examining ‘Problems of Common Life’. The first section begins with a familiar Niebuhr paradox, namely that the law of love both is, and is not, a law. It is a law in the sense that it ‘states the basic requirement of the aggregate existence of humankind’, that is, ‘the law of love is really the law of life’ (1938, 69 & 70). But it is not a law because it cannot be enforced and remain true to itself: ‘Every effort to enforce it negates it’ because enforcing love presupposes that there is a ‘conflict between the self and society, or the self and its higher self which real love would overcome’ (1938, 70-71). At the heart of the paradox is human sinfulness. Human sin means that no person is able to live fully according to the law of love. But this does not mean either it, or human efforts to achieve a better society, are futile because of the ‘laws of justice’ (1938, 72). Niebuhr does not explain the development of his point explicitly here, it comes instead in the third section of the chapter, but what he is arguing is that the law of love both finds expression in fallen human society through the implementation of justice whilst also, and this point he does make, acting as a judge on these inevitably flawed human efforts (1938, 72). Implicit in the argument is that those political ideologies which make religious-like claims for the redeeming effect of human constructs, such as class or race, must ultimately be judged by the Christian law of love, which will reveal the inadequacy of their claims. The second section then explores the ‘fact of sin’ in more detail. It is the law of love which reveals human sinfulness because, ‘In every human moral act there is either an element of positive rebellion against God and against life in its total requirements, or a falling short of the highest possibility’ (1938, 73). Niebuhr then illustrates human sinfulness in relation to the emerging problem of globalization. He argues that the basis of ‘moral life’ is found in the sense of obligation that we feel towards those nearest to us, beginning with family and then extending out towards local community and then the wider community and nation (1938, 74). Technological advance means that international networks have been formed generating economic interdependence whilst not simultaneously creating the morality to sustain a global community: he writes that globalization, ‘has reached its climax, and probably a tragic climax, in modern civilization, in which the material needs of men (sic) are involved in a vast system of international communications but which fails to create the social mutuality necessary to support such a system’ (1938, 75). Such sin is not simply human ‘ego-centricity’, but rather a form of ‘spiritual pride’ which puts human beings in the place of God, making the self not the ‘centre of the self’ but rather making the self ‘the centre of the world’ (1938, 76). Such sinfulness is recognized in social and political life through ‘imperialism and injustice’ because ‘all spiritual pride leads to ‘oppression and injustice’ (1938, 76 & 77). This fact of sin is what liberals miss when they hope humanity can be reformed through the application of reason. But, that said, just at the point at which it looks like Niebuhr is adopting something akin to a more pietist or Barthian type position, he then returns to the paradoxical point that whilst human sinfulness means human actions ‘fall short of love’, still the law of love can function as ‘a guide for the approximations of justice and love which make up the woof and warp of everyday existence’ (1938, 79). Niebuhr condemns those Christians who advocate either withdrawal from the world or who settle for proclaiming ‘eschatological judgments’ (1938, 79).

The third section is the longest and it is in this section that Niebuhr replies to the critics of the earlier draft of his paper. In this Niebuhr is unusual, many of the contributors changed little, or nothing, in response to the comments they received. Niebuhr begins the section by asking how the law of love can be made relevant in a world tainted by human sinfulness, something realised in divided communities and loyalties. He considers first the idea of the orders of creation, which contain within them the danger of inspiring a loyalty which ignores their sinful nature (1938, 80). He then spends longer discussing the idea of love and natural law, beginning with the argument that love is applicable to social and political problems, ‘There is no moral and social situation in which the love commandments does not present new possibilities of conduct’ (1938, 81). However this is no charter for liberal idealism, in the sense that people can be taught to ignore their own needs in favour of others; he writes that the idea that the Sermon on the Mount can be applied to political problems is an ‘illusion’ (1938, 82). Instead, he writes, ‘Orthodox Christianity’ was correct ‘in establishing a more relative moral ideal than the law of love; the ideal of justice as the guiding criterion of political relations’ (1938, 82). What then follows is an essentially pragmatic outworking of this idea; namely that people can work together to make society better, including global society, but as they do so their efforts will be undermined by their sinfulness, and so in need of correction. What is to be avoided is both utopian idealism and pessimistic withdrawal. In the third part of this final section Niebuhr writes about ‘the natural law and the ideal of equality’. Niebuhr begins by arguing that justice is a relative concept, using the example of ‘the negro (sic) and “poor white” tenant farmers of the southern American States’ who, if they received a dollar a day wages would celebrate a triumph of justice even though they would still be poorer than many ‘unemployed living on the dole’ (1938, 85). The question is then whether there is a principle by which relative achievements of justice can be judged, the answer being that there is and this is the ‘principle of equality’ (1938, 85). However, ‘Perfect equality is never possible’ (1938, 86). So, the principle of equality functions as a tools for assessing the implementation of justice in particular and local contexts, whilst itself being judged by the final law which is the law of love (1938, 87). Equality suggests ‘the actual possibilities of justice in every social situation’ whilst needing ‘the higher principle of love’ to ensure it does not become ‘a form of legalism in which a relative equilibrium in society is mistaken for the perfect harmony of life with life’ (1938, 86 & 87). Niebuhr then contrasts his theology with that of a ‘German Lutheran theologian’ who critiqued his paper. His refutation of the German Lutheran is total, he writes that if the Lutheran is correct then ‘I would prefer not to be a Christian’ (1938, 89). But of course he thinks the critic far from correct, instead viewing the Lutheran notion of ‘Christian eschatology’ to be morally complacent because it excuses the Christian from being involved in politics. The problem being that all human and temporal justice and injustice is relativized by such a strong concept of divine judgment, so that even though ‘the lives and welfare of millions may depend upon these relative distinctions and achievements’ such good is ignored by some in the Church (1938, 91). In others words, Niebuhr argues, it is necessary for Christians to be involved in both the big questions of political life and also the day to day details which shape people’s actual experiences. The final part examines ‘the Kingdom of God and natural law’. It is a shorter section which repeats much of what has gone before. Its purpose seems to be to refute social gospel theology which Niebuhr suggests is widespread in American (1938, 97). Niebuhr rejects the idea that there can be ‘perfect redemption in purely moral terms’ as ‘the American critic assumes’, because of the doctrine of ‘original sin’ which ‘is either explicitly rejected or implicitly denied in wide circles in American Christianity’ (1938, 97).

Niebuhr’s second contribution to Oxford 1937 was far more important than his first. Niebuhr delivered one of the thirteen plenary addresses given throughout the thirteen days of the conference (Oldham 1937, 28). He spoke on the first Tuesday (July 13th) in the late afternoon session, sharing the slot with Dr T.Z. Koo, on the subject of ‘The Church Faces a Secular Culture’ (Oldham, 1937, 283). The text was revised for publication, subsequently entitled, ‘The Christian Church in a Secular Age’ (Niebuhr 1986). In his introduction to the conference report Oldham described Niebuhr’s address as a ‘brilliant analysis of the present situation’ (Oldham 35). This fails to capture the full extent of Niebuhr’s impact. Not only was the analysis and theology striking, Niebuhr’s rhetorical style was electric, contrasting dramatically with the more conservative lectures of his peers (Fox 180). What is also very interesting and important to note is that in his address Niebuhr focuses in much more depth and detail on the problem of secularism. Without being able to show conclusively any causal link between Oldham’s concern with secularism and Niebuhr’s address, it is clear that the two thinkers, alongside others including Emil Brunner who had influenced Oldham, were addressing the rise of totalitarianism in very similar ways (Smith 122-127).

Niebuhr’s address begins by stating that for the ‘past two hundred years’ the West ‘has come increasingly under the sway of what has been called a secular culture’ (1986a, 79). But, Niebuhr argues, it would be wrong to think of secularism as an absence, it is an impossibility for human beings to affirm nothing. So secularism has a positive content, which Niebuhr spells out:

(T)he avowedly secular culture of today turns out upon close examination to be either a pantheistic religion which identifies existence in its totality with holiness, or a rationalistic humanism for which human reason is essentially god, or a vitalistic humanism which worships some unique or particular vital force in the individual or the community as its god, that is, as the object of its unconditional loyalty (1986a, 80).

In other words the culture which Christianity seeks to address, and convert, is not without religion, rather it is a ‘very old religion’, one Niebuhr argues St Paul resisted, namely that of human idolatry whereby humans make divine claims for their flawed political projects and pretensions (1986a, 80 & 81). Niebuhr then employs the parable of the Prodigal Son as an analogy for the plight of the West, the rebellion of the son being a metaphor for the autonomy claimed by humanity when they throw off Christianity in the name of ‘rationalistic humanism’. The famine of the parable has not yet arrived but, Niebuhr assures his audience, it is on its way (1986a, 82). In the second part of the address Niebuhr asks how the Christian Church should respond to a culture currently engaged in ‘riotous living’ (1986a, 83). His answer is two-fold: first the Church must preach a ‘message of repentance’, asking people to recognize their sinfulness and turn to God for salvation; and she must preach a ‘message of hope’ the hope that Christianity ‘takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the cross to a victory in the cross’ (1986a, 83-85). Niebuhr then turns to the implications of these gospel messages in a section entitled ‘Not Of the World but In the World’ (1986a, 85). The title is important because Niebuhr’s point is that Christians have a duty, under the law of love, to be involved in the day-to-day social and political problems and concerns of all people. Niebuhr warns against ‘radical Protestantism’ and the danger of a ‘Christian pessimism which becomes a temptation to irresponsibility toward all those social tasks which constantly confront the life of men (sic) and nations’ (1986a, 86). Niebuhr then uses the next part of his address to critique the Church. He argues, extending the Prodigal Son analogy, that there is a danger that the Church plays the part of the elder brother when she ‘falsely identifies its relative and partial human insights with God’s wisdom, and its partial and relative human achievements with God’s justice’ (1986a, 87). Furthermore, Niebuhr argues, the emergence of the pseudo-religions of secularism, by which he means Marxism, liberalism and Nazism, are in part the fault of the Church, both Protestant and Catholic, which have simultaneously, albeit in different ways, claimed divine authority whilst neglecting the injustices and oppressions suffered by so many people (1986a, 90). In a manner that did not hold back against the sensitivities of his audience, Niebuhr accuses the assembled churches of the sins of political neglect which have led to the contemporary global crisis. All of which means, as the title of the final section suggests, that ‘Judgment Must Begin at the House of God’ (1986a, 91). In this last section Niebuhr makes clear that the message of repentance must be preached to members of the Church as much as to those outside the churches; only in this way can she ‘speak to the conscience of this generation, rebuking its sins without assuming a role of self-righteousness and overcoming its despair without finding satisfaction in the sad disillusionment into which the high hopes of modernity have issued’ (1986a, 92).

Amsterdam 1948.

Niebuhr made three contributions to the WCC Assembly in Amsterdam 1948. Understandably, given the proximity of the war, preparations for the assembly were not as comprehensive as they had been for Oxford 1937. As was noted above, Niebuhr, and others, explained that Amsterdam 1948 built upon the work done for Oxford 1937. That said, a preparatory volume on social ethics was produced in advance of Amsterdam 1948, entitled, *The Church and Disorder of Society*. Niebuhr wrote the first chapter, ‘God’s Design and the Present Disorder of Civilisation’ along with one of the regional reports entitled, ‘The Situation in the U.S.A.’. The latter document is barely three pages, Niebuhr stating that because the US is so similar ‘in terms of both its culture and the economic and political institutions of its civilisations’ to Europe there is no need of a ‘separate full discussion’ (1948b, 80). The situations were not quite identical however and Niebuhr briefly mentions that ‘classical liberalism’ is more prevalent in the US political and economic life, and that Marxist beliefs are more apparent in Europe (1948b, 80). Niebuhr’s prognosis is that American prosperity provides it with an advantage over Europe for the time being, but that the major problems and issues of globalization, which are manifest in Europe, will also come to impact on the US in due course.

Niebuhr’s major contribution is the first chapter of the preparatory volume. In the chapter Niebuhr develops some of the points and themes previously discussed in his address to Oxford 1937. For example, he begins by cautioning against an easy analysis which attributes the cause of the war to secularism; as at Oxford 1937 he argues that the Church, through her historic support of unjust political orders, was partly responsible for the rise of secularism, making reference again to the parable of the Prodigal Son (1948a, 14). Likewise, Niebuhr argues that Christians are required to be involved in local social and political projects, but that they must be aware of the prevalence of sin which means that ‘all such structures and schemes of justice must be regarded as relative’ (1948a, 15). In the second section of the chapter Niebuhr develops his analysis. He argues that European civilization is in decline because, in the face of technological advance, such as the Industrial Revolution, it was unable to achieve ‘a tolerable justice or to give to the masses, involved in modern industry, a basic security’ (1948a, 17). This analysis is developed in the third section when he attributes the contemporary crisis to ‘three broad forces’ these being: first ‘the old power of the landlord who dominated agrarian society’; second, ‘newer commercial and industrial owners’; and third, ‘the rising industrial classes’ (1948a, 18). The churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have frequently enhanced the strength of these forces by either failing to critique unjust institutions or by not campaigning sufficiently for justice. This results in the emergence of political religions which seek the justice that the churches have neglected (1948a, 20). In a section which then echoes *The Children and Light and the Children of Darkness* Niebuhr argues that there are two ‘forms of political religion’, the one ‘morally cynical’ and the other ‘morally sentimental and utopian’, which in different ways aggravate the current crisis (1948a, 21). Although these two political religions have many similarities Niebuhr chooses to emphasise the differences, suggesting that some sort of socialist solution to contemporary problems is preferable. This is not, however, in the form of some grand ideological gesture, but rather by applying Christian awareness of hope and sin to each problem, ‘pragmatically from case to case and point to point’ (1948a, 22-23). In the final sections Niebuhr again repeats some of the arguments made at Oxford 1937. It is the task of the Christian Church to ‘mediate divine judgment and grace upon all men (sic) and nations and upon itself’ aware than sinfulness pervades its own life as much as the secular ideologies it wishes to condemn (1948a, 25). This results in the familiar paradox, that the churches should on the ‘one hand strive to reform and reconstruct our historic communities so that they will achieve a tolerable peace and justice’ whilst on the other hand knowing that ‘sinful corruptions will be found in even the highest human achievements’ (1948a, 26). What is interesting is that it is in the following chapter, by JH Oldham, that a much more detailed analysis of technological advance and its impact on society and politics is developed. Whilst Niebuhr was aware of technology issue, his heart did not seem to be in it in the same way as it was concerned with matters of justice and equality.

Niebuhr’s third contribution to the assembly was an address he gave towards the end of the proceedings. This address has been described as part of a ‘Clash of the “Supertheologians”’ because it is seen as a response to Karl Barth’s opening lecture and because Barth’s lecture, and a response from Niebuhr, were later published in *Christian Century* (Sabella 81-84). That Barth and Niebuhr differed fundamentally is not in doubt. Niebuhr emphasised the need for Christians to be involved in proximate social and political projects, attributing the rise of secular ideologies to the historic failures of the Church to tackle injustice and inequality. Barth emphasised more absolutely the judgment of God on human endeavours. However this fundamental difference was not new to Amsterdam 1948, it had pervaded and shaped Niebuhr’s ecumenical contributions from the preparations for Oxford 1937 onwards. What was new was that Barth attended Amsterdam 1948, as a result of Visser’t Hooft’s hard work, having previously rejected invitations to the pre-war gatherings. In that sense it might be correct to say the assembly crystalised the difference between the two theologians in the minds of many attendees, but really the battle lines and respective positions had been outlined many years earlier.

Niebuhr’s address began with his broad historical narrative in which he criticized liberalism for its failure to understand human sinfulness and then attributed the rise of Marxism to this liberal failure (1986b, 94). He analysed the Cold War as ‘a bitter civil war’ between these two erroneous secular illusions (1986b, 94). But, as he did at Oxford 1937, Niebuhr moves quickly to ensure the churches do not forget their part in this tragic situation. It is because the churches supported unjust political systems that people have rebelled. The answer, again as at Oxford 1937, is for the churches to preach a message of redemption, to peoples, nations and itself (1986b, 97). This is a message of hope and judgment which has immediate and local social and political implications (1986b, 98). Again Niebuhr holds in tension the paradox of pointing out to both the rich and the poor that their politics is sinful whilst inspiring them to new life and new action to right wrongs (1986b, 98 & 99). Agreeing with Barth, Niebuhr can say that the ‘final victory over man’s disorder is God’s and not ours’ but, in contrast to Barth, ‘we do have a responsibility for the proximate victories’ (1986b, 100). He goes on, ‘Christian life without a high sense of responsibility for the health of our communities, our nations, and our cultures degenerates into an intolerable other-worldliness’ (1986b, 100). Barth feared that such a position would lead to a too close identification of Christianity with a political order or ideology. Niebuhr shared the fear, just as he shared an understanding of the importance of the doctrine of sin, but he equally feared that God would judge the Church for its neglect of immediate and temporal injustice and inequality.

Niebuhr’s contribution to Amsterdam 1948 came towards the end of a remarkably busy decade. He had published two of his most important books, been heavily involved in establishing a new journal as well as founding two campaigning political movements. He lectured, preached and wrote at an incredible rate. In many ways the Reinhold Niebuhr of the end of the decade is the Reinhold Niebuhr most people think of when they hear his name. Niebuhr’s contribution to the nascent ecumenical movement was a fitting recognition of his stature and importance as the leading Protestant theologian internationally. It was also an opportunity for Niebuhr to share his ideas on a global stage, something that was especially the case at Oxford 1937. Niebuhr used the opportunities well, galvanising the churches through the force of his rhetoric as much as the quality of his analysis and the wisdom of his ideas. He made the churches aware of the dangers of secular ideologies, Nazism, and also liberalism and Marxism, whilst simultaneously chiding the churches for those times when they have ignored injustices. His was a paradoxical message of sin and judgment, of redemption and new hope.

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