

Should We Forget Reinhold Niebuhr?

The theologian and political ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr died in 1971, but ritualistically liberals and members of the Christian Left revive him as a beacon from the past. Niebuhr's thought enjoyed a small renaissance in the eighties during the Reagan years when, after the publication of Richard Fox's acclaimed biography on Niebuhr, George Stephanopoulos trots out a Niebuhrian maxim—"it is when we are not sure that we are doubly sure"—in his *All Too Human: A Political Education* (1999) to upbraid "the frantic orthodoxy" of Kenneth Starr after the Lewinsky scandal. And now, in the long wake of 9/11, liberals like Jim Wallis (*God's Politics* [2005]) and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. ("Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005) have tried to refurbish the theologian for the present political contest between liberalism and fundamentalism. Joining the fray, Barack Obama has recently identified Niebuhr as his favorite philosopher (David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times*, April 26, 2007). But how helpful is it to resurrect Niebuhr at this time and for the purpose, as Mr. Schlesinger imagines, of giving sager counsel to power than our current absolutist president enjoys from his faith-based constituency?

A 2000 forum published in the journal *Religion and American Culture* on the ascendancy of "public theologies" since the cold war abounded with references to Niebuhr, though generally to point out how Niebuhr's influ-

ence has waned. By “public theologies” the forum referred to discourses that speak from within a religious tradition, invoking categories of faith and biblical criteria, as opposed to natural law or social ethics exclusively, to address large issues in the culture, helping “to shape the way problems and policies are addressed in the public domain.” Distinguished evangelical historian Mark Noll criticizes the failure of the “Niebuhrian type of public theology” to reach beyond the elite secular media and northeastern secular universities in the fifties, so that genuine public theology had to rise from below in the South, Midwest, and West, first in the civil rights movement and then the New Christian Right. These succeeded, we are told, because they were more populist in origin and style than Niebuhr, who never developed “a common vocabulary” bridging elite and popular spheres. The argument anticipates the self-criticism the Democratic Party has leveled at its leadership since the 2004 election: liberals need to acknowledge the limits of secularism and begin talking the language of the people, who are by and large Christian. The forum, in this regard, interestingly counterpoints the efforts of liberals like Schlesinger to resurrect Niebuhr as an antidote to right-wing organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention. Nostalgia for Niebuhr and the liberal consensus of which he was an architect is misplaced, we gather from the forum, since his brand of public theology is passé, ill-suited to addressing today’s grassroots religious insurgencies.

Neither Noll nor Schlesinger adequately assesses the problems posed by Niebuhr’s legacy to American liberalism or to present-day controversies on the proper voice of faith in American civil life. Rather than invoke Niebuhr once again in the ongoing ideological battles between Right and Left, or retire him for the sake of finding a more “common vocabulary” between the elite and the popular, I contend that it would be more intellectually responsible for us to take a critical approach analyzing Niebuhr’s thought as part of the history of our present crises and as complicit in them. We should understand what brand of religious populism overran the Niebuhrian public theology and recognize that it succeeded over Niebuhr not because of his “elitism” or “academicism” but because of apologies internal to his cold war thought, apologies that rendered him a much weaker opposition than Schlesinger imagines and have actually made his views available to conservatives who apply such texts as *The Irony of American History* (1952) with equal force for the Right. After all, what kind of opposition are we retrieving when *Weekly Standard* contributor David Brooks can favorably invoke Niebuhr in a retrospective on the theologian written to bolster the case for the Iraq War: “If there is going to be a hawkish left in

America again, a left suspicious of power but willing to use it to defend freedom, it will have to be revived by a modern-day Reinhold Niebuhr" ("Man on a Gray Horse," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2002). To begin to answer the question of why Niebuhr's influence has waned and whether his kind of public theology should be revived to speak for liberalism today, I will pursue a comparison between Niebuhr's cold war career and the rise of the New Evangelicalism, which had the young Billy Graham as its spearhead. Though a colleague, voicing a perception I fear is shared by other liberal intellectuals, once told me that Graham's name is not worthy to occupy the same sentence as Niebuhr's, this yoking of the two men helps to underscore how Niebuhr nested liberalism within conservatism, and in the process helped to erode the case for a vigorous resistance to the nascent Christian Right.

By 1957, Billy Graham was the most visible religious leader in America: a spiritual adviser to President Eisenhower, a State Department-sponsored evangelist to China and India, and a mass-media personality reaching millions with a syndicated column, a radio and a TV show, his own movie company, and revival campaigns on unprecedented scales to record-breaking crowds. When in 1952 Graham first applied to hold a crusade in New York, the city's predominantly liberal clergy refused him for his fundamentalism and his "hillbilly" style. Since that rebuff, Graham succeeded in positioning himself as a *conservative* leader, neither modernist nor fundamentalist. Acknowledging the modulation in his image, the liberal clergy made major overtures to the evangelist, the first being an invitation in 1954 to speak at Union Theological Seminary, then the bastion of Protestant realism and the academic hearth of Reinhold Niebuhr. By 1957, Graham's celebrity was commanding enough to bring together evangelical conservatives and liberal ministers to organize the Madison Square Garden Revival, the largest ever ecumenical undertaking of its kind.

Clearly Graham was making inroads in the Protestant mainstream by the mid-fifties. And Niebuhr was alarmed by his expanding influence. Both men allowed that there are democratic values implicit in Christianity, making the faith instructive to America in the cold war. They could not, however, agree on the best means to apply Christian teachings in the conflict. In this disagreement, Niebuhr was far more appealing to postwar neoliberals. A penitent former socialist, Niebuhr's radical past helped to give him credibility with neoliberal intellectuals like Schlesinger and Sidney Hook, since the progression from the left to the center, in Niebuhr's case, seemed motivated by strong principles and a change of mind about political means.

At least, that is how Niebuhr was received and how he wanted to be understood. No such alliance was possible with New Evangelicals, who seemed to their critics as if they were bringing the lampooned fundamentalism of the 1920s back into the public sphere. The same intellectuals who helped to make Niebuhr America's leading establishment theologian linked Graham's constituency with McCarthyism and theocracy. The era's major neoliberal critiques of evangelicalism, the commentaries in *The New American Right* by Daniel Bell, William McLoughlin, and Richard Hofstadter, appeared in the mid-fifties and were followed by pungent film adaptations of *Inherit the Wind* and *Elmer Gantry*. These works warily regarded New Evangelical activism and the deep motivation of Billy Graham and his colleagues to escape from the void of social irrelevance where their fundamentalist forebears had fallen after the Scopes Trial.

To these critics, Niebuhr was supposed to represent the highbrow and sage alternative to Billy Graham in the fifties, but just how strongly *did* Niebuhr differ from Graham, on both domestic and international politics? I will proceed, first, to discuss the content of Graham's message and the nature of its appeal; secondly, to address Niebuhr's critique of Graham in his own words; and thirdly, to assert that Niebuhr's charge—that Graham was complacent about injustice—now reads as a vain attempt to differentiate his own political shift to the right.

Since his L.A. crusade, Graham had been sought out by representatives of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), an organization founded as a competitor to the National Council of Churches (NCC), which was comprised of liberal clergy. Encompassing prominent seminaries (such as Fuller Theological Seminary), the NAE soon established its own publishing mouthpiece, *Christianity Today* (founded in 1956 by Carl Henry), deliberately parroting the title *Christian Century*, the liberal Protestant organ to which Niebuhr once contributed. From its inception, the NAE and *Christianity Today* had a different charter from the older, separatist fundamentalists of the 1920s. Harold Ockenga, the organizational leader of the NAE, and Carl F. Henry, the intellectual leader of the New Evangelicals, both subscribed to the Calvinist doctrine of "common grace" and shared Calvin's conviction that politics could be Christian tools and that temporal justice could be a godly aim. In *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947), Henry set the agenda for the new generation of evangelicals, asking them to observe fundamentalist doctrines but to go further than had the fundamentalists to carry the gospel's application outside of evangelical enclaves. Christians should not make the liberal mistake of substituting

social activism for preaching the gospel, but they could act as advocates, explaining how biblical principles pertained to current social issues.

Graham effectively became spokesman of the organization when he delivered an address at the NAE's annual convention in 1950, just after the L.A. crusade; according to historian William McLoughlin's report of this speech in *Billy Graham: Revivalist in a Secular Age* (1959), Graham told the assembly "that he was proud to be a member of the National Association of Evangelicals and that he believed it to be raised up of God as the medium through which Bible-believing, Christ-honoring Christians might present a united front against the enemies of the evangelical faith and for constructive action" (482). As Graham brought his magnetism to the NAE, the NAE worked to maneuver Graham closer to the citadels of power. And in the 1952 presidential election campaign, he promised to deliver a new constituency: "[T]he Christian people of America will not sit idly by in 1952. [They] are going to vote as a bloc for the man with the strongest moral and spiritual platform, regardless of his views on other matters. I believe we can hold the balance of power" (William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story* [1992], 146).

In retrospect, we can see that the Religious Right did not really materialize until the seventies, with the rise of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Moral Majority. However, Graham succeeded in laying some groundwork for a politicized evangelical coalition because, as Bill Moyers once commented, Graham came clothed in traditional symbols. Though he was in some respects an innovator, particularly in recognizing the potentials of mass communications for religious outreach, Graham was a largely unoriginal preacher, mainly refurbishing old rhetoric for the cold war era. He made core fundamentalist doctrines, such as biblical inerrancy, appealing to a wider constituency of Christians by presenting them in the time-worn terms of revivalistic American evangelicalism (especially in the fashion of the Second Great Awakening) and its attendant drama of conversion. As in the fashion of revivalists before him, from Charles Finney to Billy Sunday, Graham's message for salvation was always two-pronged, tethering the destiny of the nation to the morality of its citizens. Though Graham's critics have argued that there was much recidivism among his converts, that what he truly succeeded in doing was rallying the evangelical subculture rather than winning masses of souls, one still cannot underestimate the great popular appeal of his message of personal salvation, a message that Niebuhr did not offer nor was interested in offering. Niebuhr was more engrossed in the behavior of nations than in personal piety. The fate of

the individual person he finally subordinated to the actions of nations. The soul's redemption was a matter of God's, and men could not realistically concern themselves with it. Niebuhr's work was designed to influence elite decision making by affecting the opinions of policy makers. Graham, by contrast, wanted to exert pressure on public officials by raising a passion for national repentance, which he tied directly to the spiritual well-being of individuals. Graham's accent on conversion touched roots running deep in evangelicalism and in the idea of American identity, both of which promise transformation of self from an inherited condition into a freedom under God. Evangelical preaching fruitfully blurred spiritual liberty with political emancipation in early America, and, hearkening back to that rhetorical fusion, Graham's message of personal salvation found a wide audience in a period of nationalistic fervor.

For Niebuhr, on the contrary, Graham's message of personal salvation hardly made him worthy of a prophet's staff. In his 1956 article "Literalism, Individualism, and Billy Graham," Niebuhr criticized the evangelist for his simplistic theology, and one year later, he published a follow-up after the 1957 Madison Square Garden crusade. Titled "Frustration at Mid-Century," in *Pious and Secular America* (1958), Niebuhr expressed his concern that the New Evangelicalism equated moral goodness with mere piety and lifted the burden of continuous self-questioning from the Christian: "[Graham's] simple version of the Christian faith as an alternative to the discredited utopian illusions [Christian socialism] is very ironic. It gives even simpler answers to insoluble problems than they. . . . It does this precisely at the moment that secularism, purged of its illusions, is modestly ready to work at tasks for which there are no immediate rewards and to undertake burdens for which there can be no promise of relief" (*Pious*, 22). By secularism, Niebuhr was not only referring to freedom from dogma but also emphasizing the sphere of political action too often neglected, he believed, by pious Christians, who placed a higher premium on personal holiness than on the balancing of power. Niebuhr admitted that Graham's brand of evangelism was superior to other popular varieties of Protestantism (he had in mind Norman Vincent Peale); at least it "preserved something of the biblical sense of the Divine judgment and mercy before which all human striving and ambitions are convicted of guilt and reduced to their proper proportions" (*Pious*, 21). Unfortunately, Graham cancelled the meaning of God's Judgment by his literalistic interpretation of grace. By promising that "really good people will be really good," the evangelist betrayed the spirit of the Reformation (*Pious*, 22). Since the person, in undergoing a conversion

experience, is given an internal power to strive for spiritual perfection, he has little reason to renovate the institutions of his faith, much less to criticize their entanglement with the values of unregulated free enterprise and self-reliant individualism (*Pious*, 20).

The charge of perfectionism is inaccurate, for in Graham's account of sanctification the sinful self is not completely eradicated. Nonetheless, Niebuhr pinpointed a significant difference between his conception of human capability and Graham's. For Graham, grace was a supernatural force added to the human, assisting him to make a voluntary choice to obey God, whereas for Niebuhr, grace referred to the comic discovery that men's rational choices sometimes yield just results even when their motives are biased by illusions that they are more pure than they have right to claim. These contrasting conceptions of grace, one supernatural and one metaphoric, follow directly from the two religious leaders' teachings about the wages of Original Sin on human nature: on one side, a belief that the effects of Original Sin can skew men's reasoning without completely depriving them of their capacity for ethical thought, and, on the other, a conviction that the mind ratiocinates in darkness unless it begins from premises that descend from religious authority. Hence, Niebuhr argued that with the aid of "grace" working in history, rational man can approximate certain values, such as justice, which have both religious and secular looms, though the full demand of these values can never be met (in America or anywhere else), while Graham and the NAE, beseeching man to call upon God's grace, sought to organize converts to win official recognition of sacred values revealed in the holy Bible (as specially entrusted to America to defend). The grave problem with Niebuhr's public theology, as it evolved in the cold war, is that he stressed the finitude of human thought and its sinful illusions to such a degree that it seemed well-nigh impossible for man to exercise freedom except in terms of the ironic awareness of his ideological pretensions (to innocence, universality, or self-transcendence). Indeed, Niebuhr cast so much doubt on human reasoning that he could no longer provide the kind of sturdy religious apologetic-cum-critique of rational ethics, without damage to secularism and on behalf of a Marxist-limned moral realism, that he had given in early classics like *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1928), which never diminishes the liberating potentials of human rationality and praxis even when stressing man's liability to sin and error. Niebuhr's reduction of his own, far more vigorous, early arguments helped to pave the efforts of Graham and his ilk to rob Enlightenment of legitimacy so that they could carve out a greater sphere of action for God's servants to perfect for

His glory and America's blessing. Moreover, as Niebuhr assailed "idealists" who equated rationality and progress, equilibrium seemed to become a higher value for him than justice, as the shifting balances of power in the cold war dictated that Americans condition themselves to accepting "lesser evils" for the sake of social stability or the containment of security threats. Niebuhr's retrenchment on his earlier prewar arguments, his concession to the general evil that limits reason to the choice between evils of greater or lesser magnitude, comes to contrast starkly with Graham's galvanic rhetoric summoning Americans to the work of redemption.

Niebuhr criticized evangelists for seeking only to remove immoral influences from private life while ignoring America's structural problems, but Graham certainly did not think himself a quietist about American life. However patriotic he was, Graham also insisted on his autonomy under God to criticize a sinful American culture when centrists, such as Graham-supporter Henry Luce, in his *Life* editorials, were asking for a spiritual affirmation of postwar America. Early in the cold war, Graham showered invective on American idolatry and vice—its materialism, mass entertainment, mass media, psychoanalytic therapy, university intellectuals, rebel youth, sexual mores, and suburban families. In *Peace with God* (1952), he writes, "The American way of life' we like to call this fully electrified, chrome-plated economy of ours—but has it made us happy? Has it brought us the joy and the satisfaction and the reason for living we were seeking? No. As we stand here feeling smug and proud that we have accomplished so much that generations before us only dreamt about . . . do we lose one iota of the empty feeling within us?" (15).

It is characteristic of Graham's rhetoric that, even as he said America is Christ's country, he reminded listeners that it is under God's Judgment for its materialism. And in his sermons from this era, the scourge sent to awaken America from its spiritual complacency is Communism. Graham disclosed that Old Testament prophecies referred to Communism, in the process drawing parallels between Soviet Russia and the "evil empires" that featured in so many Hollywood biblical epics of the period: "Ezekiel 38 and 39 may well be describing Russia and the mighty power of Communism—the greatest, most well-organized and outspoken foe of Christianity that the church has confronted since the days of pagan Rome!" (*Peace*, 214, 215). Graham frequently said that a minister had to avoid being a political partisan, but since Communism was not a political ideology so much as it was a false faith, it fell within the domain of heresy and represented a challenge to Christianity itself. It was imperative to win Christian support

for John Foster Dulles's vision to "roll back" Communism, a goal that would require military intervention combined with evangelical missions in Europe and the third world.

For Graham, the international cold war and evangelical missions were complementary aims, each in turn tied to the goal of stirring Americans at home to repentance. The threat of international disaster was intended to lead private Americans toward inner reform, the conversion experience through acceptance of Jesus Christ. Graham believed that Original Sin was a species curse for which each person was individually damnable, but in the terms of his jeremiad, the personal choice for or against Christ had wider ramifications; insofar as its citizens were unsaved, America as a whole baited God's wrath. For the sake of national destiny as well as the salvation of single souls, Graham's message required that he pierce those aspects of American society that dulled men to the message of personal redemption through Christ. The national revival could not consist only in church leadership or ecumenical rallies but had to take place in American individuals, since sin of whatever magnitude began not with groups or ideologies but within each heart: "Fascism and Communism [could] find no place in the heart and soul of a person who is filled with the Spirit of God" (*Peace*, 18). On such radio and TV programs as *Do We Need the Old Time Religion* (1951), Graham made spiritual pleas to the country's citizens: "If everyone in America were to turn to Christ then 'we would have divine intervention on our side'" (quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* [1959], 508). In one of his *Sermons of the Month* from 1953, he continued the plea: "Only as millions of Americans turn to Jesus Christ at this hour and accept him as Savior can this nation possibly be spared the onslaught of demon-possessed Communism" (*Modern Revivalism*, 510). When he implored "America," Graham was not only addressing leaders and experts. America's fulfillment of God's sacred design implicated the spiritual condition of each American citizen as much as men of power, such as Eisenhower and Dulles.

At this point, we might return to Niebuhr's question: what were the fruits of all this conversion? After all, Graham and the NAE promised to reclaim secular spheres of action for Christian influence and expression. So how was the convert to cultivate his newfound values within American society? Apart from the international struggle with Communism, what counsel did Graham's preaching offer on matters effecting domestic policy? Though Graham was never as confrontational about social problems as he was about vice, idolatry, or foreign threat, they do receive some airing, as

in this passage: "What is our attitude toward the race question? . . . What is our attitude toward labor-management problems? What is our attitude toward tolerance? . . . Christians, above all others, should be concerned with social problems and social injustices. Down through the centuries the church has contributed more than any other single agency in lifting social standards to new heights" (*Peace*, 190). Graham's statement here, under the heading "Social Obligations of the Christian," rings with topical relevance, and it is certainly out of tone with the fundamentalism of his youth. When one actually examines his teaching on poverty, labor relations, or racial segregation, however, he recommended no means (advocacy of specific reforms, organized protest, federal action) apart from the voluntary Christian compassion that Niebuhr had challenged in the thirties. Labor and management should apply the Golden Rule to each other, the poor should receive help from social workers or local charities, and racial integration should be encouraged by the teaching of brotherhood. On race relations, the social issue he was most frequently asked to address, Graham waffled in his public position on segregation until *Brown v. Board of Education*, and still afterwards, he would not endorse any form of resistance, even non-violent, in the protests for civil rights or for black liberation. In fairness to Graham, he did shift slightly to the left in the sixties, as he threw his support behind Johnson's War on Poverty. But in the fifties, he was deeply suspicious of New Deal social policies as well as labor unions and direct action politics. Prior to his revisiting the teachings of the Social Gospel in the sixties (which enduringly altered, and liberalized, his views on the causes of poverty), Graham was swayed by positions inherited from the much earlier (pre-World War I) fundamentalist bouts with modernists over the meaning and method of salvation; modernists had, accurately, been accused by their opponents of substituting social service for individual conversion and identifying social perfection with regeneration from sin (conceived by modernists as a shared, corporate guilt). After modulating his position on welfare legislation during Johnson's presidency, Graham would still maintain, as the Christian Right does today (even at its moderate fringe, e.g., Rick Warren), that spiritual salvation resides in the individual's relationship with God, though social service may follow as a fruit of one's conversion.

To return to Graham's statement, that he was offering a "spiritual platform" for Christian voters in the fifties, it now appears as if the platform he then had in mind, one which has had a virulent afterlife even though Graham has himself moderated, bore a lot of resemblance to what we now call neoconservatism. In an essay titled "New Conservatism in America"

(in *Ideology and Utopia in the United States, 1956–1976* [1977]), sociologist Irving Horowitz presciently diagnoses the emerging ideology: a revolt against social welfare liberalism and secularism, and an adoption of the expansionist foreign policy objectives of neoliberals. By contrast with “old style” conservatives, the new breed is not nostalgic for a precapitalist past. It also rejects utopianism, but it does not seek security from the fallen world by isolating the nation-state. Rather, it is committed to hegemony and expansion. Since the motor of these processes are business interests, the new conservative “no longer makes paramount the critique of the bourgeoisie” (“New Conservatism,” 161). Instead, he aims to make business leaders aware of “ultimate goals,” so that capitalism, whose private property relations are often expressions of sin, can be instead an instrument of “godly sanction” for spreading the moral values and social norms of the hegemonic power: “it is a theology of imperialism” (“New Conservatism,” 145, 156). Within the hegemon, “national harmony,” rather than “national unity” (which can be artificially imposed) is the “organic” goal of society (“New Conservatism,” 153). In this regard, new conservatives appropriate the liberal discourse of consensus, though with an important additive; consensus must be achieved not through pluralities or by rational agreements on shared interests, but by education in “patriotism, love of God, and national heroes” (“New Conservatism,” 153). The teaching of proper attitudes instills, supposedly, a moral orientation that checks man’s febrile rationality.

Graham’s chief exception to this overall ideology was his populism, which, in the fashion of American evangelicalism, concluded that the equality of souls in God’s eyes led logically to the idea that each man, regardless of origin, had equal social potential. Many “New Conservatives,” Horowitz points out, were elitists (William F. Buckley, for example) who believed that society was properly stratified to afford leisure and privilege to a class that would lead the have-nots and keep their power properly minuscule, thus ensuring political stability. Graham, instead, was actually closer to contemporary neoconservatives, who have shown themselves adept at co-opting populist language, symbols, and myths in religion as in politics. In other respects, especially his attacks on secular culture, his blessings for deregulated capitalism, his appeals to traditionalism, and his tendency to see the world as a territory to be harvested for democracy and Christianity, Graham’s theology and his ethics were well suited to emerging neocon positions. Since morality was an eternal set of truths passed down through the faithful, moreover, a key voting criterion had to be whether or not the candidate was sufficiently Christ-influenced—or, as it turned out in the case

of Eisenhower, the candidate who seemed most friendly and susceptible to Graham's spiritual counsel.

At this point, we can compare Graham's message to Niebuhr's in order to point up the pretensions of Niebuhr's critique. On the question of foreign policy, Niebuhr's *rhetoric* departs from Graham's. Niebuhr never tilted from saying that if America was truly under God's Judgment, then its foreign policy objectives could not be identified with God's will, which is what Graham came perilously close to suggesting. Throughout the cold war, Niebuhr cautioned that the identification of God and country could lead to national self-righteousness and the overextension of American military commitments in an ill-fated effort to save the world for democracy. His distinction between God and country was supposed to dissuade America from overextending its power and to cultivate a mood of fear and trembling before the vicissitudes of history. Thus, Niebuhr's counsel was supposed to be the wiser alternative to Graham's apocalypticism, since his rhetoric appeared to discourage military commitments in the third world. *In fact*, Niebuhr no more than Graham provided an ethical position clearly condemning America's expansion of its global anti-Communist objectives. Since Niebuhr *also* assumed that Communist revolutions anywhere were threats to the national interest, he believed that America was obliged to prevent nonaligned countries from being turned. He would always add the caveat that ironic hindsight might later reveal errors in America's tactical judgment, but wherever national interests or Western freedom appeared to be at stake, the country had to assume probable justification. In the meantime, the degree of America's guilt would remain uncertain, a mystery that only time would solve. Since the "realist" Niebuhr as much as the "crusader" Graham agreed that Communism would be a form of enslavement much more severe to colonial subjects than what they had endured under Western paternalism, wars of counterinsurgency were justifiable in both of their philosophies.

On the issue of imperial intervention, Niebuhr's Zionism is also a significant portion of his legacy, though one often glossed over by his defenders. The close affinity between Zionism and certain strains of evangelical fundamentalism is well known, and so we are unsurprised to learn that Graham's film company, World Wide Pictures, circulated *His Land: A Musical Journey into the Soul of a Nation* (1969), a movie depicting the evangelist's conviction that the restoration of Israel had fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. But it is more troubling to recognize that Niebuhr, supposedly the voice of temperance, staked "realist" positions as extreme in their

bias as Graham's dispensational millenarian view. A former coleader of the Christian Council of Palestine, Niebuhr had been the chief Protestant proponent of Zionism in the forties, and, though he would remain uncomfortable with the "Messianic" claims of certain Zionists (see his essay "Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization," in *Pious and Secular America*), he would consistently refuse to criticize Israel's actions, even when fellow *Christianity and Crisis* editor Arnold Bennett took more circumspect positions, citing concern for Arab refugees. Arguing the necessity for what he would elsewhere call "imperialistic realism," Niebuhr willingly acknowledged that the establishment of a separate, sovereign Jewish state in Palestine would entail injustice to Arabs, but asserted that "the collective will" of Jews to survive as "a nationality" outweighed the abrogation of Arab rights ("Jews after the War," *Nation*, August 31, 1946). His case for Zionism (and his rejection of a binational state) in the forties drew upon the crisis in Europe for its urgency, but he was equally adamant in his support of Israel when it expanded its territory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, when it occupied Gaza after the Suez War, and when it captured lands nearly three times its original size during the Six-Day War (Niebuhr opposed the proposal of a UN sanction against Israel in 1967). His often overlooked, but startling, analogy in *The Irony of American History* likening the rise of Communism in the twentieth century to the rise of Islam and "its challenge to Christian civilization in the high Middle Ages" (128), further likening the sultan of Turkey to Stalin—the first a theocrat, the second the head of a false state religion—suggests perhaps that aside from the obligations of "imperialistic realism," Niebuhr's championing of Israeli rights at the expense of Arab rights also rested on an unstated but deeply biasing religious prejudice shared in common with Graham.

Furthermore, Niebuhr's record on domestic policy in the fifties is less aggressive than his critique of Graham implies. True, Niebuhr was concerned about racial oppression and opposed to dismantling Roosevelt's social programs, but the edge of his rhetoric in the fifties was no longer directed against class and racial injustice. His chief target was America's mythical image of itself as God's innocent bearer of democracy. When it came to criticizing systemic problems in American life, Niebuhr assumed a much tamer voice than he did as a myth buster. He rarely went further than to join other neoliberals in saying that "imperfections" in American democracy would hopefully be improved on by pragmatic compromises in the near future; he quite often said, however, that these imperfections were less frustrating if one recognized how much worse conditions could be given

the ineradicable nature of Original Sin, which taints all rational endeavor: “the purity of idealism . . . must always be suspect. Man simply does not enjoy pure reason in human affairs; and if such reason as he has is given complete power to attain its ends, the taint will become the more noxious” (*Irony*, 108). For all his continual remarks about the need for men to resist evil in secular life as well as the soul, Niebuhr basically accepted that the postwar compact—its expanded cooperation between the federal government, big business, and the Pentagon—was really the best of all possible worlds.

In retrospect, it seems that Niebuhr was less a critic of the establishment than he was a public relations man for it. When he eventually unscrewed his cold war armor, in his writings on the Vietnam War, Niebuhr did achieve a level of self-criticism, as he saw the folly of anti-Communist interventionist policies he had shielded a decade earlier. But the ironic insight came late. He had been one of the premier de-radicalizing intellectuals of his generation, and by criticizing Graham in the fifties, he was flanking himself from his critics on the left, such as A. J. Muste, who had pointed out how much he had compromised his earlier principles. In our own time, when liberal Democrats like Schlesinger are invoking Niebuhr’s example to parry the rhetoric of the Religious Right, it is doubly important that we remember this chapter from Niebuhr’s and Graham’s careers. Graham and the New Evangelicals were soon able to eclipse Niebuhr’s brand of Christian liberalism because the latter’s gloomy apologetics could offer no robust alternative to the traditional appeal of Graham’s clabber of populism, conversion, and national covenant. Graham promised a dynamic engagement with contemporary crises through the immediate choice for a new, regenerate life in God, whereas Niebuhr, in effect, said that any action for substantial changes in the American system and its foreign conduct were circumscribed by the wages of sin. The ex-radical liberal, in other words, had adopted the language of eternal caution, whereas the conservative had taken up the banner of active mission. Between them, the two men effected an exchange of image from which liberalism in American faith and politics is still suffering today.

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