

On the Sidewalks of New York

21. Reinie

Entering Union Seminary was a natural decision for me. I had not seriously considered another Seminary. First, I was city bred and by nature felt at home in a seminary within the city, particularly New York City. Second, my relationship to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church under the ministry of George Buttrick helped me view my faith from a larger ecumenical context.

George Buttrick was not a strong "institutional" Presbyterian. His appeal was to an ecumenical community. Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church also had a wider church context. Union Seminary served both purposes. It was an ecumenical seminary, but it had a Presbyterian affiliation through Auburn Seminary which was organically related to Union. Auburn supported the ecumenical character and purpose of Union Seminary. My third reason for attending Union Seminary was the presence of Reinhold Niebuhr on the faculty. Union was Niebuhr's spiritual and physical home.

Union had one of the finest religious faculties in the country. It was strong in all of the traditional religious departments: Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, and Theology, But I had come to study under Niebuhr. In my senior year at Wooster, Bob Bonthius in the Department of Religion offered a Reinhold Niebuhr Seminar. This became a warm up session for me. Our class concentrated on Niebuhr's definitive theological work "The Nature and Destiny of Man." Bonthius also provided a wide ranging collection of articles on Niebuhr written by people who were critics of his neo-orthodox theology: humanists, secularists, pacifists, theological liberals. I was impressed that so many people, especially those outside the Christian community, had taken on Niebuhr. Their criticism, by and large, centered on Niebuhr's strong stance on human sinfulness.

Niebuhr's understanding of sin, which he saw in terms of human pride, cut deep into the lives of people, especially in our desire for power over other people. Niebuhr's critique of power was the key which first led him to join

the ranks of the socialists. His early pastoral experience in the Detroit of Henry Ford encouraged his criticism of those who controlled the industrial system in the United States. This same perception of power led him to see the corruption of justice within the Soviet system. "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." was a simple way of stating his stance. I recognized that Niebuhr's early socialist roots with which he criticized the U.S. economic system had been tempered by the idolatry he saw within Stalinist Communism. Bonthius' course proved to be excellent preparation for coming to grips with Niebuhr in the flesh.

When I arrived at Union in September 1949, I immediately sought an opportunity to take a course with Niebuhr. As an incoming Junior this was difficult. We were expected to take the required courses: Old Testament, New Testament, Theology and Church History. That took care of all your available hours. There was, however, a seminar being offered on "Christianity and Communism", with emphasis on China. In the Fall of 1949, the Chinese Peoples' Army had marched into Shanghai and had driven the Nationalists into exile in Taiwan. There was a large corps of missionaries and overseas people at Union who were the essential clientele for this course. The seminar was being taught by John Bennett and Niebuhr. I signed up for the course as an auditor since it was outside my required course schedule.

This was a great way to begin seminary. You were right in the middle of world events. One of our texts was the NEW YORK TIMES as it reported the daily events happening in China. Though Bennett and Niebuhr were leading the seminar, they had an array of informed people who shared their special expertise. Niebuhr showed his wisdom and humility in this course. He knew he was not an expert on Asia. He had spent his life dealing with the realities of Europe, so he drew heavily upon the experience of other people. It was a true seminar with overseas people, missionaries and those with expertise in international affairs sharing their knowledge and insights.

John Hamlin, a Presbyterian missionary in China, was home on furlough and participated enthusiastically in the discussions, as did Alex Grant, a graduate student from Canada, whom I was later to work with during our years in the Philippines. One of the course participants was a Chinese graduate student.

He had a corner room at the darkened far end of the sixth floor of Hastings Hall. I chanced to drop by his room to deliver a note. His room was dimly lit but on his wall I glimpsed the picture of Mao and on his desk books of writings of Mao. In the Winter of 1950 he suddenly left to return to China.

It was during this period that Niebuhr was making regular trips to Washington, D.C. He had been invited by George Kennan to participate in State Department policy planning deliberations. Niebuhr appreciated Kennan's "realism" within American foreign policy, especially in regard to Russia. Niebuhr brought back to the Union discussions, the wealth of information he had gleaned from policy deliberations in Washington. He was always cautious of the American tendency toward "moralism" in international affairs. In his biography of Niebuhr, Richard Fox has an apt quote from Niebuhr. "Egoism is not the cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism. Preoccupation with national interest can quickly degenerate into moral cynicism even if it is originally prompted by moral modesty. We must be concerned with interests.....of those whose lives are intertwined with ours and who are locked with us in a common destiny." (1)

When it came to the China discussion, Niebuhr was more concerned about Communist power in Europe, and was less apprehensive about a total Communist victory in Asia. As his remarks in the "Christianity and Communism" Seminar indicated, he was impatient with our support of Chiang Kai-shek, whom he considered corrupt and inept. He was against intervention in Asia against Communism; we were too inexperienced and our knowledge of Asia was too limited. Our attention, Niebuhr believed, should be on Europe and building a solid front against further Communist encroachment in Germany. During the seminar Niebuhr said, "A Communist China is not an immediate threat as imagined by some. The Communism of Asia is primarily an expression of nationalism of subject peoples and impoverished nations. We still have a chance to espouse their cause and help them to achieve independence and health." (2) Would that we had followed his advice in our tortuous entanglement in Vietnam.

The seminar was a memorable one. It is just what I had expected to get at Union. I knew I had to fill out my requirements for the Bachelor of Divinity,

but I was looking for immediately relevant discussions about the Christian faith in action. I had come to Union to find openings in which the Christian faith would come into direct engagement with the struggles people were facing in the world. I came away from the seminar with one added benefit. I had discovered John Bennett, Union's other major social ethicist. I liked Bennett's calm and measured response to political issues. He provided a balance to Niebuhr's jumping in with both feet. I was to find John Bennett's more measured approach to Christian social ethics a welcome counterpoint to Niebuhr's charismatic, and exacting, insights into world politics. Niebuhr provided me the inspiration and the world view. In the German Niebuhr had a "Weltanschauung" - a world view - which was comprehensive and engaging. Bennett provided the framework for making judgements on political and ethical problems. Bennett spoke about the "middle axiom", that insight drawn from the Biblical ethic which provided guidelines for action when applied to specific political and social situations.

Niebuhr was constantly in demand for speaking engagements as well as having many political commitments. He held a major responsibility in the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and he was continually on call as a consultant to a variety of world bodies. You had to take whatever opening there was to keep abreast of his thinking. One of the more informal occasions was the Thursday night open house which the Niebuhrs held in their Union Seminary apartment. These were always "gemütlichkeit" gatherings with beer and pretzels and intense discussions on the latest U.S. or world event. At some point in the evening Niebuhr would make some pointed remarks and take questions from his guests.

In my Middler year I took his advanced course of Christian Ethics. The first semester dealt with the whole array of pre-Christian ethical systems beginning with the ethics of primitive societies, continuing through readings in Egyptian and Babylonian ethics, and then into the ethics of the Hebrews, the Greeks and the Romans and ending with the ethics of Indian and Chinese religions. It was a heavy course, one which showed an entirely different side of Niebuhr. I had always thought of him as contemporary, right in the mix of issues. Here he dealt with the distant past. Even his sharpness could not take the edge off the tediousness of ancient laws and practices. At some point

he would come up with an "off the cuff " quip which added a touch of levity to laborious material. It was as if, knowing he was straining to keep the material lively, he had to maintain his reputation as being *au courant*.

When we got to the second semester the course moved to Christian ethics. We were now on familiar ground and Niebuhr brightened up. He became effusive, his countenance more intense and his hands more expressive. Here he was himself. This is why he was at Union: his shrewd insights into the application of Biblical ethics in our current situation. He built his case for the "ethic of love" and continually pointed to the ambiguity of living out that love ethic in social situations. It was here his insights cut to the paradoxes within life and helped me appreciate his depth and his direction for my own life. One of his great insights is worth quoting here, "Nothing worth doing is completed in one lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any context of history, therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, no matter how virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore we are saved by love. "(3)

It was during the year, 1950 to 1951, that the Auburn wing was being built onto Union Seminary within the Quadrangle. There was a lot of action around Union in 1950 with much dirt and noise. Auburn Seminary, which had been an upstate New York Presbyterian Seminary, had been closed for many years and its program incorporated into Union Theological Seminary. Auburn was the remaining stream of Presbyterianism which had been part of Union Seminary's early tradition. There was to be a celebration of the completion and the dedication of the Auburn wing in late 1950 or early 1951, the anniversary year of Auburn Seminary.

The occasion of the dedication was to be celebrated with a dramatic production written by several students and directed by Robert Seaver, Professor of Speech at Union. and another person from the School of Sacred Music. The presentation lifted up the dramatic parts of the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The drama was to be backed up with musical choruses. Interwoven in the drama were scenes of the workers building the current Auburn wing. The workers' conversations reflected the current events which were affecting their lives as they were building the

Auburn wing. One of the events of 1950, which disturbed us all, was the announcement by President Truman of the detonation of the Hydrogen Bomb. This was followed in June by the outbreak of the Korean War.

I was chosen to play one of the workers in the presentation. My New York accent made me an ideal candidate for the role. The drama was in the dialogue we carried on about our lives as we faced an uncertain future in a world dominated by nuclear escalation and regional wars. The climate of living in an H Bomb world had affected us all. Niebuhr's immediate response to the H Bomb was to worry that our military strategists might be tempted to a quick fix. He said at the time: "We cannot afford, morally or strategically, to confront the world with such a weapon as the primary source of our defense." (4) But he also worried that the threat of the use of the H Bomb might lead us to pacifism. Here he believed that nuclear weapons were "our ultimate insecurity and our immediate security" against a Soviet threat.

The drama in celebration of the Auburn wing was a great success. The play was well acted, the music was inspiring and the audience was appreciative. The writers had done an admirable job in weaving together a celebration of past Presbyterian history with the ethical realities of living in 1951. When I got to Niebuhr's Christian Ethics class the next day, as he arrived at the lectern, his gaze fell on me. He bent over the lectern, his clear blue eyes penetrating me: "That was a good performance last night. You played your part well. You caught the real feelings of a worker." I thought to myself: That's what I know.

As I thought about Niebuhr's comments in class, it occurred to me that he responded instinctively to worker situations. Most people would not have caught the intensity. It was Niebuhr's pastorate in Detroit in the 1920's which had shaped him. It was there he gained an appreciation of the effects of power over people's lives. In a city where people were dominated by work on the assembly lines of huge automobile factories, Niebuhr developed his understanding of sin and power. His autobiography of those years in Detroit, "Leaves From the Notebook of A Tamed Cynic," was seminal in his writing the epoch-making book "Moral Man and Immoral Society."

Reflecting on his Detroit experience in 1956, Niebuhr wrote in the preface to the paperback edition of "Leaves": "After a quarter of a century in academic life, I can still understand why I was so reluctant to leave the local parish. Academic life seems highly specialized in comparison with the life of a parish priest meeting human problems on all levels of weal and woe, and trying to be helpful in fashioning a "community of grace" in the barren anonymity of a large city. I regret the immaturity with which I approached the problems and tasks of the ministry but I do not regret the years devoted to the parish." (5)

It was out of this "immaturity" that Niebuhr wrote his watershed analysis of power in industrial society: "Moral Man and Immoral Society." The book sounded the deathknell for liberal theology. The optimistic response of theological liberals to the Depression left Niebuhr cold. He ripped apart the moral confusion of liberal Christianity which saw hope in the "social statesmanship on the part of business leaders" in solving the economic woes of millions of people. Instead Niebuhr saw the corruption toward which corporate power gravitates unless it is checked by a countervailing force. Niebuhr's words still hold true today: "Political power has been made responsible, but economic power has become irresponsible in society. The net result is that political power has been made more responsible to economic power. It is, in other words, again the man of power, or the dominant class which binds the society together, regulates its processes, always paying itself inordinate rewards for its labors." (6) It has been said that "Moral Man and Immoral Society" was the most prophetic of Niebuhr's writings, some say the most Marxist. It was published in 1932 at the height of the Depression and the closest in time to the Detroit experience he had just left.

As I read both "Leaves" and "Moral Man," they were the closest to my own experience. Niebuhr considered both these analyses dated when I attended Union Seminary, but for me they were the reality with which many working people still had to deal. As I was to later discover in Asia, inordinate power, willfully used, was the overwhelming fact of life for millions of people.

As Niebuhr moved further away from the Depression and his Detroit experience, his view of power became more sophisticated. The idolatry of Communism in solving the problems of injustice became one of his main

targets. "Christian realism" was the label which people gave his theology. Some friends asked me, could I still go with Niebuhr now that he had moved away from his early socialist commitment?

My first answer was to say that there was a distinction between the Communism which Niebuhr had targeted in the post War period and the socialism which he had ardently supported in the early 1930s. The fact that he had moved to the center never bothered me. I felt that Niebuhr had a pastor's heart. He saw and understood the misery of people, and he responded to the abuse and misuse of power in whatever circumstance. But I believed that there was an imbalance in power within American society. We had a long way to go before we were a just society. This is why I remained a socialist.

On the international scene, I perceived that Niebuhr's judgements were generally correct, particularly his analysis of the abuse of power in the Soviet Union. Niebuhr balanced his criticism of the Soviet Union with his censure of the United States for its immodesty and hypocrisy in international relations. "The Irony of American History", which Niebuhr wrote during my years at Union Seminary took some of the edge off his wholesale condemnation of Soviet Communism. Niebuhr pointed out that we as a nation shared some of the same illusions which characterized the Soviet Union. We were as humorless in our immodesty about our virtues as a democratic society as the Russians were about their classless society. "No laughter from heaven could possibly penetrate through the liturgy of moral self-appreciation in which the religion of Communism abounds" but "a frantic anti-Communism can become so similar in its temper of hatefulness to Communism itself, the difference in the respective creeds being unable to prevent the similarity of spirit." (7)

In the latter part of my Senior year Niebuhr had a stroke which effectively ended his active career. Although after a convalescence he continued to teach and to write, his direct involvement in political affairs was severely curtailed. I continued to look for his now infrequent articles in "Christianity and Crisis", the journal of social criticism which he helped begin. His articles still had the incisiveness of thought and the grasp of history which were the mark of his early years. He was still labelled a "Christian realist." Younger

people faulted him for the “realism” which seemed to give uncritical support to U.S. foreign policy. John Bennett, who was close to Niebuhr in the 1960s, differed with this view and pointed to his last writings which were critical of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war.

I took with me from Union Seminary an affection for Niebuhr which has lasted me through my life. He was one of America’s most critical thinkers, not only theologically, but politically as well. Many in the academic community, particularly among historians, are indebted to Niebuhr for providing a unique Christian view of the weaknesses and strengths which have evolved in the making of the United States.

Beyond his greatness as a thinker, I appreciated his humanity. I admit that I stood in awe of Niebuhr. His intellectual sharpness overwhelmed me. Whenever a piece of his common humanity showed through, it renewed my confidence that he was reachable. I had known that Niebuhr was a baseball fan. In fact, he was a New York Giants fan and went to the Polo Grounds whenever time allowed. That, of course, endeared him to me. One time in class he was caught up in a discussion of the difference between himself and John Bennett. “John Bennett is the real intellectual between us.” Niebuhr offered. “When John Bennett gets to the NEW YORK TIMES in the morning, he immediately reads the editorials. When I get the TIMES I turn to the sports pages.”

When classes began in the Fall of 1951, New Yorkers were caught up in a down to the wire National League pennant race which pitted the New York Giants against their arch-rivals the Brooklyn Dodgers. The Giants had been counted out of the pennant race as far back as early August. They had stumbled badly in the early season and on August 11th were thirteen and a half games behind the first place Brooklyn Dodgers. Suddenly the Giants caught fire and began a winning streak that brought them into a first place tie with the Brooklyn Dodgers in the last game of the regular season. This forced a three game play-off between the Giants and the Dodgers.

Wherever I was during the play-offs I found a radio to listen to the game. The first game I was on my way up to my field work assignment as a student

chaplain at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. I spent the crucial part of the game listening to a taxi drivers' radio parked outside the Medical Center. For the third, and final game - the Giants and the Dodgers had both won one game - I had an afternoon Old Testament class with James Muilenburg. Several of us took seats in the back of the classroom that afternoon. One of our number had a battery radio and set it up at the back of the room, just audible to the back two rows. Jim Muilenburg, unaware of our knavery, had gotten all wound up in his lecture, which was exciting in itself. The game came down the bottom of the ninth inning with the Giants behind Brooklyn 5 to 3. Two men were on base, one out and Bobby Thompson was at bat. The ears of the faithful had become extra-sensory, none of us were hearing what Muilenburg was saying, but leaning far back in our seats to pick up the announcer's voice. Suddenly the back of the room broke into a tumult. Thompson had hit a line drive into the lower left field grandstands. He had homered and won the game and the National League pennant for the Giants. Muilenburg was unhinged by the interruption, but quickly gained composure. Class was just as well as over for the Giant fans. I took off after class jubilant and headed toward the Broadway and 120th Street door. I got out the door and there coming up the street was Niebuhr walking his dogs. He looked at me, his face breaking out in a big grin. He knew I had heard the news. "That's what I like about those Giants, they're existential." exclaimed Reinie, "They're up and their down. They're down and their up.!" That's the way I like to remember Niebuhr. His theology even encompassed the New York Giants.

End Notes

1. quoted by Richard W. Fox, in "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography," (N.Y.:Harper & Row, 1985), p.238
2. quoted by Richard W. Fox, p. 240.
3. Ursula Niebuhr (ed.) "Justice and Mercy," (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1974) 1951 prayer in preface
4. quoted by Richard W. Fox, p. 240
5. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic," (N.Y.:Meridian Books, Living Age Books,pb. 2nd printing 1959) p. 9
6. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Moral Man and Immoral Society,"(N.Y.: Chas. Scribner's Sons,1948) ,p. 15
7. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Irony of American History," (N.Y. : Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1952),p. 170