



**Major Works on Religion and Politics: Leaves
from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic / Moral Man
and Immoral Society / The Children of Light and
the Children of Darkness / The Irony of American
History / Other Writings**

Reinhold Niebuhr , Elisabeth Sifton (Editor)

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From the 1920s through the 1960s, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was among America's most prominent public intellectuals. As a pastor, teacher, and writer, he bridged the divide between religion and politics with perspicacity, grace, and singular intelligence, whether writing about pacifism and "just war" theory, the problem of evil in history, or the crises of war, the Depression, and social conflict. His provocative essays, lectures, and sermons from before and during World War II, in the postwar years, and at the time of the Civil Rights Movement offered searching analyses of the forces shaping American life and politics. Their profound insights into the causes of economic inequality, the challenges of achieving social justice, and the risks of adventurism in the international sphere are as relevant today as they were when he composed them.

This volume, prepared with extensive notes and a chronology by the author's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, is the largest, most comprehensive edition of Niebuhr's writings ever published. It brings together the books *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), his personal reflections on his experiences as a young pastor in Detroit as it was being transformed by the explosive growth of the auto industry; *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), a brilliant and tough-minded work that draws out the implications of Niebuhr's view that while individuals can sometimes overcome the temptations of self-interest, larger groups never can; *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), a passionate defense of democracy written during World War II; and the essential study that Andrew Bacevich has called "the most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy": *The Irony of American History* (1952), a consideration of American conduct in the early Cold War years that takes equal aim at Soviet communism and at the moral complacency of the United States in its newfound global ascendancy.

These four works are supplemented with essays, lectures, and sermons drawn from Niebuhr's many other books, as well as prayers—among them the well-known Serenity Prayer. The volume also includes a chronologically arranged selection of his journalism about current events, many of the pieces appearing here in book form for the first time. "We are bound to go back to Niebuhr," the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. once wrote, "because we cannot escape the dark heart of man and because we cannot permit an awareness of this darkness to inhibit action and abolish hope."

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From Reader Review Major Works on Religion and Politics: Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic / Moral Man and Immoral Society / The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness / The Irony of American History / Other Writings for online ebook

Robin Friedman says

Reinhold Niebuhr In The Library Of America

The Library of America aims to present the best of American thinking and writing. The many volumes of the series cover fiction, poetry, drama, history, journalism, philosophy, and more from familiar and less-familiar writers. The latest book in the LOA series is this volume, "Major Works on Religion and Politics" by the 20th Century Protestant theologian and public intellectual, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892 -- 1971). Niebuhr wrote prolifically on religious and political issues over a long career that spanned both World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. His writings are difficult but have been and remain widely read and highly influential. Niebuhr modified his positions many times over his life. More often than not, he is regarded as part of the progressive trend in American political thought, but this characterization risks a great deal of over-simplification. This LOA volume was my first sustained reading of Niebuhr. The LOA kindly sent me a copy for review.

Many people who do not know Niebuhr's more formidable writings are familiar with at least one of his works without knowing the author. Niebuhr wrote a little prayer, "The Serenity Prayer" which, as given in this volume goes like this:

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

The Serenity Prayer is included in this volume in a collection of Niebuhr's prayers. The editor of the volume, Elisabeth Sifton, wrote a book about the Serenity Prayer: "The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Time of Peace and War". Sifton is also Niebuhr's daughter and an editor and book publisher for over forty years. She selected the contents for this LOA volume and prepared a chronology of Niebuhr's life and notes on the texts.

The selection of prayers is only a small part of this book. The volume includes four full-length books of Niebuhr, selections from his writings on current events from 1928 -- 1967, and sermons and lectures on faith and belief. The book offers a great deal to read and to learn.

In my reading of these works, Niebuhr's theology and philosophy impressed me as more important than his more topical political writings. Theology and politics are interlaced in his works. Niebuhr is a somewhat conservative, I think, Augustinian theologian whose religious views and politics rest heavily on views of original sin and the human capacity for error and self-deception. He sees various forms of secularisms, including both communism and unbridled individualism as attempts both to deny the fallible, limited character of human thought and to see human life as included entirely within a social, mundane context. With a strong liberal tendency, Niebuhr's political thought has a strong pragmatic cast. Creative tension results from the relationship between Niebuhr's theology and his politics. He tends to view secularism as based upon an overly-optimistic view of human nature; but the American founders, for example, were well aware of the divisive, self-aggrandizing parts of human nature when they framed the Constitution. I want to

comment briefly on each of the four major works included in this LOA volume and on the Lectures on Faith and Belief, both of which were of more interest to me than the prayers and the political writings.

Upon graduating from Yale Divinity School, Niebuhr accepted a pastorate at a small church in Detroit where he served for thirteen years. Niebuhr kept a journal and in 1929 published excerpts in a book, "Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic". This book offers an endearing, perceptive look at the life of a young clergyman, including his doubts about the worth of his calling. It also shows Niebuhr's developing views on pacifism and on the economic disparities and injustices he came to know in industrial Detroit. This is an accessible book, different from Niebuhr's later writings, and separately available in a LOA e-book and elsewhere.

The remaining three books combine theology with momentous, changing public events. The books have influence beyond their theological content because Niebuhr's insights can be restated in secular terms by those not religiously committed. In these books, Niebuhr's political views change with changes in events. "Moral Man and Immoral Society" was written during the Great Depression just before the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt. Niebuhr argues that individual morality and political morality are governed by different causes and cannot be judged by the same standard. He continued to hold this position through the rest of his life. This is probably the most radical of Niebuhr's books with its criticism of capitalism and economic and social inequities and its support for strong forms of social dissent, including possibly violence in some instances.

Written during WW II, "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness" tries to explain the basis for democracy in a way different from the Lockean-liberal explanation. The "children of light" are those who attempt to make human self-interest subject to a higher law. Niebuhr finds these "children" have to learn a good deal about human nature from the authoritarian "children of darkness". Interestingly, Niebuhr puts both liberals and Marxists in the camp of the "children of light".

"The Irony of American History" was published in 1952 during the Cold War. In this book, Niebuhr's position has shifted still further as he becomes aware of the communist threat to liberty and freedom. He has clearly come to regard communism as tyrannical and sees it the mission of the United States to defend the values of freedom, by military force if necessary. His position of "Christian realism" urges the United States not to lose sight of its own shortcomings or to adopt an absolutist position in the necessary fight against communism. This book enjoyed a wide readership during the Cold War and still deserves to be read.

The essays on faith and religion in this volume are varied and difficult. Niebuhr develops his own Augustinian, faith-based position and in the process offers many comparisons to secular liberalism, rationalism, Greek thought, Jewish thought, mysticism, and Catholicism. Besides its roots in Augustine, Niebuhr appears to me influenced by the Jewish thinkers Abraham Joshua Heschel, Franz Rozenzweig, and Martin Buber. Of the essays in this section, "Theology and Political Thought in the Western World", and "The Wheat and the Tares" seem to me to offer the best succinct summaries of Niebuhr's thinking. Thus Niebuhr writes in the former essay:

"[T]here is no 'Christian' economic or political system. But there is a Christian attitude toward all systems and schemes of justice. It consists on the one hand of a critical attitude toward the claims of all systems and schemes, expressed in the question whether they will contribute to justice in a concrete situation; and on the other hand a responsible attitude, which will not pretend to be God nor refuse to make a decision between political answers to a problem because each answer is discovered to contain a moral ambiguity in God's sight. We are men, not God; we are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in

history; and probably no pure evil either. The fate of civilizations may depend upon these choices between systems of which some are more, others less, just."

The Library of America is to be commended for its series and for this volume. Niebuhr is a complex, profound writer, worthy of inclusion in a series of the best of American thought. Readers interested in religious and social questions will be interested in this collection of the works of Niebuhr.

Robin Friedman

Emil Milanov says

Niebuhr's works are profoundly different from what one has come to expect from IR studies today. Where contemporary IRT deals with strictly defined variables, system dynamics and social structures, the great American theologian in turn offers a set of powerful narratives - about the nature and fallibility of Man, about innocence, morality, evil and hope.... about the ironies of history and the sheer hubris of the cult of reason and the quest for perfection in what is ultimately a Fallen world.

In a strange way, Niebuhr's writings remind me a lot of the great J.R.R.T. One deals with the drama and recalcitrance of human history while the other is an inventor of worlds imaginary, that is true, but there is a certain kinship in their thoughts pertaining to the nature and destiny of Man that I personally found extremely interesting.

Still, if there is one major lesson to be learned from this collection of works, it is one of humility. To quote the Serenity Prayer, "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other".

Jonathan Maas says

When A Moral Center meets the Real World - How can it Survive?

Like many, I read this off of John Blake's interview with Obama, which revealed Niebuhr as Obama's favorite philosopher / thought leader.

Basically Niebuhr asks the question repeatedly : How does one retain one's moral center when facing the realities of leadership in this world?

IE how do you retain your morality when facing an election, that requires you to play dirty to win? In Niebuhr's case, how do you retain your religious ideals, when in a world of competition - you compete against others for leadership within a church, and your church competes with others for followers. How do you do this?

Well, the answer is not easy, and Niebuhr spent a lifetime wrestling with it. Obama, love him or hate him, found a way to push his leadership forward while retaining a moral center. You can argue with this of course haha, but you get my idea.

Regardless, I highly recommend this for leaders, those interested in morality, those interested in making a

better world, and just about anyone else.

Paige Ellen Stone says

The Library of America is a growing national treasure of the United States. (I don't say "America", because that term actually includes North, Central and South America.) It is comprised of exquisitely bound copies of the works of writers throughout American History. While I support the Library, the truth is, copies of its books are much less expensive on Amazon.

Reinhold Niebuhr is one of the great thinkers on religion and politics of the 20th century. Most people know the serenity prayer, recited at all AA and Al-Anon meetings as well as at other 12-step based meetings and programs. Few know that it was written by Reinhold Niebuhr. This book is a collection of some of his most important works, gathered in one volume, printed on acid free paper and bound in a very high quality manner. This book is meant to last.

Included here are some of his major writings on both religion and politics, such as:

Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic

Moral Man and Immoral Society (a work whose relevance increases as we move into the 21st century)

The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness

The Irony of American History

Other writings are included, such as essays on the current events of his time, from 1928 to 1967), many of the prayers he composed and some of the sermons and lectures he gave on Faith and Belief. Also included are a chronology of his works, notes on the various writings in this volume and an Index.

This is an exquisite book, collecting some of the most important works of this important writer. Highest recommendation.

C. Michael says

Read where the Serenity Prayer came from...

Tyler says

I have not attended a religious ceremony in about ten years and do not have a great interest in the future of religion but this book and this writer are both very valuable to me. What I find most appealing about Niebuhr is his extreme interest in doing the *right* thing. The problems he focuses on are timeless and even though he at sometimes shows a penchant for the white-male-centeredness common to his era, I rarely found myself disagreeing with him on any topic. Niebuhr bemoans the alignment of the church with the establishment capitalist class of 20th century America because it led folks to the church for purposes of their own social advancement rather than a desire to simply do good unto others.

One word that Niebuhr uses that I always found odd was "transmutation", as in "Patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism." I am not sure but I assume this word may have been more widely used in the first part of the 20th century because of Ernest Rutherford's transmutation of Nitrogen into Oxygen isotopes in 1919. I bring it up here because I think the analogy to Chemistry is interesting. Niebuhr was interested in transmuting our society into one that was more compassionate and equal. If the elements can be changed by nuclear transmutation then perhaps there is some hope that our world society

can be transmuted into something better as well.

Lucas says

Niebuhr's early notes are sensitive and perceptive, but some of his later work is tiring and programmatic. This collection focuses on the implications of Marxism on Christianity and American culture. He has a gift for displaying the freshness of biblical thought even when he seems most strongly in the grip of socialist realism.
