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**BOOKFORUM**

**SUMMER, 2011**

**INTELLECTUAL HISTORY**

**Dark Passage**

**BY Jim Sleeper**

***WHY NIEBUHR NOW?***

John Patrick Diggins

University of Chicago Press

152 pp.

**L**ike George Orwell, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) was a prophet of the twentieth century whose legacy has been claimed by combatants along a left-right political spectrum that both men disdained. While both were left of center, both were also anti-Communist and believed that conservatism offers important truths. Both lamented that each side clings to its truths until they curdle into lies, leaving each side right only about how the other is wrong.

Orwell foresaw the totalitarian consequences; Niebuhr, the grander, deeper thinker, surveyed “the abyss of meaninglessness” that “yawns on the brink of all [man’s] mighty spiritual endeavors.” His two-volume study, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1943), reviews the futility of Aristotelian and Platonic wisdom, of rationalistic, Thomistic church doctrine, of Enlightenment reason, of Lockean capitalism, of liberal nationalism, of Marxism—and even of science.

Yet Niebuhr’s oft-misunderstood faith drove him to progressive, anti-Communist activism at the edge of that abyss, in the Christic, tragic manner of Martin Luther King Jr., who was inspired by Niebuhr as a divinity student and cited him in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Niebuhr had little use for Emersonian, expansive optimism about the self and even less use for capitalism’s Lockean, military-industrial, casino-finance, corporate-welfare, and consumer-marketing modes. Yet he saw the Americanrepublic as a central, if probably doomed, crucible of a deeper human struggle toward a destiny beyond history.

A surprisingly broad range of American leaders, from George Kennan (who called Niebuhr “the father of us all”) to Henry Luce to Barack Obama, have listened. In part, this is because Niebuhr’s dark faith made sense of the emblematically tragic events of 1919 (when Woodrow Wilson’s liberal-nationalist universalism failed), 1929 (when free-market capitalism collapsed), 1939 (when the Stalin-Hitler pact bared Communism’s moral bankruptcy), and 1949 (when the Soviet atom bomb destroyed the US’s hopes that science would save humanity).

So what was Niebuhr’s hope? The late American historian John Patrick Diggins answers with an assessment that wasn’t finished at Diggins’s death but that his partner, Elizabeth Harlan, and two former students have brought out in *Why Niebuhr Now?* This slim volume is faithful to Diggins’s paradoxical ways of thinking, which had affinities to Niebuhr’s—although not to his magisterial style.

Noting that Niebuhr’s anti-Communism was misappropriated by Peter Beinart and other advocates of liberal nationalist misadventures like the Iraq war, Diggins shows what they missed in Niebuhr’s understandings of individuality and capitalism— and hence in his faith and politics. The faith, although Christic and biblical, turned paradoxically on humans’ experience not of God’s presence, but of his absence. Niebuhr’s “religious vocation was to doubt religious certainty,” as Diggins puts it: “Genuine religion is always a struggle between belief and unbelief.”

That struggle is inevitable, Niebuhr held, because, on the one hand, our individual finitude and mortality make us experience the wonder, love, and yearning that generate religion, art, and compassion. On the other hand, because we’re limited and doomed as creatures, we’re also willfully or wistfully doomed as *creators*, with no external vantage points or leverage on history. That predicament generates incessant flights into illusory self-importance, power, omniscience, and material security—and therefore into idolatries of rugged individualism, liberal universal nationalism, the invisible hand, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the global village, and techno-nirvana.

For Niebuhr, these irrepressible strivings make pride the “alloy of sin” in all human interaction. Sin, in his view, is essentially everyone’s anxious tendency to make far more of our individual desires and accomplishments than any objective view can warrant. It’s because we’re mortal yet willful, Niebuhr wrote, that “an evil which does not exist in nature could have arisen in human history.” He added that science only enlarges our prison of finitude and mortality by making us observe ourselves observing ourselves, in infinite regression, ultimately to end up all the more homeless in our self-consciousness. That there is no escape revivifies the biblical myth of the original sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge to escape the human condition. The Bible thus illuminates the human experience more clearly than science does.

Niebuhr taught that only Christian faith and love, predicated on accepting our fate on earth, can keep us from destructive illusions of power and omniscience and make us better stewards of earth and of one another. He disdained both liberal Protestants’ “blue sky” attempts to treat sin as mere ignorance and Catholics’ insistence that submission to dogmas and sacraments will deliver us from evil. Yet only religion posed the right questions, and “Niebuhr’s theology is a study in both the limitations of knowledge and the necessity of faith,” Diggins writes.

Where Nietzsche saw “slave morality” in that necessity, Niebuhr saw the only liberation we can know: “The injunction of Christ: ‘Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul’ (Matthew 10:28) neatly indicates the dimension of human existence which transcends the basis which human life and history have in nature.”

Niebuhr may be more lost to us now than Diggins hopes. To watch Chief Justifier John Roberts justifying free speech for corporate “speakers” or the financial analyst Jim Cramer jumping and shouting about market blips on CNBC is to recognize how the idolatries of an increasingly illegitimate and unsustainable regime are degrading us. Niebuhr would draw us further back and down into American religious origins than most of us want to go; Diggins’s account reminds us where we’re heading instead.