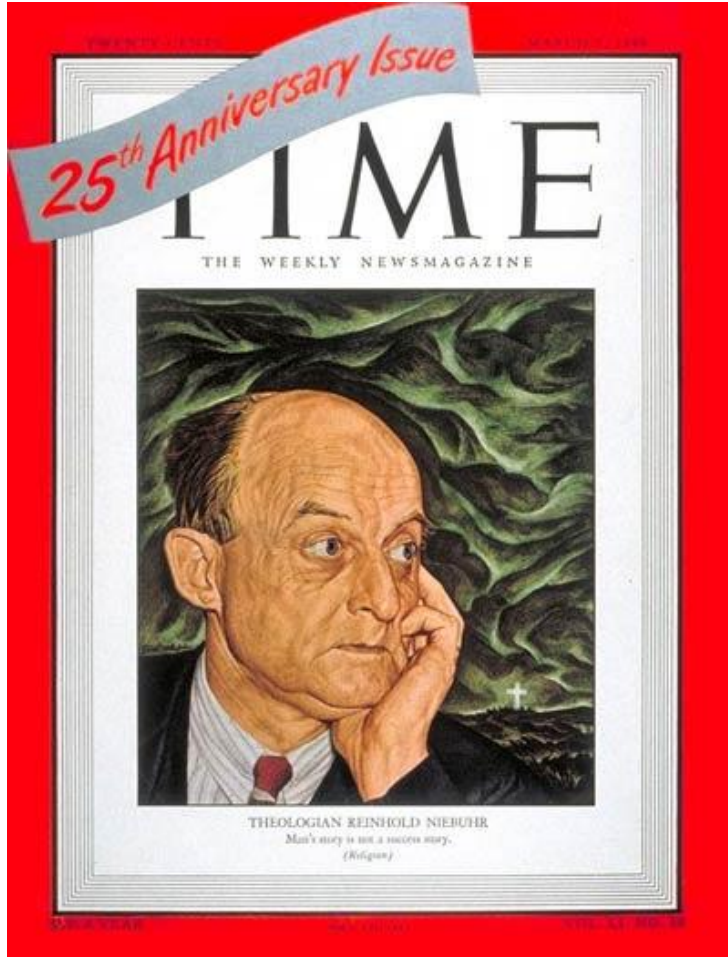


# Reinhold Niebuhr: 1892-1971



1928-1960 Professor of Practical Theology,  
Union Theological Seminary

## Serenity Prayer

God, give me grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.



# Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Works

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Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (1930).

Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics, (1932)

Interpretation of Christian Ethics, (1935)

Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, (1937)

Christianity and Power Politics, (1940)

The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, (1943).

The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, a Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its traditional Defense (1944).

Faith and History (1949)

The Irony of American History, (1952).

Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953).

The Self and the Dramas of History, (1955).

Pious and Secular America (1958)

Faith and Politics (1968)

Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr (1992).

On Niebuhr:

Richard Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography, (1985).

Ronald Stone, Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1960s.

Christian Realism in a Secular Age (2019).



# Reinhold Niebuhr: Christian Ethics

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*Moral Man and Immoral Society, 1932*

**1) Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own. ... Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity. But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups. In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships. ...**



**It may be possible to establish just relations between individuals within a group purely by moral and rational suasion and accommodation. In inter-group relations this is practically an impossibility. The relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.**

**(Introduction)**



**Insofar as this treatise has a polemic interest, it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of religiously inspired good will and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives.**

**(Introduction)**



**2) The emancipation of the Negro race in America probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of social and political strategy [non-violence]. It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race. ...the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies. (253)**



*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 1935*

**3) In the struggle between...rich and poor...certain moral judgments are possible... They stand under criterion of the simplest of all moral principles, that of equal justice. That principle has been valid in all the advances made by human society and its application to the modern social situation is obviously valid. (131)**



**4) The very essence of politics is the achievement of justice through equilibria of power. A balance of power is not conflict; but a tension between opposing forces underlies it. Where there is tension there is potential conflict, and where there is conflict there is potential violence. A responsible relationship to the political order, therefore, makes an unqualified disavowal of violence impossible. There may always be crises in which the cause of justice will have to be defended against those who will attempt its violent destruction.  
(189f)**





**5) John Dewey [in his book: Common Faith] would eliminate conflict and unite men of good will everywhere by stripping their spiritual life of historic, traditional and supposedly anachronistic accretions. This proposal is a striking example of the faith of modern rationalism in the ability of reason to transcend the partial perspectives of the natural world in which reason is rooted. (224)**



**6) There is no deeper pathos in the spiritual life of man than the cruelty of righteous people. If any one idea dominates the teachings of Jesus, it is his opposition to the self-righteousness of the righteous. (225)**



*The Nature and Destiny of Man. A Christian Interpretation (2 vols, 1941, 1943)*

**7) It may be that the collective egotism of group pride represents a particular temptation to individuals who suffer from specific forms of the sense of inferiority. The relation of modern fascist nationalism to the insecurity and sense of inferiority of the lower middle classes is therefore significant. ... Collective pride is thus man's last, and in some respects most pathetic effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it. It can hardly be surprising that this form of human sin is also most fruitful of human guilt, that is: of objective social and historical evil. (I, 212f)**

**Guilt is the objective consequence of sin, the actual corruption of the plan of creation and providence in the historical world. (I, 222)**



8) The anti-aristocratic emphasis of the Bible [in Old and New Testament prophecies against the guilt of wealth and power] has been interpreted by certain types of sectarian Christianity and by modern secular radicalism in too simple politico-moral terms. Jesus is reduced...to the stature of a leader of a proletarian revolt against the rich. The same emphasis has, on the other hand, been too simply obscured by most types of conventional Christianity, [which] regards the humility of spirit which Jesus extolled as a spiritual guide...  
... Biblical religion is too concerned with the ultimate and perennial human situation to permit a simple political interpretation of its anti-aristocratic tendencies. It is on the other hand too realistic to obscure the fact that socio-economic conditions actually determine to a large degree that some men are tempted to pride and injustice, while others are encouraged to humility. (I, 225)



9) The fact that, according to the Bible, men of intellectual, spiritual and moral eminence should fall under the same judgment as the men of power will seem particularly offensive to most moralists. It is at this point that the anti-aristocratic tendencies of Biblical religion stand in sharpest contrast to all forms of rationalism which assume that the intelligent man is also the good man... Without understanding the sinfulness of the human heart in general it is not possible to penetrate through the illusions and pretensions of the successful classes of every age. (I, 227)



**10) The greatest sin of moralistic Christianity is its tendency to encourage the assumption that men are as good as the ideals of justice and love which they entertain. (I, 279)**



**11) All structures of justice presuppose the sinfulness of man, and are all partly systems of restraint which prevent the conflict of wills and interests from resulting in a consistent anarchy. But they are also all mechanisms by which men fulfill their obligations to their fellow men... The Kingdom of God and the demands of perfect love are therefore relevant to every political system and impinge upon every social situation in which the self seeks to come to terms with the claims of other life. (II, 192)**



**12) Systems and principles of justice are the servants and instruments of the spirit of brotherhood insofar as they extend the sense of obligation towards the other, (a) from an immediately felt obligation, prompted by obvious need, to a continued obligation expressed in fixed principles of mutual support; (b) from a simple relation between a self and the “other” to the complex relations of the self and the “others”; and (c) finally from the obligations, discerned by the individual, to the wider obligations which the community defines from its more impartial perspective. These communal definitions evolve slowly in custom and law. ... In these three ways rules and laws of justice stand in a positive relation to the law of love. ...**

**The capacity of communities to synthesize divergent approaches to a common problem and to arrive at a tolerably just solution proves man’s capacity to consider interests other than his own. (II, 248f)**





**13) The final majesty, the ultimate freedom, and the perfect disinterestedness of the divine love can have a counterpart in history only in a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence. It portrays a love “which seeks not its own.” But a love that seeks not its own is not able to maintain itself in historical society. Not only may it fall victim to excessive forms of the self-assertion of others; but even the most perfectly balanced system of justice in history is a balance of competing wills and interests, and must therefore worst anyone who does not participate in the balance. ...**

**In apprehending the Cross as the symbol of this ultimate perfection, Christian faith has always been profounder than the theologies which sought to rationalize it. For faith has consistently regarded the Cross as the point in history where the sinful rivalries of ego with ego are transcended... (II, 72)**

*(continues on the next slide)*



13 cont)

**The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself; and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life, since human life remains within the vicious circle of sinful self-glorification on every level of moral advance.  
(I, 142)**



**14) The Cross represents a perfection which contradicts the false pretensions of virtue in history and which reveals the contrast between man's sinful self-assertion and the divine agape. (II, 88f)**



*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,  
A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its traditional Defense, 1944.*

**15) [The children of light are moral thinkers and idealists, but they are naïve about the influence of self-interest. The evil children of darkness are wise in understanding the power of self-interest and know how to use it. (foreword)]**

**Modern “children of light” expect modern society to achieve an essential uniformity through the common convictions of “men of good will” who have been enlightened by modern liberal education. This belief fails to appreciate the endless variety of cultural and religious convictions growing out of varying historical situations. ... The increase in the intensity and extent of social cohesion extends community, but also aggravates social conflict. (131f)**



**16) The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community. (41)**



**17) The most effective opponents of tyrannical government are today, as they have been in the past, men who can say, “We must obey God rather than man.” Their resolution is possible because they have a vantage point from which they can discount the pretensions of demonic Caesars and from which they can defy malignant power as embodied in a given government. (82)**



**18) The first religious apprehension of a universal and unlimited moral obligation was achieved in prophetic monotheism, which had its inception in the prophet Amos' conception of a universal history, over which the God of Israel presided as sovereign but of which the history of Israel was not the center and end. (155)**



19) The Nazi effort was profound in the sense that the perils of liberty are sufficient to have made it practically inevitable that some community would try to avoid them in the manner of Nazism. ... The fact that [tribal] primitivism results in perversity and that coerced unity produces sadistic cruelties...is a tremendously valuable lesson for our civilization. ... One of the greatest problems of democratic civilization is how to integrate the life of its various subordinate, ethnic, religious and economic groups in such a way that the richness and harmony of the whole community will be enhanced and not destroyed... (123f)





**20) Once it is fully understood that...advancing civilization tends to accentuate rather than diminish such disproportions of power...it must become apparent that property rights become instruments of injustice. In that sense the Marxist interpretation of the effect of property in history is correct. ... (110)**



**21) Marxist theory fails to anticipate the inevitable rise of an oligarchy in a new society. ... Even if a community approached the socialization of property by gradual stages and circumvented the period of revolution and dictatorship, it would still face the question of how to socialize property without creating pools of excessive social power in the hands of those who manage both its economic and its political processes. ...**

**The contrasting perils of anarchy and injustice, arising from too little and too much equilibrium of economic power, or from too much or too little social control over it, must be considered in the light of each new situation and technical development. The property issue must, in other words, be continually solved within the framework of the democratic process. It is valuable to remember that some forms of property are by their very nature power over others, while other types are primarily to secure the person against the aggrandizement of others or against the caprice of life and nature; and again others represent primarily the power to perform one's social function. (113f)**



**22) Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. (Foreword)**

**Democracy is a method for finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems. (118)**



*The Irony of American History, 1952*

[In this work, “irony” means the difference between dominant ideals and the reality they tend to obscure.]

**23) Any modern community which establishes a tolerable justice is the beneficiary of the ironic triumph of the wisdom of common sense over the foolishness of its wise men. For the wise men are inevitably tempted to follow either one or the other line of "rational" advance, of which the bourgeois [favoring capitalist individualism] and the Marxist ideologies are perfect types. (beginning of chap. 5)**



*“Theology and Political Thought in the Western World,” Ecumenical Review, 1957.*

**24) Self-criticism, critical thinking, political realism’s skepticism, theological realism’s hope: these resources give us some treasures to contribute to the community in its struggle for justice. Among them are [also] an understanding of the fragmentary character of all human virtue; the tentative character of all schemes of justice, since they are subject to the flow of history; the irrevocable character of the “moral law” transcending all historical relativities; and the hazardous judgments which must be made to establish justice between competing forces and interests. (261f)**



*Pious and Secular America, 1957*

**25) Billy Graham's simple version of the Christian faith...is very ironic. ... It cuts through all the hard antinomies of life and history by the simple promise that really good people will really be good. (21f)**



**22) Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. (Foreword)**

**Democracy is a method for finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems. (118)**



# Notable Aspects of Niebuhr's Religious Thought

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*Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932)*

1) Jesus, in the sublime naiveté of the religious imagination at its best, interprets the impartiality of nature toward the evil and the good...as a revelation of the impartial love of God. (53)

The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. (81)





## Probable Influence of Tillich

*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935)*

**2) The quintessence of human personality is never in time... That is why the secret of personality is never fully disclosed and also why the artist is more successful in discovering the clues to it than the scientist. (83)**

**Faith in God means faith in the transcendent unity of essence and existence, of the ideal and the real world. (209)**

**The ethical demands of Jesus...proceed from a transcendent and divine unity of essential reality... (56)**



## General and Biblical Revelation, and the “Point of Contact”

*The Nature and Destiny of Man (1941, 1943)*

**3) The law of man’s nature is love, a harmonious relation to life in obedience to the divine center and source of his life. This law is violated when man seeks to make himself the center and source of his own life. ...**

**The essence of man is his freedom. Sin is committed in that freedom. ... [It is] made possible by the fact of his freedom, but not following necessarily from it. Christianity therefore issues inevitably in the religious expression of an uneasy conscience. (I, 16f)**



4) ...the law and man's uneasy conscience are the first point of contact between God and man. ... Man's own heart accuses him. Without faith [in God's love and forgiveness] this accusation leads to despair and with faith it may lead to repentance. Man's uneasy conscience is...an expression of the law which is written in his own heart... (Romans 2:14-15). (I, 274f)



5) The revelation of God is always twofold ... [a private, personal revelation in all persons], and a historical Biblical revelation... Without the private revelation of God, the public and historical [Biblical] revelation would not gain credence. ... Private revelation is...synonymous with “general” revelation, without the presuppositions there could be no “special” [Biblical] revelation. It is no less universal for being private. ... The experience of God is...implied in all experience. The soul which reaches the outermost rims of its own consciousness must come in contact with God, for he impinges on that consciousness. (I, 127)



**6) General revelation...contains three elements. The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being [the Creator]. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third...is the longing for forgiveness. (I, 131)**



**7) Christian faith sees in the Cross of Christ the assurance that judgment is not the final work of God to man. (I, 142)**



**8) The perfect love of the life of Christ ends on the Cross, after having existed in history. It is...supra-historical...in the sense that the love which it embodies is the point where history culminates and ends. (I, 164)**

**The vindication of Christ and his triumphant return is...an expression of faith in the sufficiency of God's sovereignty over the world and history, and in the final supremacy of love over all the forces of self-love which defy, for the moment, the inclusive harmony of all things under the will of God. ... This return of Christ stands at the "end" of history in such a way that it would sometimes appear to be a triumph in history. ...the Christian faith insists that that the final consummation of history lies beyond the conditions of the temporal process. Against other-worldliness it asserts that the consummation fulfills, rather than negates, the historical process. (II, 290f)**



9) Eternity...stands over time in the sense that it is the ultimate source and power of all derived and dependent existence. It is not a separate order of existence. ... The eternal is the ground and source of the temporal. The divine consciousness gives meaning to the mere succession of natural events by comprehending them simultaneously... (I, 299)





**10) By its confidence in an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man's historical striving to the very point of suffering with and for him, Christian faith can prompt men to accept their historical responsibilities gladly. ... Wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of grace in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope. (II, 321, conclusion)**



**11) There are ultimate problems of life which cannot be fully stated until the answer to them is known. Without the answer men will not allow themselves to contemplate the full depth of the problem, lest they be driven to despair. (II, 75)**

**Hope...deals with the future as a realm where infinite possibilities are realized and must be a realm of terror if it is not under the providence of God. (I, 271)**

