

CH 536: "The Theology and Ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr"  
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities  
June 2008

Instructors: Charles M. Swezey (Emeritus, Union Theological Seminary/Presbyterian School of Christian Education) and Paul E. Capetz

Purpose of the Course:

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. Certainly, he was the most influential theological ethicist in the United States. His perspective, called "Christian realism," was a response to the breakdown of liberal optimism as represented by the "social gospel" movement that had called for the transformation of society through the implementation of Christian values. In its place, Niebuhr drew upon Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard to forge a more realistic assessment of human nature that could inform Christian efforts to participate responsibly in the economic, political, and social arenas of modern life.

This course is an introduction to his thought. Its purpose is to enable students to grasp the central core of his thinking and to assess its relevance for the twenty-first century. To this end we shall engage in a close reading of his *magnum opus*, The Nature and Destiny of Man. In addition to this work we shall read his defense of democracy, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, as well as an important essay entitled "Liberty and Equality." By the end of the seminar students should possess not only a solid grasp of the content of his thinking, but also a critical assessment of his categories for interpreting the contemporary world.

Assigned Readings:

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 2 vols., The Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1941, 1964, 1996). Hereafter: NDM .

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, 1960). Hereafter CLCD.

Reinhold Niebuhr, "Liberty and Equality," in Pious and Secular America (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 61-77. Hereafter: "Liberty and Equality."

Recommended Reading:

Robin W. Lovin, Reinhold Niebuhr, Abingdon Pillars of Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

### Requirements and Procedures of the Course:

Students are expected to complete all the reading assignments on time and to be prepared to discuss them in class. Additionally, students will be required to take turns writing very short papers (no more than 2 double-spaced pages) to be xeroxed and handed out to all members of the class. These short presentations should state succinctly the central argument of the assigned readings for that day. These papers will not be graded. The purpose of these papers is to initiate meaningful discussion about Niebuhr's text.

A final paper (no more than 10 to 12 double-spaced pages) is due Monday, June 23. This paper should focus on an important aspect of Niebuhr's thought or on the structure (or a significant part of that structure) of his thought (e.g., the nature of humans or human destiny, pride or sloth). A paper topic must be agreed upon in consultation with the instructors before the end of the term. Also, remember that two copies of your final paper must be submitted. If you request an extension, your paper will not be graded until after the start of the fall semester.

### Schedule of Classes and Reading Assignments:

Class meets four times a week (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 8:45 a.m. until 12:00 p.m.).

Monday, June 2:

- 1) Introduction to the Course
- 2) NDM I, 1, pp. 1-25 (to be read together in class)

Tuesday, June 3:

- 1) NDM I, 5, pp. 123-149
- 2) NDM I, 6, pp. 150-177

Wednesday, June 4: NO CLASS

Thursday, June 5:

- 1) NDM I, 7, pp. 178-207
- 2) NDMI, 8, pp. 208-240

Friday, June 6:

- 1) NDM I, 9, pp. 241-264
- 2) NDM I, 10, pp. 265-300

Monday, June 9:

- 1) NDM, II, 1, pp. 1-34
- 2) NDM, II, 2, pp. 35-67

Tuesday, June 10:

- 1) NDM, II, 3, pp. 68-97
- 2) NDM, II, 4, pp. 98-126

Wednesday, June 11: NO CLASS

Thursday, June 12:

- 1) NDM, II, 5, pp. 127-156
- 2) NDM, II, 6, pp. 157-183

Friday, June 13:

- 1) NDM, II, 7, pp. 184-212
- 2) NDM, I, 2, pp. 26-30; NDM, I, 3, pp. 54-56; NDM, I, 4, pp. 93-96

Monday, June 16:

- 1) NDM, II, 8, pp. 213-243
- 2) NDM, II, 9, pp. 244-286

Tuesday, June 17:

- 1) "Liberty and Equality"
- 2) NDM, II, 10, pp. 287-321

Wednesday, June 18: NO CLASS

Thursday, June 19:

- 1) CLCD, 1, pp. 1-41
- 2) CLCD, 3, pp. 86-118

Friday, June 20:

- 1) CLCD, 4, pp. 119-152
- 2) CLCD, 5, pp. 153-190

APPENDIX: Books, Collections of Articles, and Selected Secondary Sources

Books by Niebuhr published during his lifetime:

- 1969 THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE, with Paul E. Sigmund  
1965 MAN'S NATURE AND HIS COMMUNITIES  
1963 A NATION SO CONCEIVED, with Alan Heimert
- 1959 THE STRUCTURE OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES  
1957 PIOUS AND SECULAR AMERICA  
1954 THE SELF AND THE DRAMAS OF HISTORY  
1953 CHRISTIAN REALISM AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS  
1951 THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY
- 1949 FAITH AND HISTORY  
1946 DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES  
1944 THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS  
1943 NDM, vol. 2, HUMAN DESTINY  
1941 NDM, vol. 1, HUMAN NATURE  
1940 CHRISTIANITY AND POWER POLITICS
- 1937 BEYOND TRAGEDY  
1935 AN INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS  
1934 REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF AN ERA  
1932 MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY  
1932 THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGION TO SOCIAL WORK
- 1929 LEAVES FROM THE NOTEBOOK OF A TAMED CYNIC  
1923 DOES CIVILIZATION NEED RELIGION?

Collections of articles:

- 1992 A REINHOLD NIEBUHR READER, ed. Charles C. Brown  
1991 REMEMBERING REINHOLD NIEBUHR: LETTERS OF REINHOLD AND  
URSULA M. NIEBUHR, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr  
1986 THE ESSENTIAL REINHOLD NIEBUHR, ed. Robert McAfee Brown  
1977 YOUNG REINHOLD NIEBUHR: HIS EARLY WRITINGS, 1911-1931, ed.  
William G. Chrystal  
1974 JUSTICE AND MERCY, ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr  
1968 FAITH AND POLITICS, ed. Ronald H. Stone  
1960 REINHOLD NIEBUHR ON POLITICS, ed. Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good  
1959 ESSAYS IN APPLIED CHRISTIANITY, ed. D. B. Robertson  
1957 LOVE AND JUSTICE, ed. D. B. Robertson

Selected secondary sources:

- 2003 Elizabeth Sifton, THE SERENITY PRAYER
- 2001 Langdon Gilkey, ON NIEBUHR: A THEOLOGICAL STUDY
- 2000 Robin W. Lovin, "Christian Realism: A Legacy and its Future," THE ANNUAL, SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS, vol. 20
- 1995 Robin W. Lovin, REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND CHRISTIAN REALISM
- 1992, 2003 Charles C. Brown, NIEBUHR AND HIS AGE
- 1992 Harlan Beckley, PASSION FOR JUSTICE, chapters 4 and 6
- 1986 James M. Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics," REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND THE ISSUES OF OUR TIME, ed. Richard Harries
- 1985 Richard Fox, REINHOLD NIEBUHR: A BIOGRAPHY
- 1980 Judith Plaskow, SIN, SEX, AND GRACE: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE AND THE THEOLOGIES OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND PAUL TILLICH
- 1979 D. B. Robertson, REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S WORKS: A BIBLIOGRAPHY (Note: not the earlier edition)

