

## *A Few Words from the Director*

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In recent months I have found myself reflecting on Reinhold Niebuhr more than usual. In part this is because the recent revelation that Barack Obama was influenced by Niebuhr has sparked a revival of interest in his thought, and that has led some of our sponsoring churches to ask me to speak about Niebuhr and his influence in their adult ed programs. In part it is also because of the fact that in my scholarly work at Georgetown I have been caught up in a discussion prompted by the fact it has recently come to light that one of the most important contemporary political philosophers--a man called John Rawls--was also influenced by neo-orthodox Protestant theology (to which Niebuhr contributed significantly). I participated in a panel on the influence of religious ideas on Rawls' work at a recent meeting of the American Political Science Association held here in Washington.

Niebuhr is sometimes characterized as a Lutheran. But the evidence for that claim is weak. It is more accurate, I believe, to think of him as both Lutheran and Reformed. For he was raised, educated and ordained as a minister in the (German) Evangelical Church, which was an extension of a church in Prussia that combined Lutheran and Reformed elements and deliberately avoided identifying itself exclusively with either confession. When he came to maturity and made his famous turn toward neo-orthodoxy in the 1920's, it was the entire magisterial Reformation tradition--especially in its Lutheran and Reformed forms--that he embraced.

Niebuhr died in 1971, but he did his most important intellectual work in the period between the 1930's and the 1950's. It is a product, therefore, of a particular moment in the history of the 20th century from which we are now well removed, and for that reason his works sometimes have a dated feel about them when read today. But only to some extent. As Barack Obama observed in the interview with David Brooks where he revealed his interest in Niebuhr, there are parts of Niebuhr's thought that seem as relevant today as they did when they first appeared.

Especially is that true, I think, of the more fundamental claims Niebuhr made as an ethicist and political philosopher. A good example is his critique of the modern idea that a good society can be built on a foundation of enlightened self-interest--which is something I encounter all the time in my work as a student of political thought. It is a very popular idea today, just as it was in his day. Niebuhr challenged that way of thinking on grounds he believed derived from the "prophetic" strain in Biblical religion. No matter how enlightened people are, he said, if they think they can act virtuously while pursuing their own interests, they will usually end up taking advantage of other people and persuading themselves that they are doing the right thing. Niebuhr was under no illusions that religion as such could solve this problem; in fact, he thought it often simply contributed to the problem. But he also thought the kind of witness that was represented by such figures as the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth had the potential to shake people out of such complacency and even to enable them to act in sacrificial ways on behalf of others.

When one reads what Niebuhr had to say on matters of this kind it is easy to see why he had the influence he did on important political actors, ranging all the way from George Kennan to Martin Luther King, Jr. My guess is that this will continue, moreover, because his core claims, like the comparable claims of other such figures, continue to resonate long after the time when they were first articulated. And the lessons they have to teach us never really get learned in any lasting way. So they have to be relearned, over and over again. That's part of the reason why we dwell as much as we do in the work of the Reformed Institute on our heritage as Reformed Christians. And for those who are really concerned about preserving the strong social conscience that has been characteristic of our tradition, it should be reason enough.

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