Introduction

Christian realism is a reminder of our limits and an affirmation of our hope. It tells us that our knowledge is imperfect, our plans are incomplete, and our expectations are inevitably distorted by self-interest. We are always trying to overcome these limitations, and we are often partly successful; but our partial successes make it all the more important to remember that the limits remain, mocking our confidence with ironic reversals and threatening our pride with forces beyond our control. Final answers and permanent solutions elude us.

Nevertheless, we live in a meaningful universe. Conflict, violence, and the relentless background drone of anxiety are not the ultimate reality. The coherence of our partial truths and the justice that expresses our imperfect love point to reality in a way that incoherence and injustice do not. So we feel ourselves always obliged to work toward a better approximation of justice and peace, and we cannot rest content merely in prevailing with our own interests.

Everyone experiences this dialectic of power and finitude, meaning and incoherence, hope and anxiety. For some, it signals a need to dig through the distortions of human subjectivity to the hard core of objective fact. For others, the persistence of incoherence and violence suggests that objectivity itself is an illusion, and the only order we will find is the one we make for ourselves.

For biblical faith, however, this unresolved tension in all human experience reveals the nature of ultimate reality and locates our place within it. Biblical faith articulates this revelation by saying both that we are "created in the image of God" and that we are "fallen." We have used the image of God, which is our power to know, imagine, and choose, to separate ourselves from God. As a result, we are unable rightly to choose or to know a good which is nonetheless always present to us, shared by all of us, engaging us in pursuit of its partial and limited realizations, and judging our failures to comprehend it as a whole.

This assessment of the human situation is shared by all Christian theology. What distinguishes Christian realism is the conviction that the best place to see this human condition in ordinary experience is in those large-scale relationships and interactions we call politics. As Edmund Santurri puts it, "Political life displays in a peculiarly transparent way the fallen condition of the world."[1] Although many people center their moral reflections in personal relationships and close communities, Christian realists find the moral life more clearly presented in political problems that show the limits of our understanding, demand higher levels of self-restraint, and demonstrate our dependence on powers and forces outside of our control. Seen from a Christian realist perspective, politics demands our best efforts at the same time that it undermines our self-righteousness. Politics condemns injustice without promising us that good will and sincerity will always be rewarded. "In such a faith, both sentimentality and despair are avoided. The meaningfulness of life does not tempt to premature complacency, and the chaos which always threatens the world of meaning does not destroy the tension of faith and hope in which all moral action is grounded."[2]

Through the work of theologians, preachers, and political thinkers, this Christian realist orientation toward politics shaped the self-understanding of peoples and leaders in the Western democracies just after the Second World War. It helped shape the global order that emerged during those years and lasted to the end of the Cold War. Reinhold Niebuhr was a central figure in these developments, engaged in conversations about events with leading politicians, philosophers, historians, and critics, and also writing books, sermons, and lectures that shaped the public perception of Christianity and its meaning for the modern world.[3]

Niebuhr's Christian realism stressed the role of power in maintaining order and accomplishing political purposes, but he also insisted on the necessity of checking power with countervailing power.[4] Within nations, Christian realism suggested the checks and balances of constitutional democracy as the best way to preserve both order and freedom. Between

[1] Edmund Santurri, "Global Justice after the Fall: Christian Realism and the 'Law of Peoples,'" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 (2005), 784.
[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 64.
[3] Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 193–248; Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).
[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960).

nations, a balance of power provided the realistic alternative to utopian plans for world government.

To seek peace through conflict between roughly equal opposing powers seems a risky idea at the outset. Realists come to trust the process through experience over time, but as Niebuhr pointed out, neither secular liberalism nor Marxism supports it in theory. It gains plausibility through the biblical understanding of human nature, which reinforces our experience that there is no single locus of power and authority in this world from which all conflict can be resolved and all questions answered, despite the perennial attraction of imperial claims and comprehensive theories that promise such a center.[5]

Niebuhr's century was one in which lessons about peace had to be learned by reflecting on its absence. Two world wars nearly destroyed the political order that had been maintained by successful modern states since the Protestant Reformation. In the twentieth century, the successful modern state was tested by the forces of imperialism, nationalism, and revolutionary Marxism. Against those challenges, Niebuhr believed the clearest direction was provided not by modern political theory, but by the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. They understood idolatry, and they knew how to defeat it.

The twentieth century was marked by the rise and fall of ideological states that linked absolute power to ultimate good. The Revolution of 1917 transformed the Russian Empire in which the tsar held absolute power into a Soviet Union in which the state held absolute power, ostensibly for the ultimate purpose of bringing about its own dissolution in a proletarian utopia. Mussolini, Franco, and, most successfully, Hitler supplanted faltering governments with a state that promised a new center of authority, adequate to overcome the weaknesses of democracy and the threats of revolution. As European empires faded after the First World War, the Empire of Japan transformed its successful emulation of the nineteenth century European empires into a new imperial ideology that linked religious legitimacy, authoritarian politics, and cultural hegemony. The Chinese completed the cycle of major power transformations with their own communist revolution that ended with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Although power had tended to concentrate in the hands of the state since the beginning of the modern era, these twentieth century powers demanded more from their people than even the most absolutist modern

[5] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 100.

states, because they claimed to put their power in service of a greater good. Although the good envisioned was different in each case, these regimes all exercised totalitarian power, demanding not merely obedience, but absolute loyalty, and putting all their people and all their social resources in service of the goal envisioned by their leaders. Institutions, ideas, and persons that could not find a place in service to the new order had to be eliminated.

The link between greater goals and greater power makes logical sense at first. These governments were initially successful in mastering the economic and political dislocations of the time, and both fascist and communist parties gained some following in most Western democracies during the period between the two world wars.

Prophetic tradition, however, knows where the totalitarian claim leads. It leads to a state that not only acts on God's authority, but acts in God's place. The power to unite all good and the authority to silence all opposition belong only to God. The successful modern state has had a different task, important but limited, of securing peace and security within a given territory. Early modern philosophers and jurists, recoiling from the century of religious warfare that followed the Reformation, tended to suppose that intolerance and persecution are the results of religious zealots claiming political power. Democratic theorists through the beginning of the nineteenth century thus supposed that freedom could be secured by the simple expedient of separating religion from politics. But when the totalitarian possibility became a twentieth century reality, its claims were not made by churches, but by states. Prophetic faith was not surprised by this. The sources of idolatry lie in human anxiety and egoism generally, not particularly in religion.[6] Prophetic faith is thus alert to idolatrous claims wherever they occur, and it is suspicious of any power – kingly, priestly, or prophetic – that thinks itself above this temptation.

The most relevant point for twentieth-century Christian realism, however, is that the answer to idolatry is not to emulate it. Faced with totalitarian opponents who are absolutely certain about their cause, Christian realists must be disciplined enough not to claim the same for themselves. This will provoke the anxiety of those who fear their own uncertainty as much as they fear the convictions of their enemies, but faith and political experience concur that a limited, critical assessment of the evil of our foes and limited claims for our own virtue provide effective guidance, even when

[6] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), vol. I, 208–19.

those on the other side insist on seeing the conflict in more ultimate terms. Having learned this lesson with some difficulty in the crisis of the Second World War, Niebuhr and the diplomats and global strategists who shared his realist understanding were determined to handle the looming conflict with the Soviet Union on other terms.

> The pride and self-righteousness of powerful nations are a greater hazard to their success in statecraft than the machinations of their foes. If we could combine a greater degree of humility with our stubborn resolution, we might not only be more successful in holding the dyke against tyranny, but we might also gradually establish a genuine sense of community with our foe, however small . . . We shall exploit our opportunities the more successfully, however, if we have knowledge of the limits of the will in creating government, and of the limits of government in creating community. We may have pity upon, but can have no sympathy with, those who flee to the illusory security of the impossible from the insecurities and ambiguities of the possible.[7]

The political strategy of the Christian realist is based on limitation and balance, rather than on a final victory, because the political attention of the Christian realist is focused on what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the penultimate."[8] The penultimate is the world of ordinary life seen in anticipation of the ultimate, but not directly participating in it. Concentration on the penultimate requires, according to Bonhoeffer, a rejection both of the radical politics that is willing to destroy anything and everything for the sake of ultimate truth and of the compromises that, by suspending judgment until ultimate truth is fully present, slip by degrees into relativism. The Christian realist shares the radical's dissatisfaction with injustice, but focuses on responsible choices among the concrete possibilities now available.

THE SCOPE OF CHRISTIAN REALISM

The use of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* to elaborate Niebuhr's understanding of prophetic faith makes a point that needs to be emphasized at the outset. Christian realism is not confined to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Protestant theologians who took the term upon themselves in the early years of the twentieth century.[9] Christian realism, like William

[7] Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, pp. 30–1.
[8] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Clifford J. Green (ed.), Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. VI (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 146–70.
[9] For a history of this Christian realism, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. II (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 435–521.

James's pragmatism, was "a new name for some old ways of thinking."[10] Niebuhr and his colleagues thought of themselves as speaking for a tradition that had its roots in the Hebrew prophets and took shape in Christian theology at least as early as Saint Augustine, who was able to distinguish between an ideal community united in love of God and the penultimate, but nonetheless real communities united by the search for peace.[11] Not all those whom Niebuhr regarded as Christian realists would have recognized themselves in the identification, and not everyone who should be included made it onto Niebuhr's list. Bonhoeffer may have been one Christian realist who did not.[12]

In this book, then, we will be exploring an understanding of Christian realism that is broad in history and in concept. Christian realism belongs to no single author, nor can it be reduced to a single system of ideas. What connects these variations on the realist theme is that they unite political realism, moral realism, and theological realism.[13] The meaning of "realism" is different in each of these uses, and the relationship between them is one of mutual qualification, rather than tight logical implication. They interpret and explain one another, so that a political realist who is also a moral realist views politics differently from a political realist who is not, and a theological realist who is also a political realist probably will not grant moral ideas the same sort of normative force as a theological realist who rejects political realism. The latter might speak of absolute norms or exceptionless moral rules. The former will talk about "the relevance of an impossible ethical ideal."[14] Nothing logically requires a person who holds one of these realisms to affirm the other two. The three realisms are "realistic" in different ways, with regard to different things, but a Christian realist holds all three realisms together.

Political realism analyzes political choices in terms of self-interest and power. Particularly when considering the actions of nations and their leaders, the political realist expects to connect events into a meaningful pattern only by asking how the nation is pursuing its interests over the long run. Larger cycles of history or moral and religious judgments play a role in

[10] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907).
[11] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, R. W. Dyson (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 950–61.
[12] See Reinhold Niebuhr, "*Ethics*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 11 (1956), 57–8.
[13] For a more complete explanation of these three realisms in Reinhold Niebuhr's work, see Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 3–32.
[14] Cf. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 62–83.

political understanding only as they can be connected to interests and the search for power to make those interests effective.[15] To be "realistic" in this context means having a keen eye for all the interests that are actually at work in a political situation, thinking clearly about how they relate to one another, and looking beyond rhetoric, proclamations, one's own moral judgments, and other people's ideologies to determine what is actually driving choices and strategies.[16]

A generation of historians, political theorists, and diplomats, exemplified by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan, urged this political realism on policy makers and strategists for many of the same reasons that the Christian realists urged it on their generation of theologians.[17] After the First World War, idealism led the victorious allies to impose an unworkable peace on the defeated German Empire and to ignore the need to deal realistically with emerging Soviet power. A more stern realistic discipline would be needed after the Second World War, when a defeated Germany would have to be won over quickly as an ally against the full-blown Soviet reality. Democracy could no longer afford the assumption that moral superiority would guarantee victory over a hostile totalitarian power. Western democracies had to understand their own interests and win other nations to share them. They could not engage in a moral crusade to defeat the Soviet Union. They would have to be satisfied with containing and deterring it.

Such political realism ties its analyses closely to concrete political situations and actual political choices. It does not lend itself to speculation about ideal systems of government or to setting up scales of political value that rank governments and institutions against one another in moral terms. Describing the way that competing interest groups negotiate some specific compromise between their claims tells the political realist what is happening in a way that evaluating the result in terms of an abstract standard of justice does not. Political realism forces you to pay attention to the whole range of interests that are actually at work in a situation, rather than just those interests that your ideology or your moral theory tells you are important. So a realist is apt to see forces at work that other people fail to see, or at least forces that other people do not want to talk about.

[15] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Fourth Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 5–8.
[16] Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, p. 119.
[17] Ronald Stone offers a detailed study of Christian realism in relation to these developments in political thought, especially in the study of international relations. See Ronald H. Stone, *Prophetic Realism* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 27–55.

In this way of thinking, moral ideals can become interests, too.[18] If nations and their leaders are so committed to democracy that they will risk other interests to support the democratic process or to keep democratic governments from being defeated, then the political realist will have to pay attention to democracy. But to figure out what is going to happen next, the political realist will look at how the interest in the democratic ideal guides decisions, rather than at what the ideal itself prescribes. Political realism, then, is realistic in the eyes-open, feet-on-the-ground, common sense way we say that someone is realistic when he or she pays attention to what is going on and is not misled by vain hopes or baseless fears.

Moral realism is realistic in a different way. Moral realism holds that our moral rules, ideals, and virtues reflect durable features of human nature that really exist, apart from the religious traditions, moral theories, and accumulated practical wisdom on which we draw to talk about them.[19] In contrast to those philosophers who locate the meaning of moral terms in emotive responses to situations, or who suggest that meaningful moral judgments can only arise in a community of discourse that shares a common way of using moral language, the moral realist ties moral meaning to a reality that exists beyond the subjective feelings of those who use moral terms and beyond the systems of language in which they discuss moral judgments with others. Often, this moral realism is a version of ethical naturalism, which holds that meaningful moral language refers to objective conditions required for human flourishing.

A moral realist will qualify the political realist's immediate, concrete focus on power and interests by adding that interests which are incompatible with the conditions for human flourishing or which undermine the communities that sustain those conditions are interests which, sooner or later, will lose out to other interests which have a more realistic grasp of the requirements of human nature. This does not mean abandoning political realism for a utopian program that seeks the ideal conditions for human flourishing, but it suggests that the possibilities and limits of human nature are realities that nations must take into account when deciding what their interests are. Having an accurate account of those possibilities and limitations is an important part of the task of political leadership. Niebuhr sought to provide that account in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and he connected it to the task of political realism when he argued that "a free

[18] George Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 64 (1985), 205–18.
[19] David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

society prospers best in a cultural, religious, and moral atmosphere which encourages neither a too pessimistic nor too optimistic view of human nature."[20] Others who belong to this broad understanding of Christian realism have found Niebuhr's "not too much . . . not too little" formulation too ambiguous to be helpful, but John Courtney Murray, for example, connected his defense of democracy to his Thomist understanding of human nature at the same time that he recognized that political ideals also reflect concrete political interests.[21] Robert Gordis likewise found the emphasis on "original sin" in Niebuhr's account of human nature too extreme for a Jewish interpretation of scripture, but he shared Niebuhr's disillusionment with theology which "stressed the potentialities for perfection in man, or at least for his perpetual and consistent improvement."[22] The moral realism of Niebuhr's theological contemporaries is not marked by their agreement with his political realism, but by the fact that they could discuss their disagreements in terms of an account of human nature that could be traced to biblical sources and confirmed in contemporary experience. In fact, during the 1950s, they often did discuss these questions at Robert Maynard Hutchins's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.[23]

Perhaps the most important practical direction provided by this moral realism is the humility and self-restraint that the Christian realist tries to introduce into political discussions. Because our moral concepts formulate ideas about reality that exists independently of our ideas about it, moral realism is not troubled by the idea that the human good is not completely known, or by the fact that our attempts to give a comprehensive account of it may be incomplete. If the language of moral judgment depends on the real conditions of human flourishing, then even those who think they know that language must recognize that they may be mistaken in their moral judgments. Their meaningful moral discourse may make claims about human nature that prove false in longer experience, or that are modified by new technology, or that have to be restated in light of a more inclusive account of whose experience is fully human.

[20] Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. viii.
[21] John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the America Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), pp. 19, 30–33.
[22] Robert Gordis, *The Root and the Branch: Judaism and the Free Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 139.
[23] Leon Hooper, S. J., "Cups Half Full: John Courtney Murray's Skirmishes with Christian Realism," in Eric Patterson (ed.), *The Christian Realists: Reassessing the Contributions of Niebuhr and His Contemporaries* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 159–76; Thomas C. Berg, "John Courtney Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr: Natural Law and Christian Realism," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 4 (2007), 3–27.

A moral realist need not claim perfect or complete knowledge of the realities on which moral meanings depend. Recognizing that different people have different moral ideas need not culminate in relativism. A moral realist is likely to be a "fallibilist," holding that moral realities can be known, but that any particular claim to moral knowledge may prove to be false, so that all such claims are in constant need of testing and correction.[24] Someone who ties the meaning of moral language closely to a particular community of moral discourse may see little connection between moral truth and the clash of interests that holds the attention of the political realist, but a moral realist may see that political conflict as one place in which the testing and correction of moral claims can go on. The moral realist who is also a political realist will not surrender moral judgment entirely to that contest of competing interests, but he or she will not completely separate the two realms either.

Finally, Christian realism is also *theological realism*. The realities of interest and power and the realities of human nature are not the whole of reality. The reality of God stands beyond both the world that is susceptible to strategy and power and the enduring realities of human nature. As moral realism holds that there is a moral reality independent of our ideas about it, theological realism holds that our language about God or about the divine is not merely a way of expressing emotions of awe, joy, or terror. Statements about God or the divine can be true or false. Their truth or falsity, moreover, depends on a state of affairs that exists in reality, and not on our ideas about it.[25] This is a strong claim which may have unanticipated implications for believers and nonbelievers alike. On the one hand, religious truth depends on the reality of God, whether or not we know that reality. Consistency with a body of doctrine or a religious tradition may be important for many reasons, but it is not what makes a theological statement true or false. On the other hand, what is true about God is true, whether or not we know it or believe it. When theological realists make statements about God, they are saying something they believe to be true for everyone, not only for those who happen to share the belief. It is often difficult for theological realists to be as dogmatic as those who share their religious traditions would like them to be, or as tolerant of whatever beliefs people happen to hold as a pluralistic society might expect them to be.

Christian realism, however, is not a general philosophical theism, but an affirmation of statements about God drawn from what Niebuhr called

[24] See, for example, William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 114–15; also Richard Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 29–31.

[25] Christopher Insole, *The Realist Hope* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), pp. 1–5.