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978-0-521-60300-3 - Christian Realism and the New Realities

Robin W. Lovin

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THE NEW REALITIES

Are religion and public life really separate spheres of human activity? Should they be? In this book, Robin W. Lovin criticizes contemporary political and theological views that separate religion from public life as though these areas were systematically opposed and makes the case for a more integrated understanding of modern society. Such an understanding can be underpinned by “Christian realism,” which encourages responsible engagement with social and political problems from a distinctively religious perspective. Drawing on the work of Rawls, Galston, Niebuhr, and Bonhoeffer, Lovin argues that the responsibilities of everyday life are a form of politics. Political commitment is no longer confined to the sphere of law and government, and a global ethics arises from the decisions of individuals. This book will foster a better understanding of contemporary political thought among theologians and will introduce readers primarily interested in political thought to relevant developments in recent theology.

ROBIN W. LOVIN is Cary M. Maguire University Professor of Ethics at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, where he previously served as Dean of the Perkins School of Theology. He is a graduate of Northwestern University and Harvard University and an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church. He was previously Dean at the Theological School of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, and has also taught at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. His previous books include *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (1994).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521603003](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521603003)

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First published 2008

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Lovin, Robin W.

Christian realism and the new realities / Robin W. Lovin

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-84194-8 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-0-521-60300-3 (pbk.)

1. Christianity and politics. 2. Religion and politics. I. Title.

BRII5.P7L68 2008

261–dc22

2007045455

ISBN 978-0-521-84194-8 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-60300-3 paperback

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## Preface

More than a decade ago, I wrote a book called *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. The distinction between the man and the method was important to me, as it was to Niebuhr himself. Christian realism did not belong to him alone, though he was its most articulate and influential voice. It is a way of thinking deeply embedded in Christian tradition, and it can be systematically distinguished from other ways of thinking about politics, ethics, and theology available in Niebuhr's time and in ours.

This volume continues that effort to take the way of thinking that Niebuhr represented beyond his own formulation of it. This is not because I think less of Niebuhr, but precisely because I think his Christian realism has been intellectually isolated by more recent developments in philosophy and theology that make it harder for contemporary scholars to appreciate his insights. I have tried to address these problems here by emphasizing the social and political pluralism in the Christian realist tradition and by stressing the theology of responsibility on which his pragmatic approach to moral problems depends. The idea of responsible action connects Niebuhr more closely than I had understood before to his theological adversary, Karl Barth, and to his erstwhile student, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This book is in some respects an effort to write the theology and ethics we might have had if Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer had each had the opportunity to actually understand what the other was saying. Or perhaps it is an effort to imagine the political philosophy we might have had if John Rawls had continued the line of thinking he explored in his undergraduate thesis at Princeton. (The reader will find that cryptic remark explained near the beginning of Chapter 4.)

I have been encouraged in this work by opportunities to present and discuss it with colleagues in many places, including the Society of Christian Ethics; the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University; Simpson College; the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey; and a joint meeting of the Society for the Study

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of Christian Ethics and the Societas Ethica held at Oxford University in 2006. More continuous conversation has been provided by Charlie Curran, Tom Mayo, Beka Miles, Theo Walker, Steve Sverdlik, and other colleagues in the Ethics Colloquy at Southern Methodist University. Douglas Ottati, William Schweiker, and Michael Perry have all been particularly helpful over many years, and I trust they will forgive me if at points I can no longer tell the difference between ideas they have given me and ideas of my own. Oleg Makariev has read, edited, corrected, and questioned this text through many variations, and I am immensely grateful for his loyal assistance during my first five years in my present position. Stephen Riley contributed greatly to the preparation of the final manuscript, and Mark Tarpley assisted with the final editing and prepared the index. Kate Brett at Cambridge University Press has been unfailingly patient, encouraging, and hopeful. I am grateful to all of these people, and to many others whose ideas and interest contributed to the writing of this book and whose work has now delivered it into the reader's hands.