Book Reviews

Scott R. Erwin


I enjoyed reading this book. It is clearly written, thoroughly researched, and has an important thesis. Erwin’s theme is that Niebuhr’s theological vision was fundamental to his analysis of events, even when he did not make that vision explicit, and that it has been ignored by a number of recent writers on Niebuhr. The shorthand for that vision is, ‘In the battle and above it’, which is the subtitle of the book. This phrase comes from what Erwin maintains is a frequently overlooked article of Niebuhr’s, published early in World War II. What that article argues for is even more powerfully and succinctly expressed in the prayers that Niebuhr wrote at the time, later collected together by his wife Ursula, which Erwin does not in fact refer to. For example, part of one prayer reads:

> We pray for the victims of tyranny that they may resist oppression with courage. We pray for wicked and cruel men, whose arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and brought forth its final fruit. We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue, or rest content to have our ease at the price of other men’s sorrow and tribulation. We pray for all who have some vision of your will, despite the confusions and betrayals of human sin, that they may humbly and resolutely plan for and fashion the foundations of a just peace between men.

As that prayer reveals, Niebuhr all his life fought on two fronts. One was against those who refused to take a stand on current issues. He argued that despite the confusion and complexity of events, despite the fact that there might be faults on both sides, we had a moral responsibility to make proximate decisions and back them with action. So it was that during the 1930s, early recognising the evil of Nazism for what it was, he tirelessly urged America to resist isolationism and support the allies. The other front was against any tendency to self-righteousness and complacency, illusion and self-deception. One of
Erwin’s purposes is so to relate this theological vision to contemporary circumstances that we can see on which of these two fronts Niebuhr was fighting at the time. For example, criticising those who see the two volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* as a single whole, he points out that they were in fact written some years apart with different underlying concerns. In volume I, *Human Nature* (1941), the political situation is one which required active participation ‘in the battle’, but in volume II, *Human Destiny* (1943) with the war being waged, his concern was to put forward an ultimate perspective, one ‘above the battle’, in which we are all seen to be caught up in human sin, so any self-righteous crusade mentality is totally out of place.

After the war, faced with the new threat of Communism, his concern was again to urge resolute action to oppose it. This brought him into a series of strong disagreements with Karl Barth who thought, on the contrary, that the Church should not take sides in such a decisive way, but should be urging its fundamental message of judgement and reconciliation on all sides. Niebuhr wrote home to his wife Ursula that he found Barth a man of ‘unbelievable self-confidence’ and ‘much more irresponsible personally and theologically than he had imagined’. Niebuhr shared with Barth an ultimate perspective on history in which the inherent contradictions and incongruities of life are resolved in the justice and mercy of God, and because of this they drew closer together later in life. But Niebuhr thought that this had to go along with making penultimate judgements about the evils that had to be resisted in every generation, and he judged communism to be one such in a way that Barth did not.

Erwin argues that Niebuhr formulated his vision and fundamental perspective on political events early in his life and that it remained pretty consistent despite the need to emphasise different aspects at different times. When Niebuhr became a big name and a significant influence among secular historians, politicians and political theorists, there was a tendency for the theological underpinning of his position to be kept under cover, partly because overtly religious language had no resonance in those secular circles. This was particularly so in *The Irony of American History*, first published in 1952 and reissued in 2008 with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich in which it is described as ‘the most important book ever written on US foreign policy’. Erwin is critical of Niebuhr at this point for not spelling out more clearly the theological basis of his approach to American history and even more critical of contemporary writers on Niebuhr who concentrate on what the says about American policy and ignore the underlying theology. But he also sees here not just a desire by Niebuhr to speak to the secular mind, but a weakness in his fundamental theological position, in that he talks about symbolic truth without indicating in what way, if any, this might relate to reality. Here he might have been unduly