
In this volume Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethical theory is subjected to a severe assessment by theologians and political theorists. It is both an attractive book, with its chapters well edited and presenting arguments concisely, and yet it is also (partly by its very attractiveness) deeply puzzling. The difficulty is this. There are now two debates in which Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethical theory is central. One is a debate on the nature of Christian ethics itself: a reflection, as it was, on the very possibility of what it means to be Christian and to embody a ‘moral and Christian response to contemporary politics’. The second debate concerns the possibility of a moral dimension to political and economic life after the collapse of the self-confidence of modernity which was so strikingly portrayed in the 1960s. The recent Festschrift for Hugh McLeod (who is the pre-eminent historian in Britain on the social reality of the churches in the last two centuries) argued in several of its essays that this decade of the 1960s saw the secularization thesis at its height among historians and sociologists, and it was assumed that religion would wither and die before the growth of urban life and technology. Modernity was both self-confident and dismissive of religion. That self-confidence of modernity has now gone. So there is now a debate on how a much less confident modernity can retain moral integrity. This debate is central to the political storm both among Obama’s followers in the United States, and within the British Labour party, about where integrity might be found after the debacle of Tony Blair’s alliance with United States neo-conservatives in a series of imperial interventions, most notably in the invasion of Iraq, which went so very badly awry. I would therefore wish to argue that there are two debates in which Niebuhr features prominently: in one he is portrayed as the villain of Christian ethics, and in the other (for those who are aware of him, as Obama certainly is) he offers the possibility of regaining a chastened moral realism in politics. The puzzle is how the two debates connect, and that is the question which this book does not resolve, welcome though it is.

Let me expound the first debate on the nature of Christian ethics a little more. The greatest fissure in contemporary theological ethics is between those who believe that theology derives its validity from the self-revelation of God on the one hand, and those on the other who remain convinced that a correlation of human sociality and divine response enables ethical
questions to be resolved. For those who hold the former position divine self-disclosure may be manifest in a number of ways, but they all fall under ‘divine command ethics’. That is, the divine imperative may be expressed in terms of narrative which is Christocentric, or through the interruption of divine agency into human life, or finally through the proclamation of the paschal message which the church proclaims in liturgy and through the magisterium as the word of God. Each of these, whether found in Hauerwas, Barth or Ratzinger, finds the validity of Christian ethics contained within the doctrine of revelation. Reinhold Niebuhr found such a doctrine of revelation deeply alien, and he has been much criticized by Hauerwas for collapsing the truth of the Christian faith into a version of American pragmatism, in the school of Dewey, James and Pierce. For Niebuhr the freedom of self-transcendence of the self was established by his reading of Buber, Kierkegaard and Augustine. It is out of this belief in human self-transcendence that the reality of biblical revelation is established. Only from first philosophically establishing the reality of divine revelation, with its unique correlation of divine creation, judgment and forgiveness, could the possibility of a dialogue of Christian ethics and the problems of contemporary existence be asserted.

The debate between these very different understandings of Christian ethics is pursued vigorously in this volume. Those who pursue the charge against Niebuhr are Sam Wells and Ben Quash. Wells accuses him of lacking a proper Christology and ecclesiology. Quash disagrees with Niebuhr that love has no place in the reality of political life. Rather love is instead always something which is gifted by the Spirit through the Church, and so sin is seen as deeply contingent, even if also a universal condition. Those who defend Niebuhr’s methodology include Robin Lovin, Martyn Percy and Ian Markham. There are interesting analyses of liturgy (again fairly critical of Niebuhr) by Bishop Stephen Platten and a defence of Niebuhr’s suspicion of the church (Dackson) as an ‘outsider ecclesiology’ which has much to teach the churches.

The second debate on the moral re-energizing of political life is also pursued strongly in this collection. There are articles on the political use of Niebuhr’s legacy (a sharp evaluation of Niebuhr’s complex relationship with Vietnam as a model for neo-conservatives’s re-evaluation of their support for the Iraq invasion, by McCorkle, and an equally thoughtful account of American power by Carlson). Also very welcome is a wide ranging survey of international relations by Lieven, which is both profound and very