
CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL ISSUES OF TODAY

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A. Comments on Professor Biggar's lecture

Thank you for your very structured and convincing lecture.

My compliments on how you start by demonstrating how impractical moral idealism often is. I also appreciate your plea that the sometimes unexpected lust for domination needs to be taken seriously, especially in care situations. We have just had national elections in our country and I was surprised by the fact that people often forget that governing means making choices under the condition of scarcity. Thank you for making that point.

That is also why I am sceptical when I hear that governments, as in the Netherlands, are pursuing a 'feminist' foreign policy. At the same time, when I speak to the Ambassador for Freedom of Religion and Belief, she says that she tries to mainstream the attention to religion in foreign affairs. In that case, I don't say: 'Shouldn't you focus on other rights? The resources of the foreign ministry are limited and you would do better to focus on our national security'. So, how does Christian realism decide what is important, given the fact that Niebuhr speaks highly of the human creativity to overcome a world based on self-interested human beings? Could a gender perspective, a feminist agenda or more attention for religion be ways to realize another world?

I agree with your comments on power. The Christian Philosopher Geertsema

has written an article on power and conflict in which he looks at it from the perspective of creation, fall and redemption. I am curious to know whether you would agree on what he says here:

‘From the perspective of creation, power and even conflict do not have a negative connotation. Power is part of human existence because by nature it is lived within relationships that involve mutual influence. Diversity, too, is intrinsic to created reality.’ It is because of ‘the all-pervasive influence of evil and sin’ that ‘humankind has made itself the starting point of life and so selfishness spoils everything. Yet creation maintains its basic influence.’ The redemptive aspect is, according to Geertsema, that ‘exertion of power as service acquires a new dimension as it might include suffering and even death for the sake of the other. The kingdom of God is not established by means of external force but by changing hearts, because it is based on free service out of love. Its aim is not to subdue but to heal and make really free, in order that God’s original intention with people will be realised in a way that even goes beyond how it started in the beginning.’¹

‘The professional needs a certain “callousedness”, growing a thick skin’, Professor Biggar states. I agree that one has to distinguish between one’s professional and personal attitudes, feelings, etc. That is why so many professions have uniforms: lawyers, policemen, clergy, nurses, etc.

I also endorse the importance of ethicists and academics to stay in close contact with the burden-bearers of the world. Academics should commute

¹ Henk Geertsema, ‘Power and Conflict in Human Relations. Tentative Reflections from a Christian Perspective.’ In *Philosophy Put to Work. Contemporary Issues in Art, Politics, Science and Religion*, edited by Jan Van der Stoep, H. G. Geertsema and R. Peels. Amsterdam: Christian Studies of Science and Society, 2008. Online available

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268383440_Power_and_conflict_in_human_relations_Tentative_reflections_from_a_Christian_perspective and

http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/power_and_conflict_in_human_relations._tentative_reflections_from_a_christian_perspective.pdf

between the scientific, rational world: the high grounds and the swampy lowlands: the concrete situations in which policymakers, state leaders, and diplomats have to make day-to-day decisions.²

I am uneasy about this so-called ‘callousedness’. Isn’t that just an ethic of the-end-justifying-the-means? Also, how do you avoid a kind of professionalism in which the personal and the professional are two separate worlds? By this I mean that the professional is just adhering to technical standards and procedures as if they were neutral, and the personal is the sphere of emotional and subjective standards. I would prefer to say that these procedures and techniques are in place to serve others and aim at a certain good. Some techniques are better and sometimes morally preferable than others. So, it might be helpful to add a layer here, namely, that a surgeon or a general in the army is participating in a certain practice in which certain goods have to be realized. In other words, the means are not neutral, they have to serve the realization of the good that is central to that practice. What are your thoughts on this?

² Buijs, Govert J. and Simon Polinder. ‘Christian Philosophical Reflections and Shalom-Searching Wisdom: Outlines of a Practice-Approach for International Relations.’ In *Christian Faith, Philosophy & International Relations: The Lamb and the Wolf*, edited by Simon Polinder and Govert J. Buijs. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020. 321, 322. The distinction between high grounds and lowlands comes from Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1991).

Response to questions sent to me by Professor Biggar by email which I also addressed during the colloquium.

A. A common complaint against Christian Realism is that it betrays Christian ideals and principles—e.g., 'just war' betrays Christian peace and forgiveness. How do you respond to that?

I think that four points are important here.

1. Niebuhr lived in a time when the United States became the most powerful nation on earth. With power comes responsibility. So Niebuhr felt the responsibility to think through all these issues as a theologian. The closer you come to the burden-bearers, to the swampy lowlands in everyday reality, the less idealistic you can be.
2. Niebuhr tries to stretch a long rope between his high, sometimes heavenly, ideals and earthly, brutal and broken everyday reality. On the one hand, he dares to say that the sacrificial love of Christ is the example for all of us, but he also dares to connect it with the question: should we use nuclear weapons in international conflicts?
3. Niebuhr is very serious about the evilness of mankind, but esteems grace very highly. He is like Timothy Keller: 'We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.' So sin gives him a reason to act and grace the possibility to act.
4. Lastly, Niebuhr believes in a providential God who can be trusted, even though he moves in mysterious ways. This also creates room for human beings to act, even though they have a limited view and are tainted by self-interest.

B. Another common complaint is that Christian Realism emphasises the persistence of human sinfulness, secular tragedy, and the need for

compromise, while underplaying the call to live in the light of the Kingdom of God and that Kingdom's realised presence through the Holy Spirit in the world now. How do you respond to that?

The above is also an answer to this question, but I would like to add that Niebuhr did so because he had been a 'Kingdom Christian'. It was because of his experiences with the Social Gospel movement that he became more realistic about our noble intentions, even if they are religious. At the same time, Niebuhr had great expectations of the coming Kingdom but he saw this as something of a different order, not something to be created in the here and now with human beings as co-workers of God. I am curious though how his conversations with Rabbi Heschel dealt with this point.

c. *All the forms of Christian Realism of which I know are Protestant. Are there equivalents in other part of the Christian Church—for example, in Roman Catholic thinking?*

Well, Abraham Kuyper is a Christian Realist, but very Protestant indeed. There is an excellent book edited by Eric Patterson and Robert Joustra which focuses on this area: *Power Politics and Moral Order*. The collection of texts that it contains is broader than Protestantism. It includes Jean Bethke Elshtain, George Weigel and Joseph Capizzi.

B. Christian Realism: How is it relevant to the economic, social and political issues of today?

Christian realism holds a certain view on (1) human nature, (2) history and (3) ethics. Very briefly:

1. When it comes to human nature, the notion of sin plays an important role. Sin in the Augustinian tradition is not a defect of human nature, but a theological category, a rebellion against God in the form of inordinate love of self which has social implications.³
2. Christian realism views history in a classical Christian way. In that vision, the concept of *eschaton* plays an important role. The telos of history lies beyond the temporal process. The consequence of this for politics is that where human problems are concerned, no more than proximate solutions are available.⁴
3. Ethics in an Augustinian sense, as introduced by Niebuhr, has everything to do with justice, order, and love. Love is the impossible possibility which was most fully exemplified in Jesus Christ. Justice without the pull of love would degenerate into mere order. Justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin which takes various forms in different times and places and requires some sort of balance of power.

When we look at these three points, Abraham Kuyper can also be considered a Christian Realist. There is, in fact, a considerable overlap between Kuyper and Niebuhr. Very briefly, for instance:

³ Roger Epp, *The Augustinian Moment in International Politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition*. International Politics Research Paper Number 10. Aberystwyth: University College of Wales, 1991. 11, 12

⁴ Roger Epp, *The Augustinian Moment in International Politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition*. International Politics Research Paper Number 10. Aberystwyth: University College of Wales, 1991. 9.

- (1) They both share the idea of the inherent religious nature of human beings. This religiosity can express itself in a number of ways, some positive, but some also negative, leading to idolatry and ideology.
- (2) Both emphasized that the Christian faith was not only of relevance for a peaceful, joyful heart and the forgiveness of sins, but also to create peaceful and just structures in societies.

What can this Christian realism do today?

- (1) In the first place, it can contribute to a sense of humility which makes a pluralistic society possible and which makes room for politics.
- (2) Secondly, it can help us to understand the irony of our endeavours.

Humility makes pluriform societies possible

Shamid Hamid, a Muslim from the United States who is very much inspired by Kuyper, quotes him from *Our Program: Christian Political Manifesto* published in 1876: ‘If humans are sinners, there can be no question of deriving the eternal principles of justice from their sinful minds.’⁵ Hamid continues by saying: ‘Because of sin, the sinner, however righteous, cannot know God’s will with certainty.’⁶ This uncertainty helps us to postpone our judgments.⁷ Niebuhr even goes a step further: ‘One of the fundamental points about religious humility is you say you don’t know about the ultimate judgment. It’s beyond your judgment. And if you equate God’s judgment with your judgment, you have a wrong religion.’⁸

So Christian realism provides people with a sense of humility and helps them

⁵ <https://comment.org/one-nation-sinful-under-god/>

⁶ <https://comment.org/one-nation-sinful-under-god/>

⁷ <https://comment.org/one-nation-sinful-under-god/>

⁸ Interview of Mike Wallace with Niebuhr

<https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll90/id/57/rec/56>

to postpone their judgments. That makes it possible to hold different worldviews in society while living in peace. But then these worldviews might still try to impose their will on the others through politics. So we also need room for politics.

What do I mean by that? I mean that there needs to be a place in society where someone at a certain moment decides: this is what we are going to do! That is an act of power and it often has consequences. But there is a political moment in which someone reviews all given arguments and the various interests, and then decides.

Human beings, and therefore societies, are inherently broken and fallen. That means that politics should be regarded as a site of uncertainty, rather than certainty. In some matters, only God knows for certain what is right. This does not equate to a termination of judgment, but rather a delay. For the faithful, judgment will come, but not yet. In other words, there should be enough room for political decisions, and sometimes this requires religion to be side-lined. Why? Because religion tends to view matters as absolute and indisputable, which are not characteristics of many political issues.

Niebuhr states somewhere: ‘Religion is so frequently a source of confusion in political life, and so frequently dangerous to democracy, precisely because it introduces absolutes into the realm of relative values.’⁹

So, we need pluralistic societies and room for the autonomy of the political. A sense of humility is not only a remedy for polarized societies, but also for societies that are struggling with religious fundamentalism or violent extremism or terrorism. (*This is what my current research is about.*)

⁹ Charles W. Kegley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2001) 213

The concept of irony to understand today's world

As I have already said, there is another distinct Christian realist idea that can help us today: the idea of irony.

The term irony is used by Niebuhr in one of his most influential books, *The Irony of American History*. Irony differs from tragedy. Conflicts are tragic when some compromise of goodness is intentionally accepted in order to achieve some other real good in the world. Niebuhr claims that the Christian must prefer an ironic interpretation of situations in which we find good lives to be impossible. In an ironic situation, the conflict in which the agent's good must be sacrificed is created in part by the failing of the agent, usually a failing to which the agent was blind.

A situation is ironic if a virtue becomes a vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits - in all such cases, the situation is ironic.'¹⁰

How does the concept of irony help us? It provides an alternative way of looking at situations which are often called hypocritical.

Western countries are often accused of being hypocritical in their foreign affairs and relations. If you type 'hypocrisy of the West' into Google, it will become clear what I mean. For example, Western countries are accused of climate hypocrisy, because it appears 'that in just a few days, the average person in the UK produces more climate emissions than people in many low-income countries do in an entire year.' Now, Western countries have pledged

¹⁰ Cited in: Jeremy Sabella, *An American Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 2017) 93

to stop aid funding to fossil fuel projects in developing states. Some of these countries will even be able to continue to develop fossil fuels at home.¹¹

Countries from the Global South are frustrated by the fact that Western countries who themselves have benefitted from fossil fuels are denying the same benefits to other countries. Is this hypocrisy?

No, this is irony.

Irony differs from hypocrisy in two respects

1. Hypocrisy is pretending to be virtuous, but actually lacking it. Irony does not mean that one lacks virtues or principles, but one is blinded to the vices that come with striving for certain principles.
2. Hypocrisy conceals vices with sham virtues. Irony does not intentionally conceal vices, but it admits that striving for certain principles or virtues always comes with a hidden vice.

Western countries have built enormous industries to provide their own people and people abroad with numerous goods. Their aim was noble, but irony teaches us that our noblest intentions often have unforeseen negative impacts. We never expected that the development of our industries which has led to many good things in the world would at the same time lead to many climate and environmental issues.

The point is that irony helps us to be aware of the possibility that in our striving there is hidden vice. We don't know what this is, because if we knew it would be tragic. But the fact that we are conscious of it makes us cautious, open to self-critique and when this hidden vice is revealed, we are not surprised. It also prevents us from talking moralistically, because we are aware of our own contribution and involvement in the possibility of evil.

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/28/west-accused-of-climate-hypocrisy-as-emissions-dwarf-those-of-poor-countries>

Furthermore, we can resolve ironic situations as soon as we become aware of them. Irony can turn either into repentance or into evil. Confronted with our pretensions, we can regret them with the possibility of seeking forgiveness or we can persevere and assert ourselves even more vociferously.

An attitude of regret is to look at our own absurd pretensions with humour. Repentance often begins with laughter, evil often with righteous indignation. We need to be able to acknowledge our own ridiculousness and get over our wounded vanity. That helps us to avoid evil.¹²

A sense of irony can make countries or statesman more cautious in their foreign affairs and provide them with an attitude of self-critique. Irony makes it possible to laugh about yourself and accept the limits of being human. It a good remedy against self-righteousness.¹³ Instead of seeing themselves as absolutely good and right, nations should see themselves as Don Quixote. Irony accepts the incongruity of life, but it also leads to a certain serenity within and above it.¹⁴

¹² Jeremy Sabella, *An American Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 2017) 92, 93

¹³ Jeremy Sabella, *An American Conscience* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 2017) 97

¹⁴ Official quote is: 'The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.' In Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 63