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**William C. Inboden.** "The Prophetic Conflict: Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and World War II." *Diplomatic History* 38:1 (January 2014): 49-82. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht089.  
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Reviewed by **Mark Edwards**, Spring Arbor University

William Inboden takes up the often-asked question: "Why does [Reinhold] Niebuhr matter" (50)? Of course, Niebuhr has been the main subject of thousands of books, articles, theses, dissertations, and addresses. Countless biographers, including Richard Fox, Ronald Stone, and Charles Brown, have chronicled his several credentials as twentieth-century American Protestantism's foremost public intellectual.<sup>1</sup> Robin Lovin, Gary Dorrien, John Patrick Diggins, Martin Halliwell, and Daniel Rice, among many others, have been reflecting insightfully and exhaustively for years on Niebuhr's political theology.<sup>2</sup> If 9/11 marked an existential break in American history, it also sparked a Niebuhr revival led by historians Andrew Bacevich and Wilfred McClay, columnist David Brooks, Senator John McCain, and President Barack Obama, and more public figures competing for the prophet's mantle.<sup>3</sup> Much of the debate over Niebuhr's continuing relevance has centered on whether he was a champion or a critic of

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Charles C. Brown, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Continuum, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005); Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> On this revival, see Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1 Nov., 2007, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/a-man-for-all-reasons/306337/>, last accessed 1/21/14.

American exceptionalism—but few seem to doubt his eternality. David Hollinger represents the lone voice crying in the wilderness of what he has called (in private conversation) ‘the Niebuhr industry.’ He has recently commented on the neglect of Niebuhr by specialists in the fields that Niebuhr wrote most often about—he names Hannah Arendt and John Rawls in particular. Peer disrespect of the man students called the ‘Socrates of Sin’ stemmed from the broad nature of Niebuhr’s interpretations and prescriptions—he was, after all, a generalist—as well as from changes in America’s socio-intellectual landscape. Hollinger sides with Martin Marty who has proclaimed that “the culture to which Niebuhr spoke is gone.”<sup>4</sup>

Inboden’s essay can be read as an unintentional reply to Hollinger. It is also a fine exposition of Niebuhr’s claim that his mind was most determined by the pressures of national and world events. Inboden believes that historians of American foreign relations still have more to learn from Niebuhr, notably how early, influential, and right was his reaction to German and Japanese imperialism. Here, Inboden takes issue with Michaela Hoenicke Moore’s award-winning book, *Know Your Enemy* —a “magisterial” study of American attitudes toward Nazism that nevertheless fails to include Niebuhr as a pioneering voice of antifascism (60-61).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Inboden’s essay functions most often as a qualification of previous studies, including Michael Thompson’s thoughtful *American Quarterly* piece on Niebuhr’s prophetic faith.<sup>6</sup> In revisiting Niebuhr’s close reading of the rise of fascism during the 1930s, Inboden offers four reasons as to why Niebuhr matters that can be reduced down to two key observations. First, Niebuhr matters because persons whom historians have deemed important or influential say that he does (or, at least, did). Inboden’s list is long on this point, involving George Kennan, Adlai Stevenson, E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Thompson, and many more. Second, Inboden argues that Niebuhr’s realist concept of the balance-of power, of actively countering unchecked aggression, was “adopted more broadly in public discourse” (54). In terms of Niebuhr’s popular impact, Hollinger argues that Niebuhr “made war safe for American Protestants,” a point with which Inboden would readily agree.<sup>7</sup>

This essay is commendable at several points. Inboden is at his best when reflecting on the similarities and differences between Niebuhr’s Christian realism and its secular variants.

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<sup>4</sup> David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 211-26. The Marty quotation is from 2005 and can be found on p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See Michael G. Thompson, “An Exception to Exceptionalism: A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Vision of ‘Prophetic’ Christianity and the Problem of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *American Quarterly* 59 (Sept. 2007): 833-855. Inboden comments on Thompson’s essay on p. 51, note 6.

<sup>7</sup> Hollinger, 211.

He also offers important insights into the tensions between Christian theology and realist traditions—as noted at the time by persons such as theologian Karl Barth and Niebuhr’s brother and constant gadfly H. Richard. Inboden is furthermore expert in tracking Niebuhr’s responses to specific developments in Germany and Europe and how those events transformed Niebuhr from critical pacifist into pious interventionist. Historians will find Inboden’s narrative refreshingly readable and thus a potential tool for introducing Niebuhr to students of American diplomacy—although the Thompson essay would be a better choice.

More sustained and careful attention to the ‘influence’ question would have strengthened this piece. Demonstrating the actual impact of one public intellectual’s writings on another, not to mention on something as ephemeral as ‘public discourse,’ is always difficult. For instance, Inboden never supports his criticism of Hoenicke Moore with the kind of reception history needed to prove that Niebuhr was a widely revered voice outside of liberal Protestant and New York intellectual circles before the 1940s. Writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* does not automatically make one influential. Along these same lines, Inboden uncritically accepts Niebuhr’s disdain for his pacifist opponents and therefore ignores their own impact and concerns—Joseph Kosek’s *Acts of Conscience* (2011) would have been a helpful counterbalance. Niebuhr’s arguably greatest contribution to public life—his critique of American exceptionalism—is curiously lost at moments when he appears as a champion of militarized American globalism.<sup>8</sup>

The influence question is part of a larger historiographical issue raised by the essay about recognizing that there are no self-made men. In referencing an article by this reviewer, Inboden admits that Niebuhr “did not act alone” but rather “developed a transatlantic network of European and American elites, especially among clergy and intellectuals, committed to supporting the allied cause” (54). The problem here is in the use of the word “developed.” The upshot of my essay—indebted as it was to more rigorous analyses by Lincoln Chadwin and Philip Coupland—was more that Niebuhr was brought into existing interventionist circles by others.<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr was “developed by” Protestant colleagues with genuine Washington connections like Henry Sloane Coffin, Henry Van Dusen, and Francis Miller. Even the qualified statement that Niebuhr’s significance included “helping build this community of transnational Protestantism” (54) is misleading, as he was as much a critic as a proponent of the ecumenical movement.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence in Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> The essay under question is Mark Edwards, “God Has Chosen Us: Re-membering Christian Realism, Rescuing Christendom, and the Contest of Responsibilities During the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 33 (Jan. 2009): 67-94. See also Lincoln Chadwin, *The Hawks of World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); Philip M. Coupland, *Britannia, Europa and Christendom: British Christians and European Integration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Mark Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God’s Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Perhaps it is unfair to make too much of an author's word choices. In this case, though, those decisions reinforce a longstanding misrepresentation of Niebuhr as the jack-of-all-crusades.

There are a lot of excellent works-in-progress today in the field of transnational religion and politics by scholars such as David Swartz, Michael Thompson, Lauren Turek, Justin Reynolds, Gene Zubovich, and the Religion and U. S. Empire group. Inboden's essay is a good reminder of one of Niebuhr's central revelations that transnationalism is a luxury that even the most moral of men cannot always afford. Still, the imperative need for historians is to relocate Niebuhr amidst this new scholarship rather than replicate his ironic apathy toward international nongovernmental agencies like the church.

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