The Postsecular Prophets

Christian Realism for Terrifying Times: A Trans-Atlantic Introduction
The “McWorld” Problem

- “The End of History,” Fukuyama and his infamous political prediction
- “The Death of God,” secularization theory and its infamous religious predictions
- Exclusive humanism and “A Secular Age”
- On airports and Big Macs: is neo-liberal capitalism producing globalist homogeneity?

Immanuel Kant’s Democratic Peace Theory gets “Supersized”
The “Jihad” Problem

• History: reports of its end have been greatly exaggerated

• Waves of populism, nationalism, and polarization are sweeping the world (nor is this primarily an “American-led” movement)

• La revanche de Dieu, the global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations

• “Modernization” clearly ≠ “Westernization”
The Postsecular Prophets: Christian Realism for Terrifying Times

1. Reinhold Niebuhr and the “American School”: Christian Realism for the Ascendant Superpower

2. Herbert Butterfield and the “English School”: Christian Realism at Empire’s End

3. Abraham Kuyper and the “Amsterdam School”: Christian Realism for the Middle Power

4. Postsecular Prophets? Some Preliminary Conclusions

5. A Few Suggestions for Enthusiasts
The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world.

Reinhold Niebuhr
Reinhold Niebuhr

- *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927)
- *Christianity and Crisis* (1941)
- Against the pacifists, the “social gospel” and the belief in progress
- But hardly *for* the fundamentalists
- “The World After the War”: A Niebuhrian influence on John Foster Dulles, the FCC, and the United Nations?

*The whole art of politics consists in directing rationally the irrationalities of men.*

Reinhold Niebuhr
Reinhold Niebuhr

- Realism and Idealism are not *doctrines* but rather *dispositions*

- Realism, to be *realist*, must be rooted in an Augustinian anthropology (non-dualist, skeptical of the human heart).

- Egocentricity is the great danger, “this tendency of the self to make itself its own end or even to make itself the false center of whatever community it inhabits” (exclusive humanism).

- Egoism is not, for Niebuhr, a *solution* but the *problem*
Reinhold Niebuhr

• The solution to egoism is not primarily fear, as in the pagan realist quadrilateral (egoism, anarchy, groupism, power politics).

• The Augustinian solution is love.

• “Commonwealths are bound together by a common love, or collective interest” (Niebuhr).

• “higher” and “lower” political orders are determined by the more beatific or debased loves toward which it bends

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

Reinhold Niebuhr
American Theologian
Reinhold Niebuhr

“A realism becomes morally cynical or nihilistic when it assumes that the universal characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative. The biblical account of human behavior, on which Augustine bases his thought, can escape both illusion and cynicism because it recognizes that the corruption of human freedom may make a behavior pattern universal without making it normative.”

Reinhold Niebuhr

“There is no cure for the pride of a virtuous nation but pure religion.”

Reinhold Niebuhr

“Every earthly peace is good as far as it goes. But they will not have had it long for they used it not well while they had it.”

Augustine
“The American School”

For Niebuhr, commonwealths constituted by common loves were the units of the international system. Fear, anarchy, and groupism were not the normative features, but simply common characteristics of the widescale pluralism of broken hearts, societies, and institutions of a world rent by sin.
The task of the historian is to understand the peoples of the past better than they understand themselves.

Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979)

“The Whig Interpretation of History” at the Twilight of Superpower
Herbert Butterfield

- *Diplomatic Investigations* and the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics

- “I value every one of the fifty-two miles that separate Cambridge from Westminster”

- *The Statecraft of Machiavelli, Christianity Diplomacy and War, International Conflict in the Twentieth Century*

- *The Whig Interpretation of History*
The “Herbert Butterfield Problem”

The Whig Interpretation of History, in which modern-day moral values “intrude on historiography” and construct a kind of “drama of good versus evil” was “the worst kind of history.”
Leopold van Ranke: “nothing in the world can ever be regarded as existing merely for the sake of something else”

“All generations are equidistant from God”

Our ancestors are more than *useful* they are our *neighbors*, and God has specific commands about how to treat neighbors (including the bearing of ‘false witness”)
Herbert Butterfield

Was Butterfield just another empirical-positivist as his critics claimed? Assailing the Whiggish interpretation for being “value laden” in favor of positivist history?

“The past is a foreign country”

This is the most difficult task for the diplomat.

“This preoccupation with transcending the historian’s cultural and ideological perspective – with putting oneself in the place of others through a mighty exercise of sympathetic imagination, understanding, a suspension of judgment, and ultimately Christian love – would bear fruit later in Butterfield’s analyses of diplomacy and his prescriptions to statesmen.”

Albert M. Coll, The Wisdom of Statecraft
If history can do anything it is to remind us that all our judgments are merely relative to time and circumstance.

Herbert Butterfield
But the greatest menace to our civilization today is the conflict between giant organized systems of self-righteousness – each system only too delighted to find that the other is wicked – each only too glad that the sins give it the pretext for still deeper hatred and animosity.

Herbert Butterfield

The problem of fear amidst worldview pluralism

The other is always an object of fear, even if we have no rational justification, because of a basic Hobbesian dilemma intrinsic in anarchy.
"In the total expanse of human life there is not a square inch of which the Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, "That is mine!'"" - Abraham Kuyper -

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

Calvinism vs. Modernity in a Middle Power Low Country
Abraham Kuyper

- Kuyper, the modern preacher, meets Pietje Baltus
- Recovering Calvinism: the antithesis, human rationality, and exclusive humanism
- Groen van Prinsterer’s “anti-revolutionary” history
- Calvinism against modernism, but for pluralism
Abraham Kuyper

Worldviews, worldviews everywhere

There is no neutral politics. All human culture, just as with human hearts, are either directed toward or away from God.

All stand on either the rock of faith, or the sand of rival gods.
Abraham Kuyper

Religion and the history of peoples and nations

Augustine inspired historiography: what do we love?

The *organic* nation
Abraham Kuyper

The problem of pluralism: can politics bridge this divide?

But how do we bridge worldviews?

The challenge of a presuppositional apologetic

Common grace and the Imago Dei
Postsecular Prophets?

Christian Realism for Terrifying Times: Some Preliminary Conclusions
Postsecular Prophets?

• They were against modernism and so anticipated much of “postmodern” politics but could not be counted among them.

• Where late and postmodernism doubled down on exclusive humanism, these thinkers all rejected that basic tenet.
This also meant a rejection of historical materialism, “the race for calories and power” (and a rejection of utopianism or idealism).

That rejection took religious form, Augustinian for each.

What about Eurocentrism?
Postsecular Prophets?

- The problem of pluralism and ethics.
- It also creates the problem of sliding into only “elite” diplomacy. We cannot default to secular categories of religion.
- But it also anticipated the postsecular turn.
Niebuhr, Butterfield, and Kuyper give us a picture of Christian Realism in three rival geopolitical contexts, concrete manifestations of Niebuhr’s disposition.

They each argue political societies are not rooted in groupist fear, but collective loves.
• Bridging systems of rival loves, and the fear those rivalries create, is the tremendously difficult task of the diplomat.

• Such an international relations is a kind of anthropology, even a kind of theology.
Christian Realism for Terrifying Times

A Few Suggestions for Enthusiasts