

## How Martin Luther King, Jr's Pacifist Liberation Theology Makes Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Realism Possible

*Caleb Day, 23 November 2017*

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**Accepted abstract:** Few Christian thinkers are as closely associated with pacifism as Martin Luther King, Jr, and few are as closely associated with critique of pacifism as Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr used Christian theology, particularly Augustine's concept of original sin, to craft a compelling, highly influential theory of political realism. Niebuhr also argued from his realist stance against total pacifism, which he considered idealistic, apolitical, and naïve about the realities of evil, self-interest, and power. I argue, however, that Niebuhr fell short of his own realist vision through his idealistic faith in US democracy, the US American nation-state, and its use of force: American exceptionalism limits Niebuhr's realism. King was influenced by Niebuhr's Augustinian realism in his own thoroughly theological understanding of politics, social justice, and resistance in the United States. King departed from Niebuhr in endorsing pacifism, in conducting his political theology from a different perspective, and in displaying a more apocalyptic understanding of divine intervention in the present and future. I argue that these differences are largely because King's political theology was grounded in pacifist praxis on behalf of the oppressed: it can be called a liberation theology. I further argue that King's liberation theology is more consistent with the realism Niebuhr endorsed than is Niebuhr's own political theology. While Niebuhr believes his realism demands support for his government's violence, King in fact makes Niebuhr's political realism possible precisely by rejecting Niebuhr's American anti-pacifism. For this reason, King was also far more effective in making American democracy more just and democratic. In today's world of resurgent nationalism, anti-realism, and violence, reading King and Niebuhr this way can help show what pacifist praxis and theology can offer to political realism, and what a realist, theological, liberational pacifism can offer to theories and practices of resistance, peacebuilding, and pursuit of justice and security.

Few Christian theologians or leaders are as closely associated with pacifism as Martin Luther King, Jr, and few are as closely associated with critique of pacifism as Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr, an influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century US American Protestant theologian, is lauded by diverse political thinkers and actors for his theologically based political realism and for his realist critique of pacifism. On Niebuhr's definitions, he was an idealist as well as a realist, and his theory involves idealism and realism working together effectively. However, in practice, Niebuhr's optimism about the United States and its democratic ideals sometimes limits his realism. King was deeply impressed by Niebuhr, and although he remained committed to pacifism, he cited and developed Niebuhrian themes in an attempt to articulate and practice a realist pacifism. I argue that in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King enacts Niebuhr's vision of realism better than Niebuhr himself does, and submit that this is precisely because King's theology was rooted in pacifist praxis on behalf of the oppressed.

## What realism is and is not for Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr is sometimes associated with an “America First” nationalism that “places national self-interest above idealistic schemes for social reform.”<sup>1</sup> However, Niebuhr opposed this form of realism, and he saw realism as contrasting with idealism, but potentially co-existing with it. This is because, for Niebuhr, realism is a descriptive claim and idealism is a normative stance.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr defines realism as “tak[ing] all factors in a social and political situation ... into account, particularly ... self-interest and power,” acknowledging them as “ineradicable.”<sup>3</sup> He defines idealism as the goal of bringing politics under a higher moral norm or ideal than observed realities such as self-interest and power.<sup>4</sup> Because realism is descriptive and idealism is normative, there is no reason they cannot co-exist, and Niebuhr himself seeks to combine both. He believes Christians are required to face self-interest honestly, but also seek to place it “under the discipline” of higher norms.<sup>5</sup> We must acknowledge that self-interest characterizes all forms of human behaviour, without seeing self-interest as normative or impossible to manage or resist in any way.<sup>6</sup> This is how he reads Jesus’ instruction to his disciples: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16).<sup>7</sup> He believes this combination is necessary to constrain and harness self-interest and power.

Niebuhr opposes both realism without idealism and idealism without realism. He calls realists who recognize no higher norm above individual or collective self-interest—or the moral cynics who believe attempting to constrain self-interest is doomed to hypocrisy and failure—“children of darkness.”<sup>8</sup> Machiavelli is the classic example.<sup>9</sup> People who do credit higher norms are “children of light” (this term is equivalent to idealists for Niebuhr).<sup>10</sup> As discussed, it is possible on Niebuhr’s definitions to be both a realist and an idealist, or child of light. However, Niebuhr he suggests most children of light are non-realist and thus foolish: downplaying self-interest, trusting “moral pretensions” claiming to be free from it, or believing it can be easily overcome or resolved with general interest.<sup>11</sup> This is doubly dangerous. Firstly, these misguided optimists underestimate self-interest in the children of darkness, to the latter’s cynical advantage.<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr observes that both Adam Smith and Karl Marx had idealistic confidence that economic forces would inevitably yield utopian outcomes—one trusted in capitalist markets while the other trusted in capitalism’s internal contradiction and inevitable synthesis in communism.<sup>13</sup> Both economic idealisms have been manipulated by children of darkness in the West and East. Secondly, naïve children of light fail to recognize self-interested ideology in themselves and in their own, ostensibly benevolent, institutions. Here Niebuhr cites natural law theories that universalize certain social formations, and Americans who wreak imperialistic havoc with idealistic foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> I can’t help but wonder whether the novelist Graham Greene was reading Niebuhr while writing *The Quiet American* about this time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 84.

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr suggests both realism and idealism are dispositions rather than doctrines, which makes precise definitions complex and imprecise. Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 120.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, 119–120; Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 165.

<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 165.

<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 129–131.

<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 181.

<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr, 165; Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 120–121.

<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 119–120; Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 165.

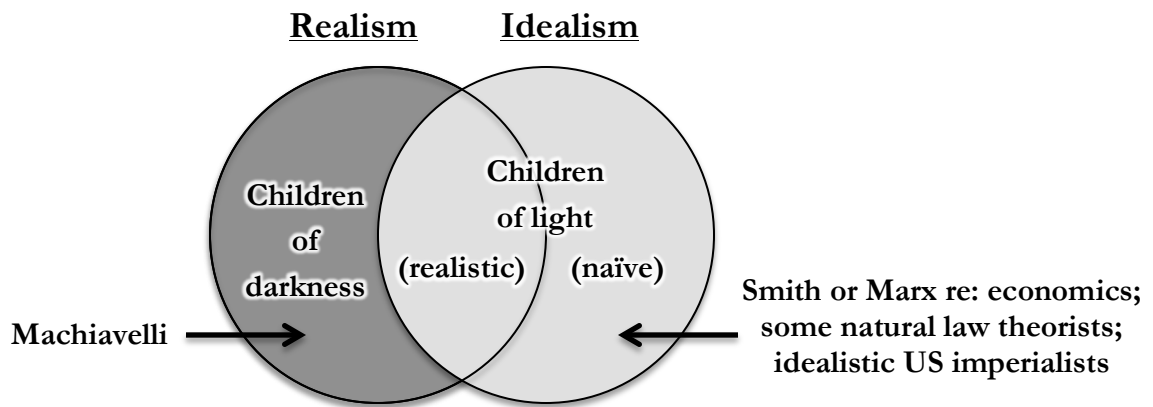
<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 119–120; Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 164.

<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 166.

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, 173–177.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, 166; Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 132–133; Niebuhr, “American Power and World Responsibility,” 204–205.

<sup>15</sup> Greene, *The Quiet American*.



**Figure 1: Realism, idealism, children of darkness, and children of light for Niebuhr**

Niebuhr’s idealism, his acknowledgement of higher norms, means his political realism is evaluative, not just descriptive. Realism for Niebuhr requires an accurate view of the human condition. For Niebuhr, the key to a consistent realist view of the human condition is the theological doctrine of original sin, typically credited to the fourth-century North African bishop Augustine.<sup>16</sup> Augustine saw original sin as a corruption of our sense of self: making the self its own chief end, in place of God.<sup>17</sup> This “inordinate self-love” is the source of evil, and translates well into Niebuhr’s notion of self-interest in politics.<sup>18</sup> He is not opposed to self-interest in itself, but suggests true self-interest and the common good should be mutually reinforcing.<sup>19</sup> Freedom and order should be respected for both individuals and communities, as humans are by nature free and social. Evil arises when self-interest is asserted *against* the common good.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the task of politics is negotiating between self-interest and the general interest, which are never easily resolved.<sup>21</sup> However, original sin and disordered self-interest affects all humans and human structures. This is why there is “serious evil in the world,” which Barack Obama praised Niebuhr for emphasizing.<sup>22</sup> Less obviously, it also means sin affects “even the most loving relations”: egotism and conflict taint “every level of human moral” or “social achievement.”<sup>23</sup>

Niebuhr emphasizes that collectives and social structures are corrupted by disordered self-interest at least as much as individuals are. A structure can pursue its self-preservation at the expense of individual and communal freedom, and the collective self-interest of one group can be pursued at the expense of a wider whole, such as “the community of [humankind].”<sup>24</sup> This gives Niebuhr a strong realism about structural sin; he observes that individual virtue does not rule out participation in “collective egoism,” because of “collective forces at work in society” independent of conscious intent by the individuals involved.<sup>25</sup> This type of insight is vital today in areas such as racism. Structural oppression has often outlived individual racist intent, and is often overlooked when we individualistically focus on intention only.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 169; Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 86.

<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 122–124.

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, 122–124; Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 169.

<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 162–165.

<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, 165.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, 164–165.

<sup>22</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 84.

<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 169; Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 109, 111–2.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 162–166.

<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 138; Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 163.

<sup>26</sup> UCSA - University of Canterbury Students’ Association, “Statement on the UCSA’s Position on the ENSOC Video Released May 27 2014 [and Facebook Discussion].” For a powerful satire on the way we confuse lack of intent to oppress with lack of oppression, see Hope, “Intent! It’s Fucking Magic!”

This also helps Niebuhr see that apparent realists like Martin Luther and Thomas Hobbes are inconsistently realistic: they are distrustful of individual human behaviour and seek to control it with state coercion, yet inadequately realistic about state power itself.<sup>27</sup> They thus give “unqualified endorsement” to states, no matter how tyrannical; and, as Niebuhr notes, such uncontrolled power is “the greatest source of injustice.”<sup>28</sup> This is because, as, Niebuhr famously suggests, individuals have more capacity for morality and justice than groups, realistically observing that struggles of power and prestige are more brutal between collectives than individuals.<sup>29</sup> Again this insight is germane today, as nation-states, corporations and terrorist organizations pursue self-interest at the expense of ethics, law, humans and the environment on a far greater scale than individual sociopaths can manage.

For Augustine and for Niebuhr, however, original sin is not the whole story, and realism is not the same thing as pessimism. Niebuhr rejects a Calvinist understanding of original sin as total depravity.<sup>30</sup> In part, this is because of how often we mask self-interest in ostensible virtue: the fact that we employ such façades rather than pursuing self-interest brazenly suggests some residual sense of duty to our neighbours. Niebuhr agrees with Augustine’s concept in his classic *City of God* the world is “a conmingling of the two cities,” the human “city” corrupted by sin and God’s city which “leavens” the world’s city.<sup>31</sup> This means we can and indeed must make relative judgments between imperfect political realities.<sup>32</sup> I also wonder whether the authors of *Dr Strangelove* were reading Niebuhr when they had Buck Turgidson advise the president “it is necessary ... to choose between two admittedly regrettable, but nevertheless distinguishable, post-war environments.”<sup>33</sup> This also means we can and must pursue political change, and may even expect “proximate victories” moving us to relatively better states of affairs.<sup>34</sup>

Niebuhr’s realism is a delicate balance of various factors, and he sees many ways we can fall short of accurate judgment and evaluation of political realities. Most obviously, we can be unrealistically pessimistic, like the ‘children of darkness’ who do not believe we can constrain undue self-interest, or unrealistically optimistic, like the naïve idealists who believe we can rid ourselves of undue self-interest. Niebuhr also believes we can err by being indiscriminately pessimistic: failing or refusing to make any relative distinctions between political realities. He was exasperated at people who cannot acknowledge that the imperfect United States was a significant improvement on the Nazi regime, or people who refuse to act to support the lesser evil.<sup>35</sup> He argued that in world where nothing can win our absolute endorsement, relative judgments are necessary for political responsibility, and necessary for any real hope of constraining self-interest. Therefore, these indiscriminate critics may as well be children of darkness.

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<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 160–161; Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 126–127.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 160–161; Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 126–127.

<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 171; Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 109.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 120.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, 134–138.

<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr, 134–137; Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 92–96.

<sup>33</sup> Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 134–137; Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 92–96.

<sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 127–129; Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 110–111, 115–118. Niebuhr suggests Augustine was sometimes guilty of this indiscriminate criticism in his judgment of the earthly city. Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 129ff. Niebuhr also accused influential German theologian Karl Barth of this indiscriminate criticism, but in fact Barth went through a similar discovery of the necessity of relative judgments during World War II. Barth acknowledged this tendency in his earlier political theology, yet actively sought to resist this in his later thought, when he realized he needed to be able to make relative judgments *against* Nazism and *for* the admittedly imperfect yet undoubtedly preferable alternative. Elie, “A Man for All Reasons”; Herberg, “The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth,” 22–23, 30.

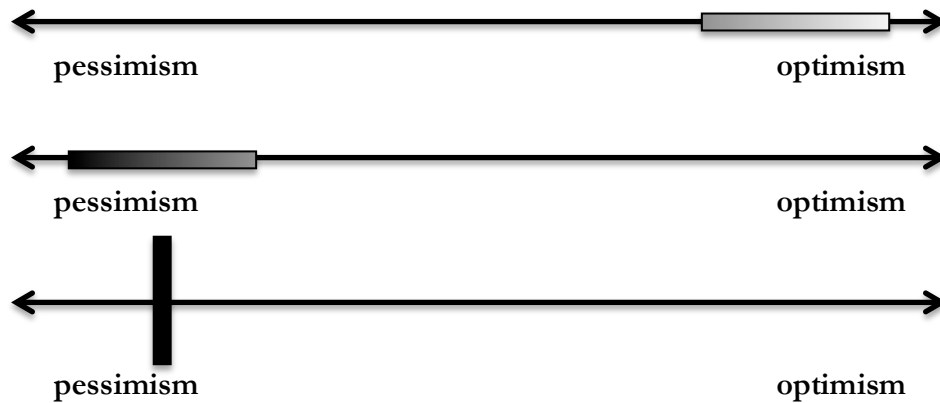


Figure 2: Unrealistic optimism, unrealistic pessimism, and indiscriminate pessimism

Finally, he believes we can err in inconsistent ways, by being unrealistically optimistic about some people or systems, and unrealistically or indiscriminately pessimistic about other people or systems. For example, although he liked Augustine’s idea of the world as “a conmingling of the two cities,” he thought Augustine was wrong to see this as “two types of people,” righteous and sinful.<sup>36</sup> As discussed above, he was also critical of Hobbesian authoritarians who put idealistic faith in the state to constrain the sin of individuals. Finally, he was critical of those who see all existing political realities as equally bad, but place unrealistic hope in some political alternative, such as communism or anarchism.

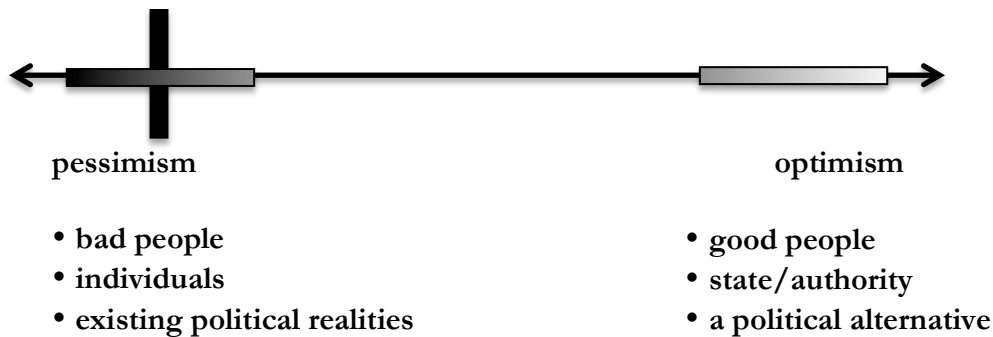


Figure 3: Combinations of unrealistic optimism and unrealistic/indiscriminate pessimism

Niebuhr wants to avoid these unbalanced combinations of pessimism and idealism and be realistic about the range of sin and relative good affecting humans and human politics: serious evil and relative good people and structures are both real. And even the best people and structures are, as Martin Luther famously put it, *simul iustus et peccator*: simultaneously righteous and sinful.<sup>37</sup> This means that all political conflicts are “conflicts between sinners,”<sup>38</sup> that knowing God’s law of love does not stop someone profoundly contradicting it in practice,<sup>39</sup> that intimacy and love do not rule out injustice in relationships,<sup>40</sup> and that “the

<sup>36</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 138.

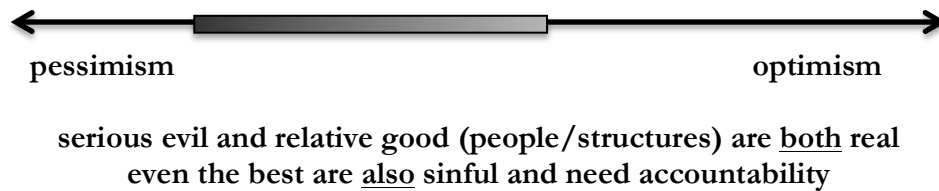
<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr, 138.

<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 114.

<sup>39</sup> Niebuhr, 119. One sobering example of this is Christian ethicist John Howard Yoder, who devoted his academic life to theorizing Christian pacifism in obedience to Christ, and “stalked, harassed and sexually assaulted more than a hundred women” throughout his career. Hamilton and Lambelet, “A Dark Theme Revisited”; Hamilton and Lambelet, “Engage Survivors More, and Yoder Less.”

<sup>40</sup> As an example, Niebuhr astutely observes that “There are Christian ‘idealists’ today who speak sentimentally of love as the only way to justice, whose family life might benefit from a more delicate ‘balance of power.’” Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 116–7.

taint of ideology” is present in the most seemingly benevolent agents, structures and theories.<sup>41</sup> Above all, it means all human realities need to be kept in check and made accountable to avoid being corrupted.



**Figure 4: The range limits of human nature and human politics for Niebuhr**

Niebuhr sees democracy as the best system for keeping imperfect humanity in check. He encapsulates his idealism, his realism, and his emphasis on democracy in a famous aphorism: “[Humankind]’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but [humankind]’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that these poles are uneven. We have an *inclination* to injustice, but only a *capacity* for justice; democracy is *possible*, but it is also very *necessary*.<sup>43</sup> This asymmetry makes him a realist, albeit an idealistic one, rather than the other way around.

### **Niebuhr’s realist critique of pacifism**

The necessity of realistically considering sin underlies Niebuhr’s 1940 essay “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist.” The wording of that title is important. Niebuhr freely admitted that the “absolute ethic of Jesus” is pacifist; he even suggested it rules out any resistance to evil.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, this pacifist “law of love” is actually the “ultimate” norm for human conduct.<sup>45</sup> However, he points out that the Christian message is more than just this law of love: it is also about the realist observation that humans universally fail to live up to this law of love.<sup>46</sup> He believes a Christian political stance takes into account both the ideal law and the real failure. For Niebuhr, this means the “law of love” functions as a “principle” of both “indiscriminate” and “discriminate” criticism.<sup>47</sup> Indiscriminate criticism means acknowledging that all human activities have elements of sin and fall short of the law of love. Discriminate criticism means relative judgments between actions and political arrangements based on how closely they approximate the law of love, or how effectively they deal with out sinful failure to love. For Niebuhr, discriminate criticism demands we “express a moral preference for the justice achieved in democratic societies” over either anarchy or tyranny.<sup>48</sup> Democracy “approximates the harmony of love” better, by making power “responsible” and enabling cooperation through “mutual accommodation.”<sup>49</sup> Discriminate criticism also produces “relative norms of social justice, which justify both coercion and resistance to coercion.”<sup>50</sup>

This is relative endorsement—we must employ a “religious reservation” rather than “uncritically” equating “the cause of Christ with the cause of democracy.”<sup>51</sup> But it is real endorsement, and these relative norms end

<sup>41</sup> Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 132–3.

<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 160.

<sup>43</sup> On this point I am indebted to my former professor of political theology, Dr Gerald McKenny.

<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 106–107.

<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, 106–107.

<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr, 102–103.

<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr, 113–118.

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr, 117.

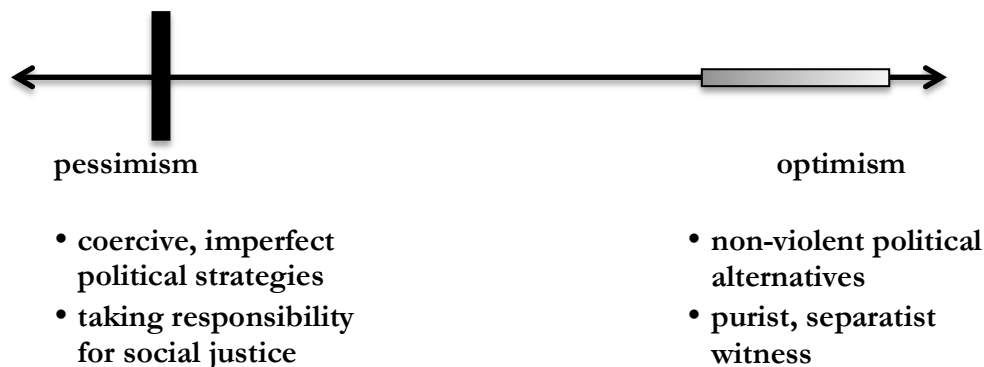
<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, 117.

<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr, 104.

<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr, 118.

up guiding the ordinary Christian's politics, because the relative norms are "immediately applicable" to political goals in this world, while "the ethic of Jesus" is not: it is only an "ideal possibility."<sup>52</sup> This is because Niebuhr believes violence is sometimes necessary to achieve relative peace or justice, "because [people] are sinners."<sup>53</sup> He suggests "political expedients" such as government, democracy, prison, war, and revolt against tyranny are necessary, and although these expedients have a "sinful element," they also act as a "remedy for sin."<sup>54</sup> Through these political expedients, he says, society "prevents the worst forms of anti-social conduct."<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he believes these political strategies are only really effective if they have recourse to violence.<sup>56</sup> He therefore associates pacifism with capitulating to evil, and "disavowing the political task and ... all responsibility for social justice."<sup>57</sup> He also associates pacifism with a perfectionism that is unable or unwilling to make the all-important relative judgments between imperfect realities.<sup>58</sup> He points out that an "uncritical refusal to make any distinctions between relative values in history" leads to "self-righteousness" and/or "inaction."<sup>59</sup>

Niebuhr does see some value in pacifism. For Niebuhr, pacifism is the refusal to act according to relative norms: pacifists enact the final norm, the law of love, in all its practical impossibility, disavowing responsibility for social justice and the compromise it requires.<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr had himself once been a pacifist, but the rise of Hitler convinced him that the Christian church cannot afford to act only according to the law of love. He does, however, suggest that the church needs the "testimony of the absolutist against us", to remind us of this final norm and of our own moral ambiguity, and to prevent us becoming 'children of darkness' who accept the world's violence as normative.<sup>61</sup> He admires the few pacifists who admit that this testimony is their only function, and do not pretend they have any direct political relevance.<sup>62</sup> However, he believes these admirable pacifists are in the minority: many delude themselves that non-violence is a practical political alternative in this world, and/or that they themselves are free from the sin and will-to-power that affects all humankind. Niebuhr believes this is because most pacifists have rejected the doctrine of original sin for "the Renaissance faith in the goodness of man," which is theologically heretical and empirically absurd.<sup>63</sup> They are therefore non-realist idealists, and they earn his stern rebuke.



**Figure 5: Most pacifists (for Niebuhr): indiscriminately pessimistic about imperfect political strategies that employ coercion; unrealistically optimistic about pacifism as a political alternative and/or the moral purity of pacifists**

<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr, 106, 115.

<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr, 107, 109.

<sup>54</sup> Niebuhr, 109–110, 114–116.

<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr, 115–116.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, 109–110.

<sup>57</sup> Niebuhr, 104, 115; King, "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 479.

<sup>58</sup> Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 110–111.

<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr, 118.

<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr, 103–104.

<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr, 103–4, 119.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, 103–4, 119.

<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, 104–105.

## Niebuhr's failure to be realistic about democracy and the USA

I find Niebuhr's attempt to combine idealism and realism compelling in theory. Identifying original sin and disordered self-interest in all political systems, motives, actors, and actions is a powerful realist check on the potential damage of idealisms. Meanwhile, using Jesus's ideal law of love as a tool for relative criticism enables realist analysis of relative political improvement. However, when judging the political realities of his context, Niebuhr often failed to achieve his intended combination of realism and idealism. Rather, his realism often gave way to an unbalanced idealism about the United States of America, its democracy, and its use of force.

Niebuhr sometimes underestimates the scope and intractability of problems that do not affect him personally. For example, when considering the Nazis' "brutalities," Niebuhr comforts himself thinking about humankind's moral-political "common sense."<sup>64</sup> He declares that "the common people ... preserve an uncorrupted ability to react against injustice and the cruelty of racial bigotry."<sup>65</sup> He wrote these words fourteen years before *Brown v Board of Education*.

Niebuhr is particularly optimistic about democracy. As he says in his famous aphorism, democracy is possible because of our capacity to justice, but it is also necessary because of our inclination to injustice. This suggests democracy is a solution to injustice. Niebuhr sees democracy as a social form that makes freedom and order mutually supporting by placing checks on self-interest.<sup>66</sup> His strong sense of democracy's necessity to combat sin deflects his realist focus from structural sin *within* democratic regimes and processes: democracy is "the only alternative to injustice" rather than a system that can co-exist with, enable, and even perpetrate injustice.<sup>67</sup> While we "cannot fully trust ... any ruling class or power", "democratic checks" and, ultimately, the possibility of violent revolution keep them in line.<sup>68</sup> For Niebuhr, democracy plays the role absolutist states play for Hobbes: he is far too optimistic about the democratic state's ability to constrain sin. He could perhaps have mitigated this by distinguishing clearly between democracy as a *concept* of restraint on individual and systemic self-interest, and democracy as *really existing systems* that may imperfectly realize the concept, but also themselves need restraint. He is aware that not all democracies meet the "democratic ideal," but still speaks descriptively as if referring to actual, current "free societ[ies]."<sup>69</sup>

The 'free society' he is most enthralled with is his own nation, the United States of America. Niebuhr acknowledges that the US and other "democratic nations" have "imperialistic motives"—at least in their "history."<sup>70</sup> However, instead of taking this observation as an opportunity to reflect on the depth of the US's sin, he quickly states that it is impossible for any nation to completely avoid imperialism, which is "the collective expression of the sinful will-to-power which characterizes all human existence."<sup>71</sup> No person or nation is perfect, but Niebuhr seems to think the US is about as close to perfect as a nation can get. He strongly emphasises the need to distinguish between the "brutalities" of "tyrannical states" and the "inconsistencies" of democracies.<sup>72</sup> Again we should remember that one of these 'inconsistencies' was

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<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, 110–111.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, 111.

<sup>66</sup> Niebuhr, "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness," 161.

<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr, 161. Niebuhr does note the danger of states sliding into "coerced unity at the price of freedom," but he says confidently that democratic processes prevent this; he does not seem to envisage democratic processes facilitating it. It would be interesting to see how he would respond to post-9/11 developments in his country.

Other political theologians are less optimistic about the state of affairs produced by democratic systems. For example, Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) suggests democracies will only produce moral outcomes if their citizens are formed in moral values. Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, chap. 3.

<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 109–110.

<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness," 161–163.

<sup>70</sup> Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 115.

<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr, 115.

<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, 110–111.



segregation. It seems Niebuhr’s political opposition to the Nazis made him well-placed to discern their sin, but his acceptance of the imperfect US government’s violence did not leave him well-placed to discern the US’s sin. His eagerness to affirm the US as relatively better than the Nazis led to an underestimation of the ‘plank in the US’s eye,’ to use one of Jesus’s turns of phrase (Matthew 7:3). As discussed below, Niebuhr did oppose Jim Crow and the Vietnam war. But these evils committed by his country weren’t constantly at the front of his mind the way they had to be for King.

Niebuhr’s idealism about the United States is particularly pronounced when he discusses foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> He is certainly concerned about idealistic imperialism and an “impulse to dominate the world” as the US becomes stronger and less isolationist, and he calls for a sober realism about the consequences of US action in the world.<sup>74</sup> Yet his own analysis produces remarkable optimism about the motives of US foreign policy, and its ability to be a force for good in the world.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, he suggests staying out of world affairs will cause just as much harm, as “America must not fail” if the world is to find peace—the US as the most powerful superpower is able to check other unjust nations.<sup>76</sup> This analysis seems conditioned by the then-recent history of the Allied victory in World War II. It relies on the biggest superpower also being the best: a historical circumstance that is contingent at best, inaccurate at worst. Ironically, in his idealism about the US, Niebuhr comes closest to his unjust reputation for endorsing a realism that treats the US’s national interest as its highest norm. Niebuhr’s own theory cannot explain his excessive faith in the righteousness of this one sin-tainted, imperialism-tempted collective over and against all others. What could explain it is the fact that Niebuhr granted credence to colonial myths of American exceptionalism, which assume the US has a special God-ordained role and destiny in the world.<sup>77</sup>

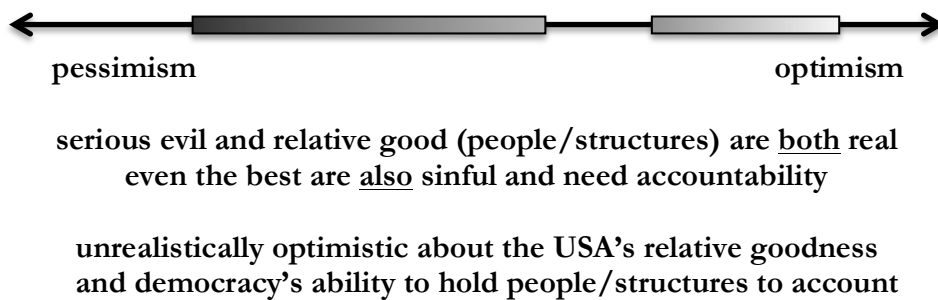


Figure 6: Niebuhr in practice: unrealistic optimism about democracy and the US limits his realism

### How King’s pacifist liberation theology made Niebuhr’s political realism possible

The political theology Martin Luther King, Jr expressed in his famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” displays both striking similarities and clear contrasts from Niebuhr.<sup>78</sup> King follows Niebuhr in both his idealism and his realism. On the idealist side, King echoed and substantiated Niebuhr’s faith that positive change can come through righteous action and democratic processes. He also called on the US to live up to its ideals of freedom and democracy, where Niebuhr had been more inclined to take for granted that those

<sup>73</sup> He also suggests that the US, along with the UK, has “resolved” tensions between labour and capital, which could surely only have been written prior to the neo-liberal dismantling of welfare states. Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 134–135.

<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr, “American Power and World Responsibility,” 204–5; Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 89–90.

<sup>75</sup> Niebuhr, “American Power and World Responsibility,” 200–2, 205–6; Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” 127–128.

<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr, “American Power and World Responsibility,” 205.

<sup>77</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 96.

<sup>78</sup> Elie, *passim*; King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

values were already being practiced.<sup>79</sup> On the realist side, King credited Niebuhr with helping him “recognize the complexity of [humankind’s] social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil,” and to avoid a “superficial optimism concerning human nature,” a “false idealism” and a “self-righteousness” whereby pacifists see themselves and their activity as sinless.<sup>80</sup>

In his letter from jail, echoes Niebuhr’s realism about structural sin and oppression. He cites Niebuhr in suggesting groups are “more immoral than individuals” and will not give up their power voluntarily without pressure from those they oppress.<sup>81</sup> Although King famously believed “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” he realistically notes that the passage of time simply maintains an unjust status quo unless it is deliberately used constructively.<sup>82</sup> This recalls Niebuhr’s notion that humans have a capacity for justice but an inclination towards injustice.

In many ways, King’s realism expands more fully and explicitly upon ideas Niebuhr hinted at. King outlines a theory of just and unjust laws, showing with sober realism that being enshrined in law does not guarantee justice: “everything Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal,’” and likewise segregation under Jim Crow.<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr agreed with King that segregation and the Vietnam War were defining injustices of the time.<sup>84</sup> However, they did not stop him being strongly optimistic about democracy and the US. King is far more critical and realistic. He questions whether the US could be considered a democracy at all, at least in states like Alabama where African-Americans were still being forcibly prevented from voting despite the recent federal law changes.<sup>85</sup> He is also clear that making the US genuinely democratic requires action beyond the existing ‘democratic’ structures: a choice between two pro-status quo candidates would hardly “bring the millennium to Birmingham.”<sup>86</sup> King also expands on a point Niebuhr had hinted at: that “coerced unity” or the absence of overt conflict is not true peace.<sup>87</sup> King argues powerfully that his disruptive non-violent activities are not causing conflict, but revealing conflict embedded in the status quo; and that that status quo’s coercive arm perpetrates brutal violence as well as preventing it.<sup>88</sup> He expresses frustration at the “white moderates” who stipulate support for the civil rights movement’s goals while condemning its methods.<sup>89</sup> Ironically, similar white moderates today often invoke King in their opposition to “disruptive” protest.<sup>90</sup>

In other ways, King contrasts more starkly with Niebuhr. Most obviously, King was a pacifist, while Niebuhr was not. However, as discussed above, although Niebuhr believed the Christian church is not pacifist and rightly so, he did make space for a minority pacifism to keep the church accountable to its ideals. He did not consider pacifists heretical if they acknowledged the ubiquity of sin, including in themselves.<sup>91</sup> This is precisely what King sought to do when, as he put it, “After reading Niebuhr, [he] tried

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<sup>79</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 92; King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 92, 98, 100. In granting some credence to these ideals, Niebuhr and King are on the idealist side against the pessimism of some black liberation theologians such as James Cone. See Cone, “Towards a Black Ethic of Liberation.”

<sup>80</sup> King, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 479–480.

<sup>81</sup> King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 87.

<sup>82</sup> King, 92; Lewis, “Obama Loves Martin Luther King’s Great Quote—But He Uses It Incorrectly.”

<sup>83</sup> King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 89–90. King’s argument on unjust laws draws on the natural law tradition. King cites Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and quotes the dictum “an unjust law is no law at all.” While King and Aquinas both attribute the dictum to Augustine, it in fact goes back to Cicero and the classic natural law tradition around the turn of the Common Era. Woodcock, “Jacques Maritain, Natural Law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 249.

<sup>84</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 84.

<sup>85</sup> King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 90.

<sup>86</sup> King, 86–7.

<sup>87</sup> Niebuhr, “The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness,” 161.

<sup>88</sup> King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 85, 91–2, 98–9.

<sup>89</sup> King, 91–2.

<sup>90</sup> An example of one of these ‘white moderates’ is the archbishop in Fergusson who quoted King to condemn disruptive protest against police killings of black men, but not the institutionalized racism of the police. Grimes, “Telling Tales.”

<sup>91</sup> Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 103–105, 119.

to arrive at a realistic pacifism.”<sup>92</sup> Niebuhr supported King’s work and endorsed Gandhian non-violent resistance as a tactic for African-Americans: King may even have got the idea from Niebuhr.<sup>93</sup>

However, Niebuhr did not write from the perspective of pacifists or African-Americans. This is a more substantial difference between Niebuhr and King: the agent of their political theology.<sup>94</sup> Niebuhr is an establishment figure, and his interests naturally lie with the US nation-state. Not surprisingly, therefore, the ‘we’ of his political theology is precisely that nation-state, burdened with the responsibility to deal with ‘our’ pride and self-interest and to pursue relative approximations of God’s justice, approximations that look remarkably similar to ‘our’ democratic ideals. While King also rhetorically invoked US ideals, and while the white-dominated US establishment has now largely domesticated him, during his life it actively denied him rights, dignity, and safety. The US was certainly not the agent of his politics—it was its opponent and target.<sup>95</sup> The agent of King’s political theology is firstly the ethnic community and movement he represented, and more broadly, all those willing to be co-workers with God for freedom and justice.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps the most substantive difference between King’s and Niebuhr’s realist political theologies is their differing understandings of eschatology, or the expectation of divine intervention in the future and present. Both Niebuhr and King believe “the Kingdom of God will finally resolve the contradictions of history.”<sup>97</sup> This distinguishes them as Christians from, for example, contemporary public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates, who says that, as an atheist, “I don’t believe the arc of the universe bends towards justice. I don’t even believe in an arc. I believe in chaos”; chaos that “probably” “ends badly.”<sup>98</sup> The difference between Niebuhr and King is that Niebuhr’s eschatology focuses on the ‘not yet,’ emphasizing the limits of what can be achieved now in this world where true love and justice can only be approximated. He suggests resolution to our history of sin is a “divine realit[y]” rather than a human or “historical possibility.”<sup>99</sup> While he endorses Augustine’s view that God’s “city” leavens the world’s “city” here and now, for Niebuhr this is through the order-keeping of the political system Niebuhr found himself in, not the disruption of that system.

King has a far more apocalyptic eschatology, whereby Christians are co-workers with God, disrupting and unveiling time and reality to redeem time and reality.<sup>100</sup> King, as much as Niebuhr, opposes progressivist eschatologies that assume the present order will eventually deliver the required change.<sup>101</sup> Yet for Niebuhr, this means we must wait and accept the imperfect goods of the present order as the best we can achieve at this point in history. King refuses to wait for God to liberate his people. King suggests that it may be “easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait,’” but those who do experience that brutal, dehumanizing physical, economic and psychological violence cannot wait.<sup>102</sup> Like the Israelite

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<sup>92</sup> King, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 479–480.

<sup>93</sup> Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” 92. Elsewhere, Niebuhr argued that non-violent resistance of this type, just like violent resistance, is a departure from the perfectionist ethic of Christ, which he argues is an ethic of total non-resistance. Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 106–107. King believed Niebuhr misinterpreted pacifism as “passive nonresistance to evil expressing naïve trust in the power of love”; King supported a “true pacifism” of non-violence resistance to evil. King, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 479.

<sup>94</sup> I am again indebted to Gerald McKenny on these points of comparison between Niebuhr and King, particularly the comments about their understandings of time and eschatology.

<sup>95</sup> The white church is also not the agent of King’s political theology insofar as it aligns itself with this establishment. King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 96–98.

<sup>96</sup> King, 92.

<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 113.

<sup>98</sup> Coates, “The Myth of Western Civilization”; Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Is Atheism the Reason for Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Pessimism on Race Relations?”

<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 113.

<sup>100</sup> King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 87–89, 92.

<sup>101</sup> King, 92.

<sup>102</sup> King, 87–89.

slaves and lament psalmists, they demand an eschatology where God acts now, just as King demands of Lyndon B. Johnston in the biopic *Selma*.<sup>103</sup>

I argue that King differed from Niebuhr in these ways because King's political theology is grounded in pacifist praxis on behalf of the oppressed. It can be called a liberation theology, which is defined by Gustavo Gutiérrez as "critical reflection on praxis in the light of [divine revelation and faith]."<sup>104</sup> Liberation theology is grounded in historical praxis for the liberation of the oppressed, and it is inextricably linked to this praxis. King's theology in this letter is certainly a liberation theology, even though he was murdered before Gutiérrez coined the term. As a jailed pastoral leader of a liberation movement, King's social position demands a different agent and perspective than Niebuhr's. It also demands an eschatology of real, immediate liberation from the status quo. Niebuhr has a stake in the status quo, and therefore a stake in an eschatology that delays apocalyptic disruption to the status quo. Finally, King knows the effects of violence and non-violent resistance through real bodily experience, while for Niebuhr they can remain abstract ideas.

These differences—committed to pacifist praxis, conducted from the perspective of the oppressed, and demanding divine intervention and political liberation now—allow King, far more than Niebuhr, to enact a Niebuhrian realist assessment of structural sin in the United States of America. King's pacifist stance did not prevent him from being able to make relative judgments between imperfect situations, as Niebuhr suggested. Rather, his refusal to justify any violence and his positioning of himself against all violence made him better-placed than Niebuhr to make both relative and absolute judgments about violence. It enabled him to keep sight of both the damage of all violent structures and the real relative difference between a violent United States with segregation and a violent United States without segregation. His grounding in liberating pacifist praxis kept him in touch with the moral ambiguity of even pacifist political praxis, but it also gave him realistic insight into what pacifists can achieve. The example of King and the civil rights movement helps us see that a realist pacifism is not only useful for reminding non-pacifists of their ideals. It can also be a better source of political realism than a Niebuhrian willingness to justify one's own nation's imperfections.

King's realist political theology has also been far more effective than Niebuhr's at changing the United States for the better. Niebuhr remains "Washington's favourite theologian", being praised since his death by Jimmy Carter, John McCain, Barack Obama, and James Comey.<sup>105</sup> Niebuhr provides these leaders with a moral, indeed a theological, justification for their causes—the Cold War, the War on Terror, intelligence and law enforcement—even while he urges "humility and caution" in their exercise of power.<sup>106</sup> Niebuhr is more readily associated with realism than with idealism, but he too often functions to disguise a realistic critical assessment of the United States' role in the world. Meanwhile, King, and the movement his political theology was grounded in, challenged the United States far more radically. He helped bring the ideals Niebuhr associated with the United States closer to being a reality.

## **Conclusion and what Niebuhr and King can contribute today**

Niebuhr provided a compelling account of political realism based largely on Augustine of Hippo's theology of original sin and God's city leavening the world's city. His realism urges realistic absolute and relative judgments and is aimed at helping imperfect humans the highest possible degree of peace, justice, and freedom. From this perspective, Niebuhr is sceptical of pacifism. He believes all too often, pacifists are unable or unwilling to make accurate judgments between greater and lesser evils, unable or unwilling to face the degree to which sin, self-interest and power affect all humanity, and unable or unwilling to take

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<sup>103</sup> DuVernay, *Selma*.

<sup>104</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xvii–xlvi, 3–12.

<sup>105</sup> Zubovich, "Reinhold Niebuhr, Washington's Favorite Theologian"; Elie, "A Man for All Reasons"; Elie, "A Few Theories About Why James Comey Might Call Himself 'Reinhold Niebuhr' on Twitter."

<sup>106</sup> Zubovich, "Reinhold Niebuhr, Washington's Favorite Theologian."

responsibility for effectively achieving peace. However, one of Niebuhr's most prominent followers, Martin Luther King, Jr, gives the lie to this. King's political theology actually achieved Niebuhr's realist vision far more successfully than Niebuhr himself did. Niebuhr too often succumbed to naïve illusions about the United States and about democracy in his haste to commend the relatively good and to extol structures that hold people accountable. King avoided these naïve illusions. I submit that King was able to do this not despite of his pacifism, but precisely because of the pacifist praxis his political theology was rooted in. King's pacifist liberation theology made Niebuhr's political realism possible.

Half a century has passed since Niebuhr and King lived, wrote, acted, and died. The United States and the world as a whole are characterised by persistent violence, resurgent nationalism, and often troublingly frank anti-realism.<sup>107</sup> Niebuhr and King, and this reading of them, may provide some guidance to ways forward. The explicit invitation from this secular conference's organisers to contribute papers on religious pacifism shows they are conscious that theological and religious perspectives have something to offer pacifism. Niebuhr and King can also show how theology and religion can be useful for political realism. Theologies that emphasise the ubiquity of sin but also the reality of eschatological hope and apocalyptic divine intervention provide powerful theoretical tools for realism. The observation that King was able to enact Niebuhrian realism better than Niebuhr himself shows that pacifist praxis is useful not only to remind us of our ideals, but also to inform a sober realism about violence. Finally, what King managed to achieve theoretically and politically shows what a pacifist liberation theology can offer to political theory and praxis, especially political theory and praxis aimed at and pursuing peace and justice in our deeply flawed but not hopeless world.

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<sup>107</sup> I do not only refer to US President Donald Trump's famously cavalier attitude to the truth and the phenomenon of 'fake news.' I also have in mind former New Zealand Prime Minister John Key's frequent dismissal of statistics and expert opinions as simply 'one opinion' that he and 'most New Zealanders' disagreed with. This was extremely politically successful in the New Zealand context: in their successful re-elections in 2008 and 2011, Key's National Party received by far the highest proportion of votes that any party has received during our era of proportional representation, and also higher than any party achieved in many of our First Past the Post elections.

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