

interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 6/1

fall 1976

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martinus nijhoff, the hague

edited at

queens college of the city university
of new york

interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 6

issue 1

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interpretation is a journal devoted to the study of political philosophy. it appears three times a year.

its editors welcome contributions from all those who take a serious interest in political philosophy regardless of their orientation.

all manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to the executive editor

interpretation

building g101 – queens college – flushing, n.y. 11367 – u.s.a.

subscription price

for institutions and libraries Guilders 42.— for individuals Guilders 33.50.
forwarding expenses Guilders 9.— one guilder = \$ 0.385

subscription and correspondence in connection therewith should be sent to the publisher

martinus nijhoff

9–11 lange voorhout – p.o.b. 269 – the hague – netherlands.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND CONTEMPORARY
POLITICAL THOUGHT: A REVIEW ARTICLE*

GLENN N. SCHRAM

- Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932. 284 pp. \$3.95 paper.
- Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937. 306 pp. \$2.95 paper.
- The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944. 190 pp. \$3.45 paper.
- Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949. 257 pp. \$8.95.
- The Nature and Destiny of Man*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949. 621 pp. Vol. 1 \$3.95, Vol. 2 \$2.95, both paper.
- The Irony of American History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952. 174 pp. \$3.45 paper.

I

Writers in the grand tradition of Western philosophy have not concerned themselves with the justification of democracy for about a generation. That tradition is distinguished by the arguments it makes in terms of human nature: when it focuses on politics, it is concerned with the human needs that will be, or the human capacities that ought to be, fulfilled by political activity. It does not just assume that a goal is a good one and then clarify our thinking about it or show how it can best be attained. It does not tell us how we can best attain whatever we value, no matter what it is. It argues for values in terms of human nature, and seeks to convince us that what it says about human nature is true. It is a type of inquiry that has fallen into disrepute in an American political science very much under the influence of analytic philosophy, for it is said to traffic in propositions that are incapable of being proved or disproved on the basis of empirical observation and that consequently lie outside the realm of knowledge.

* Of Niebuhr's many books, the six listed on this page are probably his greatest; though they were published from twenty to forty years ago, at the height of his career, their titles indicate their significance for us today. This review of the major themes of these books is an attempt to show the kind of perspective that a study of Niebuhr can bring to current affairs and to stimulate an interest in his work and that of certain writers with whom he is often compared, not always to his advantage. Though Niebuhr's influence on the study of international relations and on American foreign policy is widely acknowledged, this article is concerned with aspects of his thought which have received less attention from professional political scientists.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) belonged to this grand tradition. He and two other Christian writers of his time, Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon, mounted the major philosophical defense of democracy in the face of the threat of aggressive totalitarianism. Maritain's primary contribution was to restate the modern idea of natural right in terms of traditional natural law theory. Niebuhr claimed to differ from neo-Thomist thinkers such as Maritain on the possibility of knowing the natural law, though their differences were perhaps not so great as he thought, as we shall see. Simon, in an argument all the more persuasive because of its sensitivity to the virtues of aristocratic rule, tried to justify democracy in terms of the desirability of a check on those in power. Niebuhr took a similar approach, though, as we shall also see, he differed in an important way from Simon.

Niebuhr failed to receive a great deal of attention from academic students of politics during his lifetime, partly because of the influence of analytic philosophy on political science, as mentioned above, but partly because he had a great deal to say about what many professed to believe was the "meaningless" concept of sin, he doubted the liberal faith in progress, and he had a tragic view of life in a society whose culture, despite its literature, lacked a sense of tragedy. I do not know whether Niebuhr may now receive more attention from this group than in the past, but I think he may.

First, though political science remains under the influence of the school of analytic philosophy known as logical empiricism, some analytic philosophers have recently been questioning the notion of the objectivity of empirical science. If, as the philosophical avant garde has been arguing, the meanings of concepts in directly confirmed empirical propositions change to some extent with the theories used to explain those propositions, then, strictly speaking, the theories do not explain the same aspects of reality. Moreover, since it is through concepts that reality is perceived, there is no known objective standard against which theories can be tested: some theories explain more, others less, but they do not explain more or less of exactly the same thing. What theories are adopted, then, depends on their explanatory power and on scientific fashion, but not on their degree of coincidence with a common reality.

On this view, nothing about its concern with empirical reality guarantees that empirical science is based on objective knowledge: rather, it is based on a combination of sensory perception, logic, and faith. Empirical inquiry thus resembles those forms of inquiry which some of its proponents in political science have sought to displace on the grounds that empirical inquiry is a source of objective knowledge and that the other forms of inquiry are not. These empiricists argue that the only other source of objective knowledge is logical analysis, which issues in tautologies. Since they deny that knowledge can be anything but objective, they argue that empirical inquiry and logical analysis are the only sources of knowledge. But if the avant-garde

criticism of their view of empirical science is correct, they are left with logical analysis as the only fully reliable source of knowledge unless they are willing to recast their criteria for knowledge in less restrictive terms. If they did this, they might be able to reopen the kinds of questions raised by the grand tradition of Western philosophy.

The leaders of the philosophical avant garde are Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. It is ironic that a good many political scientists believe themselves to be operating within one or another current "paradigm" of the discipline (the term is Kuhn's). They have not examined the epistemological implications of what Kuhn and especially Feyerabend have been saying. That this state of affairs may be changing is suggested by a recent symposium on the philosophy of science in the *American Political Science Review*. There a young political scientist, Eugene Miller, calls attention to this aspect of the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend.¹ Miller's critics point out, correctly, that Kuhn, Feyerabend, and their group fail to deal adequately with the apparent uniformity over the centuries, and in numerous languages, of the meanings of commonplace empirical statements like "You are standing on my foot," but they themselves skip over Feyerabend's examples of how meanings change as one moves from classical to modern physics.

There is a second reason why political scientists may now be prepared to pay Niebuhr more attention. The magnitude of our domestic problems undermined the liberals' belief in progress at precisely the time when they were unable to meet the New Left on its own ground in defense of their remaining beliefs because they refused to address themselves to questions of human nature. Their doubts about progress put them in Niebuhr's camp; his concern with the melioration of social injustice and his defense of democracy against utopianism put him in theirs. The major difference now remaining between the two camps lies in Niebuhr's concern with human nature.

II

Niebuhr was very much aware of man's capacity for transcendence. Though frequently used to describe a quality of God, the term has come to be used by a variety of existentialist, neo-Hegelian, and Christian thinkers to refer to a type of human experience. For Niebuhr, transcendence consists of man's rising above himself to experience a reality beyond himself. It can occur through religious experience or through a sense of community:

¹ Eugene F. Miller, "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Inquiry," *American Political Science Review* 66 (1972): 796-817, esp. 804-6, and comments by David Braybrooke, Alexander Rosenberg, and others. The epistemological issue is joined in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1970).

The self can be its true self only by continued transcendence over self. This self-transcendence either ends in mystic otherworldliness or it must be transmuted into indeterminate realizations of the self in the life of others. By the responsibilities which men have to their family and community and to many common enterprises, they are drawn out of themselves to become their true selves.

.....

Though the individual is organically related to the community there is a point in human freedom where the individual transcends both his own community and the total historical process. . . . The ultimate transcendence of the individual over communal and social process can be understood and guarded only in a religious culture which knows of a universe of meaning in which this individual freedom has support and significance.²

Adapting the terminology of Dante Germino³ to Niebuhr, we might speak of transcendence as "vertical" or "horizontal," depending on the mode of its occurrence. A similar distinction is made by Ernst Nolte, the historian of fascism, when he speaks of "theoretical" and "practical" transcendence. Nolte says of transcendence that, "looking back on what has been and forward to what is coming, [it] reaches out toward the whole." His "theoretical" transcendence is Niebuhr's vertical transcendence. But his "practical" transcendence is quite different from transcendence through community, and it is not altogether clear why Nolte calls it transcendence, for he has in mind a Marxian vision of world-wide economic concentration and technical standardization at the hands of the capitalists. He believes fascism to be "at the same time resistance to practical transcendence [bourgeois society] and struggle against theoretical transcendence,"⁴ a diagnosis with which Niebuhr probably would have agreed, even while finding it somewhat superficial.

Niebuhr was inclined to view political movements more as a consequence of the absence of transcendence in human experience than as a struggle against it. He was concerned about the secularization of Western culture, the decline of vertical transcendence, and he saw that the need for religious experience was for some persons fulfilled by the pseudo-religious political mass movements of his day. He was disturbed by what he believed to be the sinful pride of the authors and practitioners of Marxism because they sought to do what he thought men could not do: to create a political order in which the best in human nature emerges and the worst disappears. Having a different (and quite plausible) view of human nature and of what is permanent in it, he saw this as a futile attempt to remake man. Yet he thought that Marxism had had some positive results—that it had heightened the general awareness of the individual's proper relationship to the com-

² *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp. 55-56, 79.

³ Dante Germino, *Beyond Ideology: The Revival of Political Theory* (New York, 1967), p. 27.

⁴ *Three Faces of Fascism* (New York, 1966), pp. 427-54.

munity and that "Marxist collectivism was, on the whole, a healthy and inevitable revolt against bourgeois individualism."⁵ Though he dismissed Communist dictators as self-seeking, or "children of darkness," he believed that those involved in Marxist movements were committed to universal values and for that reason considered them "children of light," however misguided they might be.

The National Socialists he considered children of darkness, for while they appealed to a wish for a sense of community, they had no commitment to universal values. He saw further that the intellectual appeal of National Socialism, such as it was, was due to a unique combination of factors in Nietzsche's philosophy—despair, romanticism, and a very modern sense of tragedy. He saw, finally, that this combination was unique to the culture of a time and place, and that it did not exist in the America of his day, secular though the country might be.

Yet Niebuhr recognized, well ahead of his contemporaries, a crisis in Western culture that was not confined to fascist Germany. Though himself the product of an ethnic-religious tradition preoccupied for a very long time with sin and pessimism, he is not included in Judith Shklar's list of Christian prophets of doom in *After Utopia*;⁶ but the impression he leaves is that a further demise in religious experience is not something about which we ought to be complacent. Making due allowance for his background, we need to consider the possibility, at a time when more and more persons are recognizing the cause of our present discontents as in part spiritual, that he was right.

III

It is well known that modern Western political thought has been marked by a tension between liberty and community. The great appeal of Rousseau, and to some extent of Hegel, has been their effort to reconcile the two values. Niebuhr was not especially concerned with this tension. He was bothered much more by the tensions between self-preservation and humility, between the attempt to establish social justice and the attempt to avoid overextending one's human capabilities. But under the broader concept of transcendence he gave community its due, while he also valued liberty.

The political and civil liberties associated with liberal democracy Niebuhr saw as ways to develop public consciousness of the nature of social justice. While aware of possible biases in systematic attempts to set out the principles of justice, he was even more attuned to the possibility of injustice in concrete historical situations. He also valued "democratic liberty" because, without it, there would be fewer checks on those in power; rulers are subject to the same weaknesses as every-

⁵ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. 57.

⁶ (Princeton, N.J., 1957), pp. 164-217.

body else, and there must be controls on them as on everybody else. Thus democratic liberty is justified both by man's capacity for justice and his capacity for evil:

A free society is justified by the fact that the indeterminate possibilities of human vitality may be creative. Every definition of the restraints which must be placed upon these vitalities must be tentative; because all such definitions, which are themselves the products of specific historical insights, may prematurely arrest or suppress a legitimate vitality, if they are made absolute and fixed.

....

The reason this final democratic freedom [to criticize authority] is right . . . is that there is no historical reality, whether it be church or government, whether it be the reason of wise men or specialists, which is not involved in the flux and relativity of human existence; which is not subject to error and sin, and which is not tempted to exaggerate its errors and sins when they are made immune to criticism.⁷

These ideas are founded on a perception of man's relationship to truth that contributed to the intrinsic value which Niebuhr, like some seventeenth-century English Protestants, attached to religious liberty. He did not argue for complete liberty of conscience—for the liberty of all men to believe what they wish and to propagate and practice their beliefs, provided only that they do not interfere with the corresponding liberty of others, injure others or provoke their injury, or endanger national security.⁸ Some theorists have sought to justify democracy in terms of the respect that it ordinarily affords liberty of conscience, which they regard as a good in its own right. Niebuhr did not make this argument, but his defense of religious liberty constitutes an added argument for democracy insofar as democracy guarantees religious liberty.

It will be recalled that in Protestantism the relationship of the individual to God is a highly personal one, not mediated, in the final analysis, by the church. The access of the individual to God is viewed as a manifestation of the human reason (broadly conceived to include religious experience) which had led Augustine to see the image of God in man. At the same time, however, the reason is mistrusted, for it is admitted that beliefs different from one's own might be true. Thus in seventeenth-century England the repression of opposing religions came to be viewed as a violation of human reason, of the God-like in man; as

⁷ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp. 63–64, 70–71. Niebuhr's notion of the "indeterminateness" of human activities has been the cause of some misunderstanding. He means that there are no known limits to man's creativity. Consequently, men as individuals tend to overlook the moral and physical limits on their behavior: they begin to play God and in so doing rebel against Him: they commit the sin of pride. The result is frequently injustice.

⁸ This is, I believe, a fair assessment of what is usually meant by liberty of conscience. See John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, I: *Machiavelli through Rousseau* (New York, 1963), pp. 49–50; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 211–12.

the repression of beliefs whose holders find themselves in the same intense relationship to God as the represser; and perhaps as the repression of truth itself.

In that the foregoing argument for religious liberty shows a concern for human dignity, it is a byproduct of Renaissance humanism. Along with it arose the belief in the right of all men to a voice in the governance of civil society;⁹ out of it grew the belief in full liberty of conscience. We have already noted that Niebuhr did not justify democracy in terms of a right to political participation but valued it for its effect on society and government, nor did he argue for full liberty of conscience. In talking of religious liberty, however, he refers approvingly to the writings of seventeenth-century English Protestants, including John Milton's *Areopagetica* (Milton, he wrote elsewhere, "combines Renaissance humanism and sectarian Christianity in a remarkable synthesis"¹⁰). In his own comments he characteristically gets to the root of things, to the sources of error in religious belief:

Profound religion must recognize the difference between divine majesty and human creatureliness; between the unconditioned character of the divine and the conditioned character of all human enterprise. According to the Christian faith the pride, which seeks to hide the conditioned and finite character of all human endeavour, is the very quintessence of sin. Religious faith ought therefore to be a constant fount of humility; for it ought to encourage men to moderate their natural pride and to achieve some decent consciousness of the relativity of their own statement of even the most ultimate truth. It ought to teach them that their religion is most certainly true if it recognizes the element of error and sin, of finiteness and contingency which creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth.¹¹

Because of such beliefs Niebuhr claimed to differ from neo-Thomist thinkers on the extent to which men can know the natural law. However, the differences between him and Maritain can be greatly overestimated. Maritain was indeed not so concerned with sin and with the extent to which it taints individual statements of the natural law, but he did argue that misstatements of it occur. Moreover, he asserted that our knowledge of the natural law has expanded over the centuries: "such knowledge is still progressing," he said, and "it will progress as long as human history endures. That progress of moral conscience is indeed the most unquestionable instance of progress in humanity."¹² One recalls Niebuhr's insistence that our insight into the nature of social justice is never complete.¹³

⁹ See A. D. Lindsay's account of the Putney Debates in chapter 1 of his *The Essentials of Democracy*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1935); A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty* (Chicago, 1951).

¹⁰ *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II, p. 233.

¹¹ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, p. 135.

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago, 1951), p. 94.

¹³ On the places occupied by Niebuhr and Maritain in contemporary reli-

In the area of liberty, an important difference separated Niebuhr from Simon. Although Simon saw clearly the relative advantages of democracy over aristocratic rule, most liberals would disagree with him on the extent to which the exercise of liberty is desirable in a democracy. Simon saw public debate on "the principles of political life" as a "fateful threat to any regime, democratic or not"; there is some doubt whether he would allow such debate and even greater doubt whether he would allow public debate on abortion and euthanasia, concerning which he may have believed he had unquestionable access to the truth.¹⁴ Niebuhr took a more latitudinarian approach to the question of the extent of desirable free expression because of his concern for the discovery of new insights into the nature of social justice:

Even if natural-law concepts do not contain the ideological taint of a particular class or nation, they are bound to express the limited imagination of a particular epoch, which failed to take new historical possibilities into consideration. This alone would justify the ultimate freedom of a democratic society, in which not even the moral presuppositions upon which the society rests are withdrawn from constant scrutiny and re-examination.

.....

A society which exempts ultimate principles from criticisms will find difficulty in dealing with the historical forces which have appropriated these truths as their special possession.¹⁵

IV

One would feel more comfortable with his discussion of liberty if Niebuhr had not simply expressed approval of the argument of seventeenth-century English Protestantism but had argued for religious liberty in terms of human dignity. He wanted to found his political theory on the doctrine of sin; consequently, he defended political, civil, and religious liberty in terms of the taint which attaches to statements men make of even profound truths. The Western concern for human dignity is largely a product of the Renaissance, and he blamed the Renaissance for introducing an unjustified faith in progress into Western culture. Though he recognized that "sometimes new truth rides into history upon the back of an error"¹⁶—as an example of which

gious thought on natural law, see Paul E. Sigmund, *Natural Law in Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 180-94, though it is somewhat misleading to interpret Niebuhr's views on the moral ambiguities of wars and the frequency of sin as a "belief in the necessity and inevitability of doing evil in some cases" (pp. 182-83); on the complex nature of sin, see *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I, pp. 241-64. For a good general introduction to Niebuhr's political thought, see Lee Cameron McDonald, *Western Political Theory: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York, 1968), pp. 568-81.

¹⁴ Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago, 1951), pp. 72-143, esp. 119-25.

¹⁵ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

insight he offered Marxism—it did not occur to him that the relation of human dignity to the Renaissance was rather like the relation of Marxist anti-individualism to Marxism: granted that both the Renaissance and Marxism were tainted by the sin of pride, one can still argue that both produced valid moral insights. It is true that Niebuhr spoke of “the unique worth of the individual which makes it wrong to fit him into any political program as a mere instrument,”¹⁷ and that such language indicates a belief in human dignity. But when he attempted a systematic justification of liberty it was still in terms of sin.¹⁸

Building on the foregoing ideas, one might suggest that, if the history of modern Western political thought is viewed as broadly and as fundamentally as possible, the underlying tension is seen as lying not between liberty and community but between human dignity and transcendence. Niebuhr in his way valued both. But those who value human dignity tend to overlook man’s capacity for transcendence, and those who value transcendence have at times been willing to sacrifice the human dignity of some to bring about and maintain transcendence for others. In the last decade the failure by some liberal thinkers to appreciate man’s capacity for transcendence has also prevented them from understanding much social unrest. Many of those involved in this unrest sought to transcend themselves and, if they were members of the New Left, to create a situation of transcendence for others. Others were responding in some other and more helpless way to an alienation which by its nature is the absence of transcendence. On the other hand, a failure by those involved in social unrest to understand the limits of what they could do and, in some instances, to value liberty and human dignity may explain the trouble they got into.

To their credit, modern Western democracies have made significant advances in the area of human dignity. They have tended to sacrifice transcendence, though the sacrifice has been far from complete. Intellectuals in western Europe probably have a more balanced appreciation of the two values than their American counterparts because European democracies have been built—in some instances at extraordinary cost—on the remnants of a corporate system. The demand for “participatory democracy” is as much a demand for transcendence as for liberty and dignity, and for this reason governmental and university officials have been more ready to accede to the demand in western Europe than in America. Participatory democracy, however, can answer the need for but one kind of transcendence. Therefore, although European institutions have introduced such changes more

¹⁷ *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York, 1953), p. 101.

¹⁸ Apparently Niebuhr came to accept the substance of some of the criticisms of his greatest works. See the autobiographical essay in his *Man's Nature and His Communities* (New York, 1965), pp. 15–29.

generously than American ones, their experiments have been less than uniformly successful, and America, with its greater religious vitality, may have a better chance for a renewal of transcendence than Europe.

V

However sound the theological and historical reasons for the Reformation attack on classical and medieval philosophy may have been, one can argue that it went too far, that Protestant culture has been poorer as a consequence, and that Maritain's approach to natural law makes more sense than Niebuhr's because it gives due regard to human error while attaching greater credibility to human reason. Surely, if political science is to reopen questions of human nature, it cannot stop with the Protestant Reformation, nor with the Reformation plus Augustine, the one ancient philosopher who greatly influenced the reformers and Niebuhr. It needs to look to classical and medieval philosophy as a whole (retaining, to be sure, a healthy regard for the frailties of human reason).

A Protestant preoccupation with sin and error is combined with a Catholic respect for human reason in the thought of Eric Voegelin, at present the major political thinker in the Christian tradition. It has been argued that Judith Shklar is wide of the truth when she says that Voegelin studies "all post-mediaeval political thought" as an "offspring" of the twelfth-century heresy of Joachim of Flores;¹⁹ that Voegelin fails to treat the Joachimite heresy and virtually every intellectual development since as causes of the secularization of Western culture; that his history of the last eight hundred years is hyperbole; and that he considers postmedieval intellectual developments to be nothing but effects of an underlying cause, the desire to alleviate the anxiety of existence by achieving a certainty about the meaning of history. In Mrs. Shklar's defense it must be noted that Voegelin speaks of humanistic liberalism as a "step" on the road to Marxism, and of contemporary phenomena as an "intelligible outgrowth" of medieval heresy and, implicitly, of virtually everything in between.²⁰

Voegelin is in the first instance a political scientist, and one of astounding scope and originality. His strength is not moral theology, and a student of Niebuhr might object to several things in Voegelin's thought: a tendency to impose moral categories where they do not fit, the unwarranted ascription of willful intent to the intellectual progenitors of contemporary phenomena that many deplore (such as John Locke),²¹ and an incapacity to see the good that has emerged

¹⁹ *After Utopia*, p. 172.

²⁰ See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 107-32.

²¹ Essays of this kind run a great risk of becoming involved in theological polemics, and the political scientists who write them run a risk of getting out of their depth, but it does seem to me that Niebuhr's concept of sin can illu-

from the last eight hundred years of Western thought. I use "good" here to mean moral insights and not merely civilizational accoutrements such as the competent practice of medicine (though some of these facilitate the good life, as Aristotle saw).

Unlike Niebuhr, Voegelin is not concerned with the justification of political institutions, and Dante Germino overstates the case when he says that Voegelin "displays a lively appreciation for the institutional achievements of modern liberalism."²² Though he invokes human

minate an aspect of Voegelin's thought which must trouble many readers. Implicit in the Voegelinian critique of modern thought is an idea of sin which Niebuhr would have termed overly "Pelagian" and insufficiently Augustinian. Pelagianism regards sin more or less without qualification as "a conscious defiance of God's will and an explicit preference of evil, despite the knowledge of the good" (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I, p. 245). In the Augustinian view, sin involves a defect of the will; however, it need not involve the deliberate choice of evil. Niebuhr favored the Augustinian view because it seemed to him to be more consistent with human psychology. The distinction is important, for it helps us to see that, whatever may have been Locke's standing with God, we have no evidence that his thought involved deliberate ill will.

I choose Locke, even though Voegelin dismisses him in a footnote as a modern proponent of "pleonexy," or greed (*Order and History*, III: *Plato and Aristotle* [Baton Rouge, La., 1957], p. 33), because he lends himself nicely to the sort of analysis perfected by Voegelin and employed by his student Ellis Sandoz in "The Civil Theology of Liberal Democracy: Locke and His Predecessors" (*Journal of Politics* 34 [1972]: 2-36). Sandoz describes Locke as a "genuine revolutionary in the full meaning of that term" whose "true profundity is perhaps obscured by an ambivalence that was probably calculated and which followed from his systematic intention to break with the classical and Christian tradition in philosophy and religion while appearing to be the true advocate of that tradition." He continues: "His [Locke's] 'caution' may be understood, not in terms of the degree of the break which was in fact thoroughgoing, but in terms of a reluctance to identify his intentions clearly" (pp. 13, 11).

It is true that Locke's thought helped to create a climate in which capitalism and natural science could become mixed blessings; it is also true that he hardly stemmed, and probably furthered, the secularization of Western culture. But the evidence that he willed these developments does not exist, and a more balanced view of his thought might be that it reflects both independent inquiry and traditional faith. John Dunn makes a convincing case for the following assertion (though a reading of Leo Strauss suggests that the assertion might be better made about Voegelin and his followers than about Strauss and his): "If, as Strauss and his followers insist, Locke was in fact of Hobbes's party, he was surely of Hobbes's party without knowing it. In fact, the party membership ascribed in this way appears more as a piece of twentieth-century taxonomy than an observation on seventeenth-century experience, however cautious or incautious in expression this latter may have been" (*The Political Thought of John Locke* [Cambridge, 1969], p. 219).

²² *Beyond Ideology*, p. 181, n. 42. Nonetheless, Germino's introduction to Voegelin's political theory (pp. 161-85) is generally fair and judicious and is to be recommended. He bases his assertion that Voegelin appreciates the institutions of liberalism on "Der Liberalismus und seine Geschichte," in Eric Voegelin et al., *Christentum und Liberalismus* (Munich, 1960), pp. 11-42. This article is primarily a discussion of German liberalism; it is not a comprehensive treatment of the liberal impulse, especially as it has existed historically in England and America.

Other helpful interpretations of Voegelin are Bernhard W. Anderson, "Politics and the Transcendent: Eric Voegelin's Philosophical and Theological Analysis of the Old Testament in the Context of the Ancient Near East," *Political Science Reviewer* 1 (1971): 1-29; John H. Hallowell, "Existence in Tension:

dignity against the institution of slavery, Voegelin is primarily concerned with transcendence. It is important to notice, however, that he admits the possibility that a "good society" might exist within a modern democratic framework. It is in his discussion of the "good society" and, indeed, in his entire discussion of transcendence and its relation to political order that he has something unique and valuable to say. A society is good in Voegelin's sense if at least a minority are able to lead the "life of reason" in it and if the "life of reason" becomes a force in its culture, including its political life. The life of reason is the life of the philosopher, who is open to transempirical, or transcendent, reality.²³

Though his critique of modern thought reflects an awareness of the reality of sin, Voegelin is a Platonist and, unlike Niebuhr, does not explicitly employ the concepts of sin and grace.²⁴ Niebuhr would have expressed reservations about the perfectionistic overtones of Voegelin's claim for philosophy, arguing the inadequacy of any political theory that fails to take conscious account of the reality and persistence of sin. Niebuhr did not speak of the soul as ordered by attunement to transcendent reality, and he was not concerned explicitly with the relation between the order of the soul and political order. Yet one of his major themes was the social role of religion, and he sensed the relation of the character traits of sinful men in a state of grace to the relatively good polity.

VI

That a relation exists between the order of the soul and political order is, of course, a Platonic insight. If political scientists were to try to understand and teach it, they would try to understand and teach Plato and Voegelin. If they were to admit the reality and persistence of sin, they would pay increased attention to Niebuhr. If they recognized Niebuhr's weakness on natural law and saw that, if a spiritual renewal is to occur in the West, it will very likely be Christian in nature, they would study and teach medieval and neo-Thomist philosophy. If they shared Niebuhr's insights on the value of toleration, they would make their students aware and appreciative of the variety of ethnic and religious traditions that make up American culture. If they were modestly successful in these undertakings, they would find themselves

Man in Search of His Humanity,' *Political Science Reviewer* 2 (1972): 162-84; Bruce Douglass, "The Gospel and Political Order: Eric Voegelin on the Political Role of Christianity," *Journal of Politics* 38 (1976): 25-45.

²³ On the "good society" and human dignity, see Eric Voegelin, "La société industrielle à la recherche de la raison," in Raymond Aron et al., *Colloques de Rheinfelden* (Paris, 1960), pp. 44-64, esp. 53-64.

²⁴ Voegelin's position on the Atonement has never been clear, and questions have increased since the appearance of *Order and History*, IV: *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge, La., 1974).

approaching the history of philosophy and religion as the history of man's attempt to define his experience of reality. Recognizing the inability of science to guarantee "objective" knowledge of the empirically observable, they would have no reason not to pursue knowledge of a transcendent reality, and they might consider the experience of such reality to be knowledge.

I do not know whether this approach would create a body of influential persons committed to the life of reason. It is highly possible, however, that political science might restore part of the religious spirit in which the country was founded, or at least help preserve what is left of it. In the process it might help us to acquire religious insights more profound than those of Enlightenment deism. It might also help prevent a major leadership problem from developing in the country.²⁵

It is important to recognize that a sense of tragedy of the kind that emerged in postwar Europe and that is now emerging in America is a sign of maturity in a society, a source of hope precisely because it curbs prideful optimism. Moreover, history is ironical, and out of sinful developments in the history of ideas moral insights may emerge which may or may not have been contained, with varying degrees of explicitness, in earlier thought, and which become impressed on the public consciousness. For this reason, and because of our own limitations, we ought to view our Lockean heritage with considerable humility. This much, at least, follows from an examination of Niebuhr's thought.

²⁵ A political leader is able to obtain widespread support for his positions on major public issues with relatively little recourse to coercion. This is not the place for a discussion of the problem of leadership in democratic societies; it was not a matter that concerned Niebuhr, perhaps because the subject lends itself to the kind of moral perfectionism against which he warned. But he clearly saw that some men are better than others, and in a sense his thought is relevant to the problem. One has only to survey the qualities generally associated with political leadership on the national level in England and America: honesty, integrity, a sense of identity with past personal and national accomplishments, the capacity to live with one's foibles, political savvy, self-confidence, ease of manner, and a sense of where the country should be going. A student of Niebuhr might inquire whether a religious environment is not a necessary condition for the development of some of these qualities.