

What would Niebuhr do? Theologian's legacy debated

March 24, 2011

PRINCETON, N.J. (RNS)—What happens when the contested legacy of America's most famous 20th-century theologian meets the harsh political realities of the 21st? You end up with questions like whether Reinhold Niebuhr would support water-boarding.

It's impossible to know what Niebuhr—arguably the preeminent public intellectual and American theologian from the 1940s to 1960s—would have said about the practice of torture by the United States in post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan.

Public officials and pundits from both the left and right lay claim to the legacy of noted 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and his concepts about Christian realism.

But such questions are hardly a surprise at a time when everyone from President Obama to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to *New York Times* conservative columnist David Brooks see themselves as Niebuhr's acolytes.

Nor are they a surprise when academics come together, as they did recently at Princeton University, and debate the long-term legacy of a figure claimed by both the political left and right, by religious and nonreligious alike.

A man who died in 1971 but has been heralded in recent years as "the man

of the hour” deserves his praise, speakers agreed, but also has his limits.

Shaun Casey, who advised Obama on religious outreach during the 2008 campaign, believes the pragmatic Niebuhr who’s become so popular since 9/11 is often viewed as a straightforward disciple of “real-politick” rather than a Christian theologian who wrestled with questions of transcendence.

The richness of Niebuhr’s worldview—one that acknowledges the tragedy and limits of humanity while embracing a call for social justice—has been lost in the contemporary world, said Casey, who is writing a book on those he calls “Niebuhr’s children.”

“Today, you’re either Glenn Beck or Dennis Kucinich,” said Casey, an ethicist at [Wesley Theological Seminary](#) who spoke at the Princeton event, titled “The Niebuhrian Moment, Then and Now: Religion, Democracy and Political Realism.”

Gary Dorrien, who teaches at New York’s [Union Theological Seminary](#), where Niebuhr held court more than three decades, said the problem in interpreting Niebuhr is that he “seemed to revel in dispiriting proclamations, such as, ‘The possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good.’”

What often is overlooked, Dorrien said, is that Niebuhr was “a passionate type who took his own Christ-following passion for justice for granted. For him, the love ethic was always the point, the motive and the end.”

Niebuhr’s contributions to modern Christian thought include a sense of “irony and paradox,” Dorrien said, as well as a well-honed sense of the “complex ambiguities inherent in all human choices.”

In other words, Niebuhr didn’t see a world that was easy to fit into a ready-made box.

The trouble with Niebuhr's famed "Christian realism," however, is that "it dropped the ball on economic justice after World War II. It left progressive Christianity without enough to say or do in its own language, in its own way, and for its own reasons," Dorrien said.

Given Obama's own professed embrace of Niebuhr, it was inevitable that the president's record would be viewed through several "Niebuhrian" lenses.

Although Princeton scholar Jeffrey Stout couldn't attend the conference, his paper delivered at the event was sharply critical of Obama and the president's embrace of the politically pragmatic Niebuhr. Stout said Obama "isn't a principled opponent of anything."

"The current president came to national attention as a candidate enunciating principles of justice for the conduct of warfare, statecraft, the domestic economy and political change," Stout said in his paper. "As soon as he described himself to an interviewer as a Niebuhrian, we should have known that the principles were nothing more than mushy sentiments to be thrown overboard at the first sign of rough weather."

Stout later added that he's studied Niebuhr and voted for Obama, but it's more complex than that. "It's time to start thinking seriously," he said, "about what they leave out."

Cornel West, a noted African-American religious philosopher who teaches at Princeton, reveres Niebuhr but acknowledged the many ways Niebuhr's thought has been used to undergird political and religious conformity.

West, who has been critical of Obama on a number of issues, said Stout was "expressing something that's being felt more and more. He's onto something."

But West said while he has been disappointed in Obama, "I also know what

he's up against. I want to protect him, respect him and correct him."

There was little consensus on a Niebuhrian approach to modern dilemmas like water-boarding. Niebuhr was at once a moralist, a patriot and a pragmatist. [Harvard](#) Historian K. Healan Gaston said there's little value in trying to speculate on what Niebuhr might say about specific current issues.

"Although Niebuhr's way of thinking remains intensely relevant to the challenges we face, there are a wide range of discernibly Niebuhrian positions one might take on almost any contemporary issue," she said.

"As an historian, I tend to regard Niebuhr as a creature of his own historical context who can inspire useful reflections on today's issues—but should not be ventriloquized in relation to any of them."