

Realism and idealism combine to offer a Christian social ethic

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BROWNWOOD—Christians' ultimate allegiance belongs to the kingdom of God and secondarily to the church, but they also owe loyalty to the nation in which they live—and that may mean getting their hands dirty trying to make it better, theologian and ethicist Roger Olson said.



Roger Olson proposed a middle way between the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and the idealistic pacifism of Stanley Hauerwas. (HPU Photo) Faithful Christians may find guidance by drawing from the insights of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's pragmatic "Christian Realism" and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas' idealistic Christian pacifism, Olson suggested in the annual Currie-Strickland Lectures in Christian Ethics at Howard Payne University.

On the surface, the two approaches may seem incompatible and irreconcilable, said Olson, the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. But he called for a middle way that takes the best of both.

Niebuhr and Hauerwas shared similar convictions about human sin and depravity, but they took radically different approaches toward how to live as Christ-followers in a fallen society, he noted.

Compromise necessary in a sinful world

“Put most bluntly and concisely, Niebuhr believed this world, by which he meant the social systems developed by humankind and the institutions that express and sustain them, is so fallen and corrupt, that responsible and effective Christian involvement in them, no matter how well-intentioned, will always require compromise of Jesus’ ethical perfectionism and reliance on non-Christian philosophies to establish even a modicum of public justice,” Olson said.

“And he believed that it is essential for the good of humanity, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the oppressed, that at least some Christians take the risk of soiling their souls with compromise with non-Christian, imperfect, even sinful systems of political life, and that, if they do it with eyes wide open and hearts full of repentance, God will forgive them.”

To Niebuhr, who began writing about Christian social ethics in the 1930s and continued through the 1960s, faithful engagement in society meant confronting the evils of fascism, Nazism and communism—by force if necessary.

“Niebuhr believed it was the duty of thoughtful, reflective, responsible, world-wise Christians to work effectively together with non-Christians for the cause of justice, even if that meant confrontation, conflict and occasionally violence in response to evil,” Olson said.

Justice the closest approximation to love in social systems

Niebuhr took seriously the love ethic Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, but he viewed it as an “impossible ideal,” Olson explained. It may

shape individual behavior but is not achievable in sinful human social systems. Rather, Niebuhr saw justice as the closest approximation of love as an achievable ideal in society at large.

“For Niebuhr, perfect love, agape love, disinterested benevolence, absolute nonviolence, are all relevant to Christian social and political ethics in every age and every place, but they are relevant as critical principles impossible of actual achievement,” Olson said. “Their relevance lies in their always reminding us that, with regard to justice, we can do better.”

For Niebuhr, “social and political effectiveness is an essential good and goal of the Christian calling.” Furthermore, when the church “has power and influence to steer the course of history and bend the arc of the universe toward justice, ... (it) must get its hands dirty and make the best of the filthy tools of politics,” he said.

Hauerwas values faithfulness over effectiveness

In contrast, Hauerwas—who retired in recent years from Duke University and its divinity school—views faithfulness as more important than effectiveness, and he sees deadly force as always wrong for Christians.

“In all of his writings, Hauerwas argues forcefully that peaceful existence and peacemaking lie at the very center, the core, the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” Olson said.

Dallas-native Hauerwas believes Christ calls his people to radical faithfulness to his message, even to the point of death, he said.

Violence never an option

“For Hauerwas, faithfulness to the way of Jesus, as spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount, takes precedence over effectiveness in shaping public policy,” Olson said. “If the church can shape public policy toward the

shalom of God through witness and prophetic speech, fine. It should do that.

“But ultimately the church, even individual Christians, who are really never individuals as Christians, must let go of the reigns of worldly political power and trust God to use its witness as he wishes to bend the arc of the universe toward justice. Bending the arc of the universe toward justice using worldly coercion, especially violence, is never justified for the Christian.”

Hauerwas views Christians as “resident aliens” living in enemy-occupied territory who are called to bear witness by showing God’s love in action, he explained.

“According to Hauerwas, the church’s public ethic, its social and political ethic, ought to be prophetically witnessing by example, word and deed to the world, calling it to repentance and peace,” Olson said.

As different as the teaching of Niebuhr and Hauerwas are, both are deeply rooted in commitment to Christ, reflect a shared distrust of power in human hands, and agree about the need for Christian involvement with the world outside the church, Olson observed.

Example of Bonhoeffer instructive

He pointed to German pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as one whose example may help bridge the gap between Christian Realism and Christian pacifism, and he noted the distinction Bonhoeffer drew between the ultimate and penultimate.

“The ‘ultimate’ in Christian social and political ethics is what Jesus would do. The ‘penultimate’ is what we sometimes must do that Jesus would not do because of our predicament of having worldly power and influence in a world of oppression and tyranny,” Olson said.

The distinction allowed and even compelled Bonhoeffer—a committed Christian pacifist—to join in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler, he noted.

“Bonhoeffer never rescinded his pacifism or discarded his ultimate loyalty to the kingdom of God and the church of Jesus Christ, but he sacrificed them on the altar of necessity, opting for the penultimate over the ultimate and trusting God to understand and forgive,” he said.

Christians who may bridge the gap

Olson also pointed to three other examples as possible bridges between approaches of Niebuhr and Hauerwas:

- John Chrysostom, the fourth-century patriarch of Constantinople, who did not prohibit Christians from serving in the military but called them to penitence if they had to kill someone and who also spoke truth to power, even when it cost him his life.
- Christoph Blumhardt, a Lutheran pastor and evangelist who won a seat in the German parliament and opposed Kaiser Wilhelm’s declaration of war against France, Russia and Great Britain in 1914.
- Emil Brunner, the Swiss theologian who taught an idealism that means “putting love into effect wherever and whenever possible” and a realism that recognizes “the Christian cannot perfect the world and must work with it and within it as it is.” Brunner believed the church was called to influence the state to “make it more humane and more serviceable to humanity.”

Questions of loyalty and citizenship

A key to reconciling Christian Realism and Christian perfectionist idealism rests in the individual believer’s loyalties as a citizen of the kingdom of God, the church and the nation in which one lives, Olson asserted.

“These three citizenships and loyalties form for me a hierarchy with the kingdom of God, virtually inseparable from Jesus Christ himself, at the top and the church below that and America below that,” he said.

“To the extent possible, I seek to unify, bring into coherence, these three loyalties. I exercise every reasonable effort to bring the church into alignment with the ideals of the kingdom of God. One thing that means for me is a church where worldly status means absolutely nothing and preferential treatment is given to the weak, the powerless and the poor.

“To the extent possible, I exercise every reasonable effort to bring America into alignment with the ideals of the church as it reflects the kingdom of God—but without expecting the two or three to merge and become one. That will not happen by my or our efforts.”

Political service presents agonizingly imperfect choices

In terms of Christians’ direct involvement in politics, Olson offered an “agonistic attitude” as a bridge between the positions of Niebuhr and Hauerwas—take on the burden of public service if called to it, but agonize over the imperfect choices.

If Christians serve in public office, they have a responsibility to inject “love and peace as much as possible into all public policies and decisions regarding the poor and the enemy,” Olson said.

At the same time, a bridge between the two schools of thought would require Christians to discern “when to stand down and move away from public office” and take on a strictly prophetic stance, speaking truth to power, he concluded.

Legacy of Phil Strickland

The Gary Elliston family established the Currie-Strickland Lectures in

Christian ethics to recognize David Currie, a Howard Payne University graduate and former executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, and honor the memory of Phil Strickland, longtime director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas' Christian Life Commission.

Weston Ware, who worked as Strickland's associate in the CLC 24 years, praised him for his lifetime of advocacy for public policy in service to the common good, particularly on behalf of vulnerable children.

Ware cited Henri Nouwen's definition of a leader as an "artist who can bind together many people by his courage in giving expression to his most personal concern," and applied it to Strickland.

"Phil was an artist who brought together and mobilized a generation of young and old to do what he believed God wanted—to do justice and to love mercy," Ware said. "He practiced a gospel that redeems lives and makes the world a better place."

Currie noted lessons in ethics Strickland taught him.

"People who are ethical struggle with their lack of ethics daily, continually, constantly," he said. "Basically, they live in the awareness of the presence of God. ... Those of us who have been touched by Christ cannot live a completely self-focused life."

Currie pointed out Strickland also taught him people who seek to live ethically do not ask, "What is it going to cost me?"

"When there are leaders of our country who ignore the First Amendment by banning persons of a particular religion from entering our country, who attack the First Amendment and the free press that helps us remain a democracy, referring to them as 'the enemy of the American people,' and when the very foundation of a free society is under siege, we once again need voices who will not ask, 'What is it going to cost me?' if we are to

remain true to God's call to ethical behavior," Currie said.

"Instead, we must ask, 'How can I partner with Christ?' I have no doubt that Phil Strickland would not remain silent, and neither should we."