Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

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[0:00] I bring greetings and good news from the daughter congregation, St. Peter's Fireside downtown. I'll be zipping down there as soon as I'm done here for our Sunday service. We worship at 1045 at UBC Robson Square.

And please know that if you're ever inclined to join, you're always invited. 1045 UBC Robson Square. We'd love to have you pop in sometime. We're not trying to poach you, but we'd love to have you pop in and visit sometime.
Things are going well down there. My role at the church involves supporting our Christian education program and then our catechesis, which we hope to launch in the autumn. And then I share the responsibilities for running services, pastoral work, leading small groups with the other ministers. Alistair, who's our lead pastor, and Mike Chase, who's the curate. And we have an assistant for Roger, Jeff, who is, I think, recently into town and at Regent.
And this is, am I correct, your first setting foot within the precincts of St. John's, Vancouver? Yes.
[1:05] Well, welcome, Jeff. And thank you for assisting Roger this morning. Indeed. I asked Jeff last night if he'd like to come over. I asked him about 9.30 p.m. And then I told him on the way over that I needed some help with the PowerPoint.

So, yeah. We live in a community house together, which is made up of current Regent students and former Regent students. And so Jeff's one of the recent arrivals. He's come from California and is going to be spending a few years at Regent College to get himself sorted out theologically.
Rather than take any more of your precious time, since you have to get to your next assignment in very good time, I'm going to hand it over to you at this point.
Thank you. Yeah. Let's pray for just a moment. Father, our God, we thank you for the great men and women in the faith that stand before us in our Christian journey.
We thank you that by looking at their lives, we can get a sense of the significance of Christ's work in the world. We pray that you would use the life of Reinhold Niebuhr this morning to inspire us and challenge us as we may have need.
[2:14] Amen. So, compendious primer on the life and thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Let me take a quick straw poll among you all. Who has heard of Reinhold Niebuhr?

I'm just kidding. Okay. Okay. Most recent? Yeah. Okay. So, he's somewhat well-known. I think probably 30 or 40 years ago, he would have been fairly well-known, perhaps almost a household word, as close as a theologian can get, at least, in the United States.
Niebuhr is an interesting guy. I think he's a difficult person to peg. And I think if we take a straw poll of what people have said about Niebuhr, we'll see that this is indeed the case.
So, let me run through some of the things that have been said. Because Niebuhr is neither a stranger to approbation nor controversy. Stanley Harawass, a well-known American theologian who teaches at Duke University.
He was named America's best theologian by Time Magazine a few years ago, Stanley Harawass. And this is what he says about Niebuhr. I love Reinhold Niebuhr. He was a hell of a lot more energetic of a Christian than I'll ever be.
[3:18] But he goes on to say, his theology was thin because his life wasn't. Right? Niebuhr's usefulness continues because he helps you to understand his times, not because he continues to be a constructive, critical thinker.

So, that's sort of a backhanded compliment, right? Next slide. Next slide. So, someone else who likes Reinhold Niebuhr is the current President of the United States, Barack Obama.
Niebuhr is his favorite philosopher. That's the phrase he used. Perhaps it would be better to say favorite theologian. But philosopher has probably got a broader appeal outside of, you know, in a

pluralistic society.
Barack Obama discussed his interest in Niebuhr and the influence of Niebuhr on his life in length in a very highly publicized interview with David Brooks, New York Times columnist.
David Brooks is also an admirer of Niebuhr. But interesting, Niebuhr has – the Niebuhr legacy has also been favorably evoked by people on the political right in America.
[4:20] So, Senator John McCain, who ran for president not too long ago and lost, he also identifies Niebuhr as someone who's had a major influence on his thought, right? So, political people on the left and right like Niebuhr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. attributed his ethos of nonviolent protest to Niebuhr. Specifically, he cites the influence of Niebuhr's acclaimed work, Moral Man in Immoral Society, on his thinking.
And that's directly – this assessment is directly opposed to what the famous atheist Sam Harris would say when he says that Martin Luther King got his nonviolent ethos from Gandhi, right?
But Martin Luther King himself said that he got it from Niebuhr, and that's a letter right there that he wrote which attributes some of his thinking to Niebuhr. Nature and destiny of man right there at the bottom, right? That's just so.
Niebuhr's influence also touched the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German Lutheran minister and theologian who was executed by the Nazis. They had a well-known exchange.
Bonhoeffer spent some time in New York City at the seminary where Niebuhr taught.
[5:21] In fact, Niebuhr actually discouraged Bonhoeffer from going to visit Gandhi in the 1930s when he was thinking about doing that. Niebuhr was a bit ambivalent about Gandhi's philosophical underpinnings.

He also warned to Bonhoeffer that there was no place for passive or nonviolent resistance in the face of Nazi evil, right? Niebuhr's legacy has been credited for shaping the mentality and aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.
If you read folks who are involved in that, they often talk about Niebuhr and his influence on that project. So his influence is vast and diverse. Why did I tell you all this? In short, because he's someone worth knowing about, right?
Notwithstanding his auspicious legacy, there are some people right now who think that his influence and his works have lost their salience. One of his friends, Arthur Schlesinger, suggested this in a 2005 interview.
I think Schlesinger perhaps overstated his lament, or perhaps his lament spurred in the Burian Revival, because there certainly seems to be one going on right now. If you do a quick Google search, you'll find all sorts of contemporary literature by graduate students and theologians and philosophers, social thought folk, who are writing about Niebuhr.
[6:33] You might say he's been rediscovered. There's an array of pundits and politicians who are starting to use his name again in the public discourse. My own dear friend Scott Irwin, who completed his Ph.D. at Oxford a few years ago, wrote on Reinhold Niebuhr and specifically on the theology innate in Niebuhr's political thought.

And so I'll be drawing a lot from Scott's research in today's presentation. Those who look to Niebuhr and celebrate his revival suggests that to engage with Niebuhr is to avail oneself of a prophetic voice.
A prophetic voice. So before we look to his thought, let's talk a little bit about his life, his biography, the history. Niebuhr was born in 1892. His father was a German immigrant and a prominent minister in a denomination that had ties to the Prussian Reformation.
He came from a very accomplished family. His siblings all left a mark in the field of theology. Theology was a family affair, you might say, in the Niebuhr household.
Some of you will be familiar with his brother, Richard Niebuhr, who taught at Yale University, taught in the area of theology and ethics, and wrote a book that's still used at Regent to this day called Christ and Culture.
[7:44] That was Reinhold's brother. His sister, Hulda, has gotten short shrift compared to her brothers, but she too was involved in religious education, and she taught religion at a variety of universities in both New York City and Chicago.

And her brothers actually said that she was the most talented theologian in the family. Interesting.
Niebuhr was educated at Eden Theological Seminary. It was tied to his family's denomination, and he went on to do a B.A. and M.A. at Yale University, finishing those degrees around 1916, 1917.

He never completed an earned Ph.D. like Karl Barth. In 1931, at the age of 30 or just, no, actually, 1931, yeah, around the age of 40, he got married.
He married a student of his at the seminary called Ursula Capel Compton. She was a scholar in the area of theology in her own right. She studied theology at Oxford University and was the first female to get a first in her Oxford theology degree.
So she was a heavy hitter, too. His wife taught at Barnard College, associated with Columbia University, and actually built the religious studies faculty there. She and Reinhold had a son and a daughter.
[8:56] Reinhold's son went on to teach at the Divinity School at Harvard. He's now an emeritus professor there, right? So this is a sort of theological dynasty, kind of like the Torrance family in Scotland, perhaps.

Niebuhr's career was colorful and variated. In 1915, he became a pastor, and he would serve in that post until 1928. He accepted a call to a small congregation in Detroit.
His tenure there would span some 13 years. When he arrived at that church, next slide, this is it, there were about 66 congregants active in that church.
By the time he left 13 years later, there were about 700, so substantial growth in that period. In Detroit, Niebuhr was a force for labor rights and labor relations.
His activism in these areas derived from his identification and advocacy of what's known as the social gospel movement. In reflecting on this period, he famously remarked that he cut his teeth in his social battles against Henry Ford and the Fordist vision of society that dominated Detroit during these years.
[10:02] During his season as a pastor in Detroit, social tensions were quite high. Detroit was the fourth largest city in the United States at that time. People were flocking to this metropolis for jobs in the booming auto industry, and there were a number of ensuing racial tensions, especially between whites and blacks who had come up from Dixieland to find work in industry.

It was at this interval that Niebuhr took a strong stand against Klan activity that began to pop up in Detroit in the mid-1920s. And he was also, as I just mentioned, opposed to the Fordist system and the labor practices of the Ford Corporation.
Niebuhr was quite attentive to the plight of the working class and the demoralizing conditions in which they labored. Consequently, he opened his pulpit for union leaders for the propagations of workers' rights ideas.
A journal entry from this time captures his sentiments. Let me quote Niebuhr here. During this period, Niebuhr was also a professed pacifist.
In opposition to this commitment, however, he did lend support to the U.S. intervention in World War I. He argued that a compromise with his otherwise pacifist commitments was necessary, quote, for the sake of righteousness.
[11:35] In 1928, Niebuhr accepted a position at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was to be a professor of practical theology and social ethics there, and he would spend the remainder of his working career at Union.

In this post, he joined a faculty which would eventually include Paul Tillich, Raymond Brown, the legendary New Testament scholar, and the famous liberal Protestant preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdy.
Note, well, Niebuhr's experience in academia was somewhat atypical. He was hardly an aloof and secluded theologian. Long after his arrival at Union, he remained very active in writing journal articles at the popular level, and he was still very famous for his fiery Sunday sermons.
I'd hope to share one with you this morning, but we had some IT problems, so you'll have to check that out at home on your own computer. During this period... No worries.
There we go. From current slide. There we go. Okay, that's good. During this period, the 1930s, Niebuhr went through a theological odyssey.
[12:41] He began to reject the tenets of liberal theology, and especially social gospel theology, that he had embraced as a younger person and minister, and he began to become acclimatized to the circles of dialectical theology, also known as neo-orthodoxy, the movement associated with Karl Barth and Emil Brunner over in Europe.

In this new posture, Niebuhr's regard for biblical authority was enhanced. Like other neo-orthodox theologians, he came to see the Bible as a human record of divine self-disclosure.

Reflecting on this shift, his daughter, in an interview I watched recently, stresses the evangelical tenor of her father's theological stance during these years. Owing to a number of influential publications and being invited to give the Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr's public profile received a boost in the 1930s and 1940s.
Relative to his ascendance into the realm of prominent public intellectuals in the United States, he developed a well-publicized rivalry with the education theorist and civic philosopher John Dewey. Through their exchanges, Niebuhr emerged as an advocate of the Jerusalem vision of society, whereas Dewey promoted the Athenian vision of society. The Athenian vision is a more secularized vision of public life.
[13:57] The Jerusalem vision is one that seeks to appropriate religious insights into the common public consciousness. Niebuhr's major publications, the book's covers are on the slide here, hail from his years at Union Theological Seminary, a few are worth highlighting, all of which possess grand evocative titles.

I must say, I love the titles to his books. One historian contends that his books feel permanent when they're sitting on your shelf, even though they are very much the product of a particular and recent moment in history.
So let's run through a few of the most prominent titles. 1932, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Among other things, this seminal work brought a strong remonstration against Dewey's secularist philosophy.
And Niebuhr's pronounced abuse on sin take expression in this book. In 1943, he published The Nature and Destiny of Man. This was based on his 1939 Gifford lectures.
The subject of this talk was ethics. This book provides a survey of human efforts to craft a sense of human identity into direct human destiny. In bringing a Christian alternative to these questions, Niebuhr makes a grand and famous recovery of St. Augustine's political thought.
[15:10] In 1944, he published Children of Light and Children of Darkness. What a great title, huh? That'll catch your attention. This book, which gives fullest expression to Niebuhr's political thought, critiques idealism.

He calls the idealists the children of light. He suggests that liberal idealism needs a dose of the cynicism and realism with which the world's despots and totalitarian regimes are so well versed. Those regimes are referred to as the children of darkness. In this book, Niebuhr penned one of his most typifying statements. Quote, Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.
In 1952, he published a short but well worth reading title called The Irony of American History. This book was republished in 2008 and has done remarkably well.
This brilliant treatise derives from his 1949 John Finley Green Lectures, which were given at Westminster College in his home state of Missouri. His immediate predecessor in the Green Lecture series was Sir Winston Churchill.
[16:15] Tough act to follow. Whereas Churchill's Green Lectures issued a clarion call to the Western world, his Iron Curtain remarks, Niebuhr's attention sought to counsel America on how she should behave and what sort of self-awareness she should inculcate as America assumed an ever-increasing responsibility on the global stage.

While he summoned America to action for the sake of justice, he also accentuated the common frailties, which America shared with her most notable foe at that time, the USSR.
Niebuhr also wrote a slew of articles and had a special concern for U.S. foreign policy during this period, many of which were published in a magazine that he chartered in 1941 called Christianity and Crisis.
Given my hitherto index, it's no surprise that Niebuhr has received a number of accolades over the years. Let me draw your attention to a few.
Of course, in 1939, he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures, a very prestigious lectureship in Scotland. In 1964, he was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I think this excited him and honored him more than any other honor he received.
[17:24] He also made it to the cover of Time magazine, as you saw earlier in the slide. He was identified on that cover and in that article as America's most influential Protestant theologian.

Interestingly, the magazine posthumously called him the greatest American theologian since Jonathan Edwards. Quite a compliment. There's a short stretch of road named after him in New

York City by Union Theological Seminary.
And notably, through his prodigious recovery of Augustinian political philosophy, he imported Augustine into modern liberalism. And out of this and through his involvement with groups like the Council on Foreign Relations, he served as an influential architect of American liberalism during the Cold War.
On a more pastoral level, Niebuhr is the author of the Serenity Prayer, which was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and is used in all of their meetings. Let me read that to you. It's beautiful. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Beautiful prayer.
[18:47] It's used by Alcoholics Anonymous to this day. So we've got a little bit of biography. We've talked about Niebuhr's accolades and so forth.

Let's look at his theology. And then after that, let's look at his political thought. So as a theologian, Niebuhr is considered, as I've said, to be a prophetic voice. This chiefly owes to the fact that he can't be readily relegated to any particular theological camp.
His theological posture cannot be easily classified. He did not pander, and he sought to be a truth teller. In briefly introducing a few of the defining points of his theology, I want to mention two things in particular.
Given that Niebuhr was a notoriously unsystematic writer, these foci represent themes that are kind of carried out throughout his work. So the first thing to mention is we've talked about biblical authority and his entry into the dialectical theological movement.
Let's talk about his doctrine of sin. A robust, biblical, and somewhat avant-garde in his context, doctrine of sin was a fundamental building block of Niebuhr's theology.
[19:53] Time magazine contended that Niebuhr was the pastor who, quote, brought sin back into fashion. For Niebuhr, sin is understood in the personal sense as primarily as prideful egotism, namely the tendency of humans to usurp God and place themselves at the center of the universe.

Man, as a historical creature, says Niebuhr, has desires of indeterminate dimensions. Sin results in part from human desire to transcend their environment, to transcend the limitations in which they exist.
Instead of being content as creatures, humans want to escape the ambiguity of the condition whereby they exist with limits and under God. They want to escape that state of affairs. They don't want to accept the determinate qualities of human existence.
In this line of thinking, Niebuhr is very much indebted to Soren Kierkegaard, who conceives sin as the desire to escape a quantitative leap from the determinate features of human existence.
In iterating the sinful condition of humanity, Niebuhr doesn't delimit his doctrine to an essentially personal understanding of sin. Rather, he also stresses the social dimensions of sin.
[21:05] This is articulated most notably in his book, The Nature and Destiny, Moral Man and Immoral Society. The distinctness of his view of sin is found in his insistence that sin is a social event.

And in this, he's arguing against John Dewey's thinking about the problems and the fallenness of the human condition. Liberal, rational society isn't a force for good that always tempers and subdues the sinful inclinations of individuals.
Rather, the structures and organization of liberal society are sometimes themselves tainted by sin and contribute to its perpetuation. So you see here, Niebuhr anticipating some of the thought on systemic sin that surfaced out of the liberation theology movements.
Accordingly, Niebuhr regularly illumines, which is one of his great insights, the common human tendency of governments and businesses and democracies and utopian ideas and even churches to sometimes corrupt good.
The abiding presence of sin was an unpopular message that Niebuhr brought to the United States amidst a swell of idealism that was sweeping the nation after the Second World War. Against broad, optimistic sensibilities about America's great destiny, Niebuhr underscored the distorting effect of sin.
[22:23] This took pronounced expression in his critiques of the American doctrine of special providence, which he talks about a lot in his writings and sermons. That doctrine was quite pervasive after World War II.

So what is this doctrine of special providence? I think it's worth unpacking this for a moment. The doctrine of special providence assumes that God's hand is always on people. He's rewarding them for their goodness or punishing them for their evil.
This line of thinking is misguided, according to Niebuhr, and it's a source of the deplorable self-righteousness that he sought to chastise in America at his moment in history.
The nation's victory in World War II was interpreted, in light of this doctrine, as a sign of divine favor and endorsement for everything that America could conceive and do. It was an unadulterated endorsement of the American project.
And so out of this stance, America and its foreign policy all too easily overlooked the moral ambiguity that taints even humanity's most noble efforts. The doctrine of sin, Niebuhr's doctrine of sin, was deployed in part to guard against certain risks he saw in liberalism.
[23:32] Next. Christian realism. That's the second theological pillar of Niebuhr's thought that we need to pay attention to. This is coupled to his doctrine of sin.

Niebuhr began to articulate this perspective, which is now called Christian realism, around the outbreak of World War II. It occurred together with his relinquishment of vigorous passivism from his younger years.
And it was during these years that he began to distance himself from organizations that he had had ties to as a proponent of the social gospel and an ardent pacifist, organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation.
He eventually became one of the harshest critics of these organizations. His sober and sometimes grave appraisal of the human condition and sin germinate his propagation of Christian realism.
The tenets of Christian realism, as is laid out by Niebuhr, are pithily conveyed through a phrase that he coined. Christians are to be, quote, in the battle and above it. So what does this mean?
[24:32] End the battle means that Christians are supposed to fight for truth, to protect the weak and the vulnerable, to defend justice against injustice, and to guard a cause against its peril. And they're to create societies that try to do that.

But he also talks about being above it. And what does he mean by that? Christians are to do these things, and the nations in which Christians live are to do these things as people who are aware of the imperfections innate in all the causes that they champion and defend.
We are to operate with a spirit of contrition for our own sins. We are to recognize the common humanity that binds us even to our most terrible foes. We are to know of the common need, which includes us, for grace and forgiveness.
This outlook constitutes Niebuhr's gloss and a sort of modern gloss on St. Paul's affirmation, which you also find in John's Gospel, that Christians are to be in, but not of the world. For Christian realism, unlike the social gospel movement, the kingdom of God cannot be fully realized in the present age.
Human perfectibility in the present age is an illusion. Due to the injustices that abound, people are sometimes forced to compromise the ideal of the kingdom of heaven on earth.
[25:45] Is this a cynical and forlorn perspective? I would say no, it's not for Niebuhr, right, because there's also a strong stream of hope that endures in his thought, right? Niebuhr's perspective is sober, but it's biblical and it's premised on faith.

His Christian realism presupposes the mutability of all historic norms. Anything can change, right? Anything can change. One must never think of the present state of humanity in absolute terms.
The historical norms in which we live are not fixed. The parameters are always open. New realities can and do break in. And to put it in very theological terms, there's always room for grace in Niebuhr's thoughts.
The action of God. So let's think now about how these core theological commitments shape Niebuhr's political thought, which is what really earned him renowned in his latter years.
This is the task of translation. Niebuhr, it has been said, is a genius, was a genius at translating religious insights into political situations and discourse and predictions.
[26:45] This is his great gifting. His labors in this arena gained momentum in the mid-20th century. They were precipitated both by growing tensions and increased hostility between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, as well as some personal disagreements, namely with one of his theological counterparts in Europe, Karl Barth.

In the early 1950s, this is an interesting little account. In the early 1950s, Niebuhr and Barth found themselves at a conference together in Geneva, and they had one of many tests that they had over the course of their exchanges.
Over and against Barth's preface for a mode of theological discourse that was chiefly framed in theological or insider language and largely concerned with eschatological hope, God's putting things to right at the end of the time, Niebuhr made the following critique and proclamation.
Quote, these are audacious words. Responsible Christians have no right to express their faith in such purely eschatological terms, that is, in terms that minimize the conquest of evil in particular instances in which place the whole emphasis upon God's final triumph over evil.
This protest, which was delivered publicly to a group of people, which included Barth, served only to further inflame the personal animus between these two theologians. For Niebuhr, Barth was a man of unbelievable self-confidence, to put it diplomatically.
[28:14] And Barth's mode of engagement with current world affairs, according to Niebuhr, was much more irresponsible in a personal and theological sense than he had ever imagined. These are strong and acrimonious words.

In the wake of this event, and in continuing with the general trajectory of his work at this time, Niebuhr set his mind all the more energetically to the communication and dissemination of his Christian realism.
And he wanted to do that beyond the borders of the church, a broader audience. His aim was to convey the relevance of a Christian viewpoint for contemporary challenges America was facing, especially in its relationship with the USSR.
He wanted non-Christians to benefit from the resources and insights that Christianity offered, especially given that such insights were invaluable in the negotiation of the Cold War.
And so he did, in some way, abdicate the use of insider religious language and sought a broader audience. In this task, what you see is Niebuhr becoming less of a speculative thinker and more and more a man who called for decisive and specific action of a political sort.
[29:22] The proliferation of the nuclear age only intensified the urgency of his campaign. In this undertaking, Niebuhr began to write in many journals and journals that were well beyond the realm of sort of theological, kind of insider theological discourse.

So he has articles published from this period in Life magazine and Reader's Digest, among others, which were two of the most circulated journals in the United States. So a man of vast influence. Those magazines don't often have feature articles by theologians. Features of... So let's think about a few features of Niebuhr's thought as it's politically rendered, politically translated, right?
Let's look at some of the basic contours of his translation project. Remember, these ideas are crafted in conversation with his theological convictions and they're expressed in the context of Cold War America, right?
What you'll see in three or four points I want to make in a moment is that his thought militates against the so-called mainstream narrative about the American project, right?
[30:24] They pose a formidable corrective, for instance, to the perspective and the rhetoric of a number of seminal American figures like George W. Bush. If you listen to his State of the Union address, I think Niebuhr would have balked.

But also like Thomas Jefferson, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Wilson, and Reagan, right? So he's challenging a certain sort of narrative that governs America's self-awareness.
His theology recoils against ideas of a noble America, America the great liberator, America as a harbinger of freedom, right? Who takes freedom and liberty to the darkest corners of the world, to quote George W. Bush in one of his State of the Union addresses.
For Niebuhr, these sentiments constitute a very sanitized view of history. They constitute a false interpretation of history. He thus challenges the poppy-cut account of America.
And he reminds that in history, America has all too often celebrated freedom without really defining it. Now, there is much that could be said in the arena of Niebuhr's political thought.
[31:27] For the sake of time, I want to draw your attention to four conspicuous features. First, there we go, the fallacy of national exceptionalism.

Niebuhr is quick to point out the hypocrisy of this type of thinking. His project, his thought, rejects what some would call the divine account of American origins, America as a new Israel, right?

Which has links both to Jeffersonian America and to the Puritan America, right? And against his outlook, Niebuhr says that the nation's messianic consciousness must be jettisoned.
The U.S. is not, as it sometimes presumes, a nation set apart whose motives are irreproachable. In these declarations, Niebuhr wants to assault what he sees as the spiritual pride of the nation.
And he's writing this in the U.S. context, but the applicability of this goes much beyond. It speaks also to other nations, whoever might have, whatever nations might be in a position of hegemony. In these remonstrations, Niebuhr proffers an alternative account of American success.
[32:31] This is very interesting. The nation's prominence and wealth, he says, owe more to good fortune than to divine blessing. American success is better attributed to the determination of her citizens to vigorously convert that good fortune into wealth and capital.

American commercial and territorial expansion owe less to virtue than they do to shrewdness, right? To be clear, Niebuhr does not seek to undermine the U.S., but rather to challenge the conceits of U.S. uniqueness as compared to other countries in the world.
America's soul, its virtue, its humanity isn't as vast as she thinks it is. America's actions aren't in God's service as much as some believe. Regrettably, the attitudes that Niebuhr sought to undercut continued to gain traction after World War II.
And as a result, and to his dismay, the U.S. found itself continuing to assume that only malice could prompt critique of its actions. Not reason, not theology, right?
Only malice and envy. So that's the first pillar of Niebuhr's political thought. The second is the indecipherability of history. Says Niebuhr, quote, no nation can be master of its own destiny.
[33:41] Great powers are subject to factors beyond their control and comprehension. This hortatory concession need not imply that history doesn't have any purpose. It does have purpose, says Niebuhr, but the purpose in history is often opaque, right?

Accordingly, he warns against the inclination of calculating men, the men who are at the helm of a nation and its policy, to imagine that their sagacity can exhaust the infinite possibility of God's power and God's wisdom.
Nations must be modest in forecasting that which is to come. They must cultivate a political humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension and management.
No nation, says Niebuhr, is the tutor of mankind in its pilgrimage towards perfection. No nation serves that role. That's the second pillar. The third is the false allure of simple solutions.
America, from a Niebuhrian vantage, was becoming, at that moment in history, overly reliant on military might. He sees this as a tool of the simple solution fallacy.
[34:50] To be sure, the notion of preventative war, as it was articulated in 2003, would have elicited a hostile response from Reinhold Niebuhr. Amidst the Cold War, his outlook implored restraint of those who advocated consuming the Soviets.

The contrivances to attempt Soviet annihilation, which emerged throughout the Cold War, were to be resisted, said Niebuhr, with every moral resource. In legitimating his opposition to simplistic solutions, often of a militaristic nature, Niebuhr fervently argued that the probable is not inevitable.
The probable is not inevitable. So long as war has not broken out, it is possible to avoid. And anyone who suggests otherwise is either a knave or a fool. And finally, a fourth pillar of Niebuhr's political thought, the limits of power.
For Niebuhr, this is the foundation of sound statecraft. Military might has long been overused to conceal the gravity of the gaps that exist in American society between ideal and actuality.
Says Niebuhr, to the end of history, social orders will probably destroy themselves in the effort to prove that they are indestructible. In highlighting the limits of power, Niebuhr suggests that the over-reliance of military might induces states to preponderantly overlook other political, economic, and moral factors, which could be wellsprings for unity, health, and strength, all in the national interest, but also the global interest.
[36:26] In the case of America, the addiction to military power can only be confronted by a renunciation of the nation's messianic dreams. This type of reconfiguration, however, did not for Niebuhr entail an isolationist policy, as some have accused.

But it does imply that the nation should attend less to the world outside its borders and more to the world within. America and all hegemonic nations, whether the British Empire or the Roman Empire, should maintain modesty about the virtue, wisdom, and power available to them for the resolution of

history's complexities.
With great profundity, Niebuhr propounds that even the wisest statecraft cannot create social tissue. The best statecraft can only cut and sew.
I trust that the continued benefit of these theologically undergirded principles is self-evident and possesses, as you see, enduring appeal to those who would allow God's word to infuse our broader political sensibilities.
Niebuhr's thought and its ability to gain traction beyond the borders of the church is well attested. A number of prominent allies of Niebuhr's have, for example, formed a group called Atheists for Niebuhr. So this is someone who can find common ground, right, but who nonetheless speaks out of a genuine set of genuinely Christian convictions.
[37:47] This is not to say, however, that it's important. This goes against certain accusations, which suggest that Niebuhr's political thought is, in the theological terms, it's either spurious or thin.

And I would argue the opposite following my friend Scott, who just finished his DPhil at Oxford, that actually Niebuhr's ideas and all of his thought is marinated in his theological commitments. Right? This is amply demonstrated by the following quotation, which, when read in light of a survey of political thought I've just provided, makes the interconnection between his theology and his political philosophy clear.
Let me close with this. Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime. Therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.
Therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint.
[38:48] Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness. And with that, I conclude. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.