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THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT and THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

with selected prayers

BY REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Foreword by
WILFRED M. MCCLAY

Preface by
FRANK WOLF AND TONY HALL

THE TRINITY FORUM READING
digital library edition

Excerpts from Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944) and prayers from his *Justice and Mercy* (Harper & Row, 1974) are abridged from the portions of these books that appear in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr,* edited by Robert McAfee Brown (Yale University Press, 1986). Reprinted with the permission of the Estate of Reinhold Niebuhr.

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Printed in the United States of America

ISSN 1062-2527

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The Trinity Forum Readings are underwritten in part by the McDonald Agape Foundation

PREFACE

More than 30 years ago, both of us were relative newcomers to Washington, D.C., and specifically to the U.S. House of Representatives. A Democrat and a Republican, we joined a small group in the U.S. Congress modeled after British abolitionist William Wilberforce's Clapham Sect.

Members of this group were bound together by a shared faith, committed friendships, and the desire to use our various spheres of influence to advance God's kingdom. We met in the House Chapel for fellowship, Bible study, and accountability—taking to heart the words of Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together… but let us encourage one another." In a city often marked by bitter partisan divides, this group has remained a source of strength. It has provided a place of refuge and support where each of us could attempt, however imperfectly, to work out our faith in practical ways.

This process has not always been black and white. It was not uncommon for us to leave the chapel to vote and find ourselves on opposing sides of a particular piece of legislation. But we frequently collaborated on a variety of issues about which Jesus clearly had something to say. Whether it was combating hunger in famine-stricken Ethiopia or advocating for the persecuted church then suffering behind the Iron Curtain, our common causes, like our friendship, indelibly shaped our collective time in public service.

This *Trinity Forum Reading* includes excerpts from a book by the American teacher, theologian, and intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr—the

father of "Christian Realism." Niebuhr struggled to live out his faith in personal and practical ways as he wrestled with the most pressing issues of his day, not the least of which was the global threat posed by totalitarianism and fascism. Niebuhr's Christian Realism paired the hope of politics with a sober view of human nature.

Widely viewed as a potent defense of democracy, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* famously declares: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." While Niebuhr embraces democracy, he is quick to recognize its limits and the limits of every system of government, writing that "no society, not even a democratic one, is great enough or good enough to make itself the final end of human existence."

As men who have tried to live out our faith in the public square, we, like Niebuhr, have developed a passion for pursuing justice in the political and government spheres while appreciating the inherent limitations of politics. The evils that plague mankind—hunger, illness, violence, and repression—are not ultimately political problems and they will not be stopped in the halls of Washington. In a fallen world these troubles will always be with us, and no party platform can promise to end them. At the same time, we have a responsibility, as active participants in the American experiment in self-governance, to challenge the tyrannies that threaten our fellow image-bearers.

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FOREWORD

As this *Reading* goes to press in the fall of 2012, the United States is staggering through the final stages of a heated, fractious, and relentlessly negative campaign season. The ignorant sloganeering, the emotional manipulation, the phony rhetoric, the oversimplified issues, the triumph of image over substance, the role of money in shaping the outcomes—all these sordid details have made our ideals seem heartbreakingly distant and our democracy debased. Who is most to blame—the candidates, the electorate, the PACs, the press, or the process? You can take your pick. But any way you look at it, the end result is a declining faith in the viability of our fundamental democratic institutions.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was a strong and consistent advocate for democracy. But were he here to observe and comment, it's unlikely he would be surprised by our current state of affairs. Our disappointment, he would explain, stems from overly optimistic assumptions. We assume we are better people than we seem to be, and we assume that our politics should therefore be an endlessly uplifting pursuit, full of joy and inspiration and self-actualization rather than endless wrangling, head-butting, and petty self-interest. But even though he would surely agree that the low-mindedness of our politics is regrettable, he would add that this fact is not our only point of vulnerability, and far from being the most dangerous. Niebuhr would remind us that we need to be defended not only against our cynicism but also against our idealism. For we are never more susceptible to evil than when we are convinced that we are

doing good. Both our pessimism and optimism can lead us astray. And yet we need them both, to balance and counteract one another.

The text that follows, excerpted from Reinhold Niebuhr's book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, makes these points with unforgettable power. It is enlightening reading at any time, in any season. It may seem odd that he published *The Children of Light* in 1944, in the midst of World War II, when it would have seemed blindingly obvious where to draw the line between good and evil. But Niebuhr was interested in more than this distinction; his book is best understood as a defense of democracy, the form of government he thought best suited to deal with our equal and opposite propensities.

Niebuhr believed human nature is best explained by the Christian belief that all persons are made in the image of God, and that our propensity for sin has tarnished but not entirely effaced that image. At a time when advanced thinkers left and right were jettisoning their culture's inherited biblical faith, Niebuhr insisted that Christianity offered a uniquely complex view of our human nature—far more complex, in many respects, than any of its secular equivalents, and far more adequate to the world as we find it. No one better captured this tense complexity, or more compellingly rendered the underlying tough-mindedness of the Christian faith, than Niebuhr—arguably the outstanding American public theologian of the twentieth century. Niebuhr's exploration of this tension came to define the concept of Christian Realism, which recognized both the hope and danger inherent in political endeavors.

A Theologian's Perspective

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in 1892 in Missouri and was educated at Eden Seminary and Yale Divinity School, graduating with a Master of Arts in 1915. He began his career as pastor of a small German-American church in Detroit, but his energetic writings and far-flung speaking engagements brought him to the attention of a wider national and international audience. In 1928 he accepted a post as Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he remained until his retirement

in 1960. He also served as one of the founders of *Christianity and Crisis*, a magazine established in 1941 to counter the pacifist-leaning positions of the influential liberal journal *Christian Century*. Those were positions he had once held himself; but he was moved to reject them in response to the murderous rise of Nazism and the coming of the Second World War. He broke dramatically with his former colleagues in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a group of pacifist clergy which he had helped lead, and helped form the Union for Democratic Action, an organization committed to the moral necessity of an American intervention on the side of the Allies.

His political activities did not obstruct the flow of creative work from his pen. During his unusually long and productive career, Niebuhr wrote dozens of books, articles, reviews, sermons, speeches, pamphlets, and other pieces. Niebuhr was not merely a theologian of great distinction, but a public intellectual of the first order, who addressed himself to the full range of public concerns. He had a mind of enormous scope and ambition, and there is hardly an issue of importance—political, social, economic, cultural, or spiritual—that he did not discuss in his many works.

Two themes were particularly prominent in Niebuhr's thought, and they are both evident in *The Children of Light*. First was the problem of progress: the human tendency to over- or underestimate our ability to control the conditions of our existence. Second, and relatedly, Niebuhr came to see the Christian doctrine of original sin as foundational to political thought. His suspicion of progress developed over time, as he observed current events and trends in the American church. In his youth, Niebuhr was a devotee of the Social Gospel, the movement within liberal Protestantism that located the gospel's meaning in its promise as a blueprint for progressive social reform, rather than in its assertions about the nature of supernatural reality. Adherents to the Social Gospel were modernists who often dismissed the authority of the Bible and the historical creeds. They insisted that the heart of the Christian gospel could be preserved by being "socialized," i.e., translated into the language of scientific social reform. As Walter Rauschenbusch, perhaps the leading figure in the Social Gospel movement, put it, "We have the possibility of so directing religious energy by scientific knowledge that a comprehensive and

continuous reconstruction of social life in the name of God is within the bounds of human possibility." The kingdom of God was not reserved for the next life; it could be created in the here and now by social scientists and ministers working hand in hand.

In the wake of the calamitous First World War and the economic chaos of the Great Depression, Niebuhr came to see this kind of talk as cruelly implausible. He found the progressive optimism undergirding the Social Gospel to be utterly naive about the intractability of human nature, and therefore inadequate to the task of explaining the nature of power relations in the real world. Sin, he concluded, was not merely a byproduct of bad but correctible social institutions. It was something much deeper than that, something inherent in the human condition, something social institutions were powerless to reform. In what was perhaps his single most influential book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932 in the depths of the Depression, Niebuhr turned the Social Gospel's emphasis on its head, arguing that there was an inescapable disjuncture between the morality governing the lives of individuals and the morality of groups, and that the latter was generally inferior to the former. Individuals could transcend their self-interest only rarely, but groups of individuals, especially groups such as nation-states, never could. In short, groups generally made individuals morally worse, rather than better, for the work of collectives was inevitably governed by a brutal logic of self-interest.

Christian Realism and Democracy

In *The Children of Light*, Niebuhr dismissed as mere "sentimentality" the progressive hope that the wages of individual sin could be overcome through intelligent social reform, and that America could be transformed in time into a loving fellowship of like-minded comrades. Instead, the pursuit of good ends in the arena of national and international politics had to take full and realistic account of the unloveliness of human nature, and the unlovely nature of power. Niebuhr explained that the "children of light"—progressive Christians and others who assumed that the purity of their

motives would make them effective in doing good—were blind to the ways of the world, and to their own bent toward self-interested behavior. It was precisely their lack of self-criticism, and their lack of insight into their own wickedness, that made them very nearly as dangerous as the cold-blooded children of darkness, and far more ineffectual. They failed to understand that anyone who truly wanted positive social change in the world had to be willing to understand the nature of power on its own terms, and get his hands soiled in power's use. Such a person needed to face the hard and unfortunate fact that all existing social relations were held together by coercion, and only counter-coercion could effect change.

This desire to act in an effective way in the political arena, therefore, required one to know how the children of darkness operated, and turn their dark methods to good use. Such action was morally perilous, and necessarily exposed one to profound moral risk, since the exercise of the serpent's wisdom might lead one into the serpent's wickedness. Recall the "One Ring" of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, an instrument of enormous worldly power which had an irresistibly corrupting effect on the soul of any human who wore it. But equally risky was the decision of a child of light to refrain from acting, withholding active assistance in the battle against evil in order to remain pure. For such aloofness might only trade the guilt of commission for the guilt of omission. Either way, purity was not an option. Such a position puts Niebuhr at odds, both then and now, with theologians such as John Howard Yoder or Stanley Hauerwas who insist that the politics of Christ must renounce violence and, if necessary, render one willing to die to the world in just the way that Christ did, reliant on his power rather than the corrupting might and cunning of this world. Niebuhr also comes under assault from a different direction: advocates of "just war" theory find in his thought a moral incoherence, manifested in an inability to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable uses of force. Niebuhr's ideas remain at the center of our theological reflection about politics—and remain highly controversial.

But one thing is clear: Niebuhr's realism did not translate into amorality or fatalism. His sweeping rejection of the Social Gospel and reaffirmation of the doctrine of original sin did not mean that he gave up on

the possibility of social reform. On the contrary. He insisted that Christians were *obliged* to work actively for progressive social causes and for the realization of Christian social ideals of justice and righteousness. But in doing so they had to abandon their illusions, not least in the way they thought about themselves. Notwithstanding the more flattering preferences of liberal theologians, the doctrine of original sin was profoundly and essentially *true*, and its probative value was confirmed empirically every day. Man is a sinner in his deepest nature. But man is not *merely* a sinner, but also a splendidly endowed creature formed in God's image, still capable of acts of wisdom, generosity, and truth, and still able to advance the cause of social improvement. In insisting upon such a complex formulation, Niebuhr was correcting the Social Gospel's erroneous attempt to collapse or resolve the tension at the heart of the Christian vision of things.

Niebuhr understood the doctrine of original sin—or more precisely, the Christian understanding of human nature, with its dualities and tensions—as central to the success of American democracy. Acceptance of that doctrine is, paradoxically, the best guarantor of the possibility of the improvement of the human race, since it offers us a truthful and realistic view of the crooked timber of humanity. In a rich and beautiful sentence from *The Children of Light*, he states, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." Democracy, rightly understood, empowers us to do good while constraining us from doing evil. Lincoln's celebrated principle of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" points toward this very insight, toward the ways that "the people" can and do regulate themselves in a healthy democracy. The American constitutional system, with its checks and balances and separation of powers, contains safeguards against excessive concentration of authority, and embodies the self-regulatory principle—that combination of empowerment and restraining force—better than any other system yet devised.

Such realism about human nature can help us correctly calibrate our political expectations. First, it should make us grateful for what peace and orderliness and prosperity we have, since none of these things is the

natural condition of man. Second, we should recognize that the art of politics is almost always a matter of achieving proximate, imperfect, and provisional goods at best, and confining our bad outcomes to lesser evils at worst. As the authors of this *Reading's* Preface explain, the sweeping solutions for which we yearn are not to be had in this world, since no sweeping solution is possible when the crooked entity called "man" is behind its design and tasked with its execution. And third, we should recognize that when we hope for leaders who will be transformative knights on chargers, men and women whose greatness and godliness will be evident in all they say and do, we make the best the enemy of the good.

In the following text, Niebuhr references the biblical paradox of "wise as serpents, harmless as doves," and it captures the leader's task exactly. Skilled political engagement and statesmanship are hard to learn and hard to measure. The true leader is someone *sui generis*; different from a towering intellect who is renowned for systematic thoroughness, a master political tactician who can craft effective majorities and move multitudes, or a great moral visionary who can mobilize the masses toward large reforms—although an effective leader will probably have some features of all three. He is not likely to have the arrogant confidence of the "child of light" Niebuhr critiques. Instead, he may be outwardly unprepossessing. This leader balances conviction and opportunity at every turn, looks twenty steps ahead without losing sight of the snares that lie close by, and cleaves to great goals while remaining prepared to revise them in light of the unknown. As such, he always runs the risk of seeming unprincipled to some, and unrealistic to others: unprincipled because politics is the art of the possible, and great and noble things are not made possible simply by being stated loudly and emphatically; unrealistic because "the possible" is not static, and may well be changed and expanded by the bold actions of wise leaders.

Progress is difficult. One may never see it come about solely because of one's own efforts, just as the sower of seeds knows that others will bring in the harvest. But we cannot presume that it is impossible. Still, we will be able to reckon progress rightly, and argue in good faith that

it is possible, only when we have first accepted the profound limitations within which we must operate.

Hope versus Optimism

We should not expect that we will see the outcomes for which we yearn, only that we will be given the privilege of living faithfully in the hope of them. That is why Niebuhr always insisted that hope, as one of the Christian virtues, is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism tells us that it is always darkest before the dawn; but that is not always so. Sometimes the darkness settles in to stay. Sometimes it seems impenetrable. It is not ours to know how the restoration of light will happen, but rather to contribute what we can toward that objective, and learn in the meantime how to draw our sustenance from a power beyond the reach of the darkness. To that end, Niebuhr offered, in his later book called *The Irony of American History*, a kind of catechism of theological virtue:

> 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 are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

These words offer a glimpse of Niebuhr's devotional side—his life as a pastor and a man of prayerful reflection. So too do his prayers, which were collected and published after his death by his wife Ursula. We have included three of them in this volume, to show how his insights into the crooked nature of our political and social lives were incorporated in the acts of intercession and worship. I hope all readers will not only savor them but come away with insight into how they might incorporate the full range of worldly concerns into their own devotions.

The prayers are beautiful and elegant and instructive, as the best prayers always are. But they also contain strikingly original phrases. Let me draw your attention in conclusion to one of them: "We pray for wicked and cruel men, whose arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and brought forth its final fruit." What a powerful and surprising sentence. This prayer first catches us up in righteous indignation toward evildoers, and then suddenly, without warning, whirls us around to stare into the mirror and train that same intensity back upon ourselves. It calls on us to pray for those whom we deem wicked and cruel, and not only for God's help in defeating them. We might want to consider this call the next time we are inclined to dismiss the ideas or actions of others with whom we disagree in our political and social life, and pause to remember God's grace toward our own faulty endeavors. Such reflexivity is not only the locus of Reinhold Niebuhr's thought; it is the heart of the Christian faith.

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THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

Democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history. The excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated are a source of peril to democratic society; for contemporary experience is refuting this optimism and there is danger that it will seem to refute the democratic ideal as well.

A free society requires some confidence in the ability of men to reach tentative and tolerable adjustments between their competing interests and to arrive at some common notions of justice which transcend all partial interests. A consistent pessimism in regard to man's rational capacity for justice invariably leads to absolutistic political theories; for they prompt the conviction that only preponderant power can coerce the various vitalities of a community into a working harmony. But a too consistent optimism in regard to man's ability and inclination to grant justice to his fellows obscures the perils of chaos which perennially confront every society, including a free society. In one sense a democratic society is particularly exposed to the dangers of confusion. If these perils are not

appreciated they may overtake a free society and invite the alternative evil of tyranny.

But modern democracy requires a more realistic philosophical and religious basis, not only in order to anticipate and understand the perils to which it is exposed; but also to give it a more persuasive justification. Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary. In all nondemocratic political theories the state or the ruler is invested with uncontrolled power for the sake of achieving order and unity in the community. But the pessimism which prompts and justifies this policy is not consistent; for it is not applied, as it should be, to the ruler. If men are inclined to deal unjustly with their fellows, the possession of power aggravates this inclination. That is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice.

The democratic techniques of a free society place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious. The perils of uncontrolled power are perennial reminders of the virtues of a democratic society; particularly if a society should become inclined to impatience with the dangers of freedom and should be tempted to choose the advantages of coerced unity at the price of freedom.

The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from gauging the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to justice and oppression. When this optimism is not qualified to accord with the real and complex facts of human nature and history, there is always a danger that sentimentality will give way to despair and that a too consistent optimism will alternate with a too consistent pessimism.

The Complex Roots and Resources of the Democratic Ideal

Democracy, as every other historic ideal and institution, contains both ephemeral and more permanently valid elements. Democracy is on the one hand the characteristic fruit of a bourgeois civilization; on the other hand it is a perennially valuable form of social organization in which freedom and order are made to support, and not to contradict, each other.

Democracy is a "bourgeois ideology" in so far as it expresses the typical viewpoints of the middle classes who have risen to power in European civilization in the past three or four centuries. Most of the democratic ideals, as we know them, were weapons of the commercial classes who engaged in stubborn, and ultimately victorious, conflict with the ecclesiastical and aristocratic rulers of the feudal-medieval world. The ideal of equality, unknown in the democratic life of the Greek city states and derived partly from Christian and partly from Stoic sources, gave the bourgeois classes a sense of self-respect in overcoming the aristocratic pretension and condescension of the feudal overlords of medieval society. The middle classes defeated the combination of economic and political power of mercantilism by stressing economic liberty; and, through the principles of political liberty, they added the political power of suffrage to their growing economic power. The implicit assumptions, as well as the explicit ideals, of democratic civilization were also largely the fruit of middle-class existence. The social and historical optimism of democratic life, for instance, represents the typical illusion of an advancing class which mistook its own progress for the progress of the world.

Since bourgeois civilization, which came to birth in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and reached its zenith in the nineteenth century, is now obviously in grave peril, if not actually in rigor mortis in the twentieth century, it must be obvious that democracy, in so far as it is a middle-class ideology, also faces its doom.

This fate of democracy might be viewed with equanimity, but for the fact that it has a deeper dimension and broader validity than its middle-class character. Ideally democracy is a permanently valid form of social and political organization which does justice to two dimensions

of human existence: to man's spiritual stature and his social character; to the uniqueness and variety of life, as well as to the common necessities of all men. Bourgeois democracy frequently exalted the individual at the expense of the community; but its emphasis upon liberty contained a valid element, which transcended its excessive individualism. The community requires liberty as much as does the individual; and the individual requires community more than bourgeois thought comprehended. Democracy can therefore not be equated with freedom. An ideal democratic order seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the framework of order.

Man requires freedom in his social organization because he is "essentially" free, which is to say, that he has the capacity for indeterminate transcendence over the processes and limitations of nature. This freedom enables him to make history and to elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent. But he also requires community because he is by nature social. He cannot fulfill his life within himself but only in responsible and mutual relations with his fellows.

Bourgeois democrats are inclined to believe that freedom is primarily a necessity for the individual, and that community and social order are necessary only because there are many individuals in a small world, so that minimal restrictions are required to prevent confusion. Actually the community requires freedom as much as the individual; and the individual requires order as much as does the community.

Both the individual and the community require freedom so that neither communal nor historical restraints may prematurely arrest the potencies which inhere in man's essential freedom and which express themselves collectively as well as individually. It is true that individuals are usually the initiators of new insights and the proponents of novel methods. Yet there are collective forces at work in society which are not the conscious contrivance of individuals. In any event, society is as much the beneficiary of freedom as the individual. In a free society new forces may enter into competition with the old and gradually establish themselves. In a traditional or tyrannical form of social organization new

forces are either suppressed, or they establish themselves at the price of social convulsion and upheaval.

The order of a community is, on the other hand, a boon to the individual as well as to the community. The individual cannot be a true self in isolation. Nor can he live within the confines of the community which "nature" establishes in the minimal cohesion of family and herd. His freedom transcends these limits of nature, and therefore makes larger and larger social units both possible and necessary. It is precisely because of the essential freedom of man that he requires a contrived order in his community.

The democratic ideal is thus more valid than the libertarian and individualistic version of it which bourgeois civilization elaborated. Since the bourgeois version has been discredited by the events of contemporary history and since, in any event, bourgeois civilization is in process of disintegration, it becomes important to distinguish and save what is permanently valid from what is ephemeral in the democratic order.

If democracy is to survive it must find a more adequate cultural basis than the philosophy which has informed the building of the bourgeois world. The inadequacy of the presuppositions upon which the democratic experiment rests does not consist merely in the excessive individualism and libertarianism of the bourgeois world view; though it must be noted that this excessive individualism prompted a civil war in the whole Western world in which the rising proletarian classes pitted an excessive collectivism against the false individualism of middle-class life. This civil conflict contributed to the weakness of democratic civilization when faced with the threat of barbarism. Neither the individualism nor the collectivism did justice to all the requirements of man's social life, and the conflict between half-truth and half-truth divided the civilized world in such a way that the barbarians were able to claim first one side and then the other in this civil conflict as their provisional allies.[1]

1 The success of Nazi diplomacy and propaganda in claiming the poor in democratic civilization as their allies against the "plutocrats" in one moment, and in the next seeking to ally the privileged classes in their battle against "communism," is a nice indication of the part which the civil war in democratic civilization played in allowing barbarism to come so near to a triumph over civilization.

But there is a more fundamental error in the social philosophy of democratic civilization than the individualism of bourgeois democracy and the collectivism of Marxism. It is the confidence of both bourgeois and proletarian idealists in the possibility of achieving an easy resolution of the tension and conflict between self-interest and the general interest. Modern bourgeois civilization is not, as Catholic philosophers and medievalists generally assert, a rebellion against universal law, or a defiance of universal standards of justice, or a war against the historic institutions which sought to achieve and preserve some general social and international harmony. Modern secularism is not, as religious idealists usually aver, merely a rationalization of self-interest, either individual or collective. Bourgeois individualism may be excessive and it may destroy the individual's organic relation to the community; but it was not intended to destroy either the national or the international order. On the contrary the social idealism which informs our democratic civilization had a touching faith in the possibility of achieving a simple harmony between self-interest and the general welfare on every level.

The "Children of Light" and the "Children of Darkness"

...[W]e may well designate the moral cynics, who know no law beyond their will and interest, with a scriptural designation of "children of this world" or "children of darkness." Those who believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law could then be termed "the children of light." This is no mere arbitrary device; for evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of mankind, or the total order of the world. The good

is, on the other hand, always the harmony of the whole on various levels. Devotion to a subordinate and premature "whole," such as the nation, may of course become evil, viewed from the perspective of a larger whole, such as the community of mankind. The "children of light" may thus be defined as those who seek to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good.

According to the scripture "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." This observation fits the modern situation. Our democratic civilization has been built, not by children of darkness but by foolish children of light. It has been under attack by the children of darkness, by the moral cynics, who declare that a strong nation need acknowledge no law beyond its strength. It has come close to complete disaster under this attack, not because it accepted the same creed as the cynics; but because it underestimated the power of self-interest, both individual and collective, in modern society. The children of light have not been as wise as the children of darkness.

The children of darkness are evil because they know no law beyond the self. They are wise, though evil, because they understand the power of self-interest. The children of light are virtuous because they have some conception of a higher law than their own will. They are usually foolish because they do not know the power of self-will. They underestimate the peril of anarchy in both the national and the international community. Modern democratic civilization is, in short, sentimental rather than cynical. It has an easy solution for the problem of anarchy and chaos on both the national and international level of community, because of its fatuous and superficial view of man. It does not know that the same man who is ostensibly devoted to the "common good" may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbor.

It must be understood that the children of light are foolish not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness. They underestimate this power among themselves. The democratic world came so close to disaster not merely because it never believed that Nazism possessed the demonic fury which it avowed. Civilization refused to recognize the power of class interest in its own

communities. It also spoke glibly of an international conscience; but the children of darkness meanwhile skillfully set nation against nation. They were thereby enabled to despoil one nation after another, without every civilized nation coming to the defense of each. Moral cynicism had a provisional advantage over moral sentimentality. Its advantage lay not merely in its own lack of moral scruple but also in its shrewd assessment of the power of self-interest, individual and national, among the children of light, despite their moral protestations.

While our modern children of light, the secularized idealists, were particularly foolish and blind, the more "Christian" children of light have been almost equally guilty of this error. Modern liberal Protestantism was probably even more sentimental in its appraisal of the moral realities in our political life than secular idealism, and Catholicism could see nothing but cynical rebellion in the modern secular revolt against Catholic universalism and a Catholic "Christian" civilization. In Catholic thought medieval political universalism is always accepted at face value. Rebellion against medieval culture is therefore invariably regarded as the fruit of moral cynicism. Actually the middle-class revolt against the feudal order was partially prompted by a generous idealism, not unmixed of course with peculiar middle-class interests. The feudal order was not so simply a Christian civilization as Catholic defenders of it aver. It compounded its devotion to a universal order with the special interests of the priestly and aristocratic bearers of effective social power. The rationalization of their unique position in the feudal order may not have been more marked than the subsequent rationalization of bourgeois interests in the liberal world. But it is idle to deny this "ideological taint" in the feudal order and to pretend that rebels against the order were merely rebels against order as such. They were rebels against a particular order which gave an undue advantage to the aristocratic opponents of the middle classes.[2]

2 John of Salisbury expresses a quite perfect rationalization of clerical political authority in his *Policraticus* in the twelfth century. He writes: "Those who preside over the practice of religion should be looked up to and venerated as the soul of the body.... Furthermore since the soul is, as it were, the prince of the body and has a rule over the whole thereof, so those whom our author calls the prefects of religion preside over the entire body." Book V. ch. ii. A modern Catholic historian accepts this justification of clerical rule at its face value as he speaks of Machiavelli's politics as a "total assault upon the principles of men like John of Salisbury, preferring to the goodness of Christ, the stamina of

The blindness of Catholicism to its own ideological taint is typical of the blindness of the children of light.

Our modern civilization, as a middle-class revolt against an aristocratic and clerical order, was irreligious partly because a Catholic civilization had so compounded the eternal sanctities with the contingent and relative justice and injustice of an agrarian-feudal order, that the new and dynamic bourgeois social force was compelled to challenge not only the political-economic arrangements of the order but also the eternal sanctities which hallowed it.

If modern civilization represents a bourgeois revolt against feudalism, modern culture represents the revolt of new thought, informed by modern science, against a culture in which religious authority had fixed premature and too narrow limits for the expansion of science and had sought to restrain the curiosity of the human mind from inquiring into "secondary causes." The culture which venerated science in place of religion, worshiped natural causation in place of God, and which regarded the cool prudence of bourgeois man as morally more normative than Christian love, has proved itself to be less profound than it appeared to be in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But these inadequacies, which must be further examined as typical of the foolishness of modern children of light, do not validate the judgment that these modern rebels were really children of darkness, intent upon defying the truth or destroying universal order.

The modern revolt against the feudal order and the medieval culture was occasioned by the assertion of new vitalities in the social order and the discovery of new dimensions in the cultural enterprise of mankind. It was truly democratic in so far as it challenged the premature and tentative unity of a society and the stabilization of a culture, and in so far as it developed new social and cultural possibilities. The conflict between the middle classes and the aristocrats, between the scientists and the

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Caesar." (Emmet John Hughes, *The Church and the Liberal Society*, p. 33.) John of Salisbury's political principles were undoubtedly more moral than Machiavelli's. But the simple identification of his justification of clericalism with the "goodness of Christ" is a nice illustration of the blindness of the children of light, whether Christian or secular.

priests, was not a conflict between children of darkness and children of light. It was a conflict between pious and less pious children of light, both of whom were unconscious of the corruption of self-interest in all ideal achievements and pretensions of human culture.

The Doctrine of Original Sin

In this conflict the devotees of medieval religion were largely unconscious of the corruption of self-interest in their own position; but it must be admitted that they were not as foolish as their secular successors in their estimate of the force of self-interest in human society. Catholicism did strive for an inner and religious discipline upon inordinate desire; and it had a statesmanlike conception of the necessity of legal and political restraint upon the power of egotism, both individual and collective, in the national and the more universal human community.

Our modern civilization, on the other hand, was ushered in on a wave of boundless social optimism. Modern secularism is divided into many schools. But all the various schools agreed in rejecting the Christian doctrine of original sin. It is not possible to explain the subtleties or to measure the profundity of this doctrine in this connection. But it is necessary to point out that the doctrine makes an important contribution to any adequate social and political theory the lack of which has robbed bourgeois theory of real wisdom; for it emphasizes a fact which every page of human history attests. Through it one may understand that no matter how wide the perspectives which the human mind may reach, how broad the loyalties which the human imagination may conceive, how universal the community which human statecraft may organize, or how pure the aspirations of the saintliest idealists may be, there is no level of

human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love.

This sober and true view of the human situation was neatly rejected by modern culture. That is why it conceived so many fatuous and futile plans for resolving the conflict between the self and the community; and between the national and the world community. Whenever modern idealists are confronted with the divisive and corrosive effects of man's self-love, they look for some immediate cause of this perennial tendency, usually in some specific form of social organization. One school holds that men would be good if only political institutions would not corrupt them; another believes that they would be good if the prior evil of a faulty economic organization could be eliminated. Or another school thinks of this evil as no more than ignorance, and therefore waits for a more perfect educational process to redeem man from his partial and particular loyalties. But no school asks how it is that an essentially good man could have produced corrupting and tyrannical political organizations or exploiting economic organizations, or fanatical and superstitious religious organizations.

The result of this persistent blindness to the obvious and tragic facts of man's social history is that democracy has had to maintain itself precariously against the guile and the malice of the children of darkness, while its statesmen and guides conjured up all sorts of abstract and abortive plans for the creation of perfect national and international communities.

The confidence of modern secular idealism in the possibility of an easy resolution of the tension between individual and community, or between classes, races and nations is derived from a too optimistic view of human nature. This too generous estimate of human virtue is intimately related to an erroneous estimate of the dimensions of the human stature. The conception of human nature which underlies the social and political attitudes of a liberal democratic culture is that of an essentially harmless individual. The survival impulse, which man shares with the animals, is regarded as the normative form of his egoistic drive. If this were a true picture of the human situation man might be, or might become, as harmless as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought assumed.

Unfortunately for the validity of this picture of man, the most significant distinction between the human and the animal world is that the impulses of the former are "spiritualized" in the human world. Human capacities for evil as well as for good are derived from this spiritualization. There is of course always a natural survival impulse at the core of all human ambition. But this survival impulse cannot be neatly disentangled from two forms of its spiritualization. The one form is the desire to fulfill the potentialities of life and not merely to maintain its existence. Man is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others. The will to live is thus transmuted into the will to self-realization; and self-realization involves self-giving in relations to others. When this desire for self-realization is fully explored it becomes apparent that it is subject to the paradox that the highest form of self-realization is the consequence of self-giving, but that it cannot be the intended consequence without being prematurely limited. Thus the will to live is finally transmuted into its opposite in the sense that only in self-giving can the self be fulfilled, for: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39).

On the other hand the will-to-live is also spiritually transmuted into the will-to-power or into the desire for "power and glory." Man, being more than a natural creature, is not interested merely in physical survival but in prestige and social approval. Having the intelligence to anticipate the perils in which he stands in nature and history, he invariably seeks to gain security against these perils by enhancing his power, individually and collectively. Possessing a darkly unconscious sense of his insignificance in the total scheme of things, he seeks to compensate for his insignificance by pretensions of pride. The conflicts between men are thus never simple conflicts between competing survival impulses. They are conflicts in which each man or group seeks to guard its power and prestige against the peril of competing expressions of power and pride. Since the very possession of power and prestige always involves some encroachment upon the prestige and power of others, this conflict is by

its very nature a more stubborn and difficult one than the mere competition between various survival impulses in nature. It remains to be added that this conflict expresses itself even more cruelly in collective than in individual terms. Human behavior being less individualistic than secular liberalism assumed, the struggle between classes, races and other groups in human society is not as easily resolved by the expedient of dissolving the groups as liberal democratic idealists assumed.

Since the survival impulse in nature is transmuted into two different and contradictory spiritualized forms, which we may briefly designate as the will-to-live-truly and the will-to-power, man is at variance with himself. The power of the second impulse places him more fundamentally in conflict with his fellowman than democratic liberalism realizes. The fact he cannot realize himself, except in organic relation with his fellows, makes the community more important than bourgeois individualism understands. The fact that the two impulses, though standing in contradiction to each other, are also mixed and compounded with each other on every level of human life, makes the simple distinctions between good and evil, between selfishness and altruism, with which liberal idealism has tried to estimate moral and political facts, invalid. The fact that the will-to-power inevitably justifies itself in terms of the morally more acceptable will to realize man's true nature means that the egoistic corruption of universal ideals is a much more persistent fact in human conduct than any moralistic creed is inclined to admit.

If we survey any period of history, and not merely the present tragic era of world catastrophe, it becomes quite apparent that human ambitions, lusts and desires, are more inevitably inordinate, that both human creativity and human evil reach greater heights, and that conflicts in the community between varying conceptions of the good and between competing expressions of vitality are of more tragic proportions than was anticipated in the basic philosophy which underlies democratic civilization.

There is a specially ironic element in the effort of the seventeenth century to confine man to the limits of a harmless "nature" or to bring all his actions under the discipline of a cool prudence. For while democratic social philosophy was elaborating the picture of a harmless individual,

moved by no more than a survival impulse, living in a social peace guaranteed by a preestablished harmony of nature, the advancing natural sciences were enabling man to harness the powers of nature, and to give his desires and ambitions a more limitless scope than they previously had. The static inequalities of an agrarian society were transmuted into the dynamic inequalities of an industrial age. The temptation to inordinate expressions of the possessive impulse, created by the new wealth of a technical civilization, stood in curious and ironic contradiction to the picture of essentially moderate and ordinate desires which underlay the social philosophy of the physiocrats and of Adam Smith. Furthermore a technical society developed new and more intensive forms of social cohesion and a greater centralization of economic process in defiance of the individualistic conception of social relations which informed the liberal philosophy.[3]

The demonic fury of fascist politics in which a collective will expresses boundless ambitions and imperial desires and in which the instruments of a technical civilization are used to arm this will with a destructive power, previously unknown in history, represents a melancholy historical refutation of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of a harmless and essentially individual human life. Human desires are expressed more collectively, are less under the discipline of prudent calculation, and are more the masters of, and less limited by, natural forces than the democratic creed had understood.

While the fury of fascist politics represents a particularly vivid refutation of the democratic view of human nature, the developments within the confines of democratic civilization itself offer almost as telling a refutation. The liberal creed is never an explicit instrument of the children of darkness. But it is surprising to what degree the forces of darkness are able to make covert use of the creed. One must therefore, in analyzing the liberal hope of a simple social and political harmony, be equally aware

3 Thus vast collective forms of "free enterprise," embodied in monopolistic and large-scale financial and industrial institutions, still rationalize their desire for freedom from political control in terms of a social philosophy which Adam Smith elaborated for individuals. Smith was highly critical of the budding large-scale enterprise of his day and thought it ought to be restricted to insurance companies and banks.

of the universalistic presuppositions which underlie the hope and of the egoistic corruptions (both individual and collective) which inevitably express themselves in our culture in terms of, and in despite of, the creed. One must understand that it is a creed of children of light; but also that it betrays their blindness to the forces of darkness.

In the social philosophy of Adam Smith there was both a religious guarantee of the preservation of community and a moral demand that the individual consider its claims. The religious guarantee was contained in Smith's secularized version of providence. Smith believed that when a man is guided by self-interest he is also "led by an invisible hand to promote an end which is not his intention."[4] This "invisible hand" is of course the power of a pre-established social harmony, conceived as a harmony of nature, which transmutes conflicts of self-interest into a vast scheme of mutual service.

Despite this determinism Smith does not hesitate to make moral demands upon men to sacrifice their interests to the wider interest. The universalistic presupposition which underlies Smith's thought is clearly indicated for instance in such an observation as this:

> The wise and virtuous man is at all times willing that his own private interests should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order of society—that the interests of this order of society be sacrificed to the greater interest of the state. He should therefore be equally willing that all those inferior interests should be sacrificed to the greater interests of the universe, to the interests of that great society of all sensible and intelligent beings of which God himself is the immediate administrator and director.[5]

It must be noted that in Smith's conception the "wider interest" does not stop at the boundary of the national state. His was a real universalism in intent. *Laissez-faire* was intended to establish a world community as well as a natural harmony of interests within each nation. Smith clearly

4 *Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, ch. 7.
5 *Ibid.*, Book V, ch. 1, part 3.

belongs to the children of light. But the children of darkness were able to make good use of his creed. A dogma which was intended to guarantee the economic freedom of the individual became the "ideology" of vast corporate structures of a later period of capitalism, used by them, and still used, to prevent a proper political control of their power. His vision of international harmony was transmuted into the sorry realities of an international capitalism which recognized neither moral scruples nor political restraints in expanding its power over the world. His vision of a democratic harmony of society, founded upon the free play of economic forces, was refuted by the tragic realities of the class conflicts in Western society. Individual and collective egotism usually employed the political philosophy of this creed, but always defied the moral idealism which informed it.

The political theory of liberalism, as distinct from the economic theory, based its confidence in the identity of particular and universal interests, not so much upon the natural limits of egotism as upon either the capacity of reason to transmute egotism into a concern for the general welfare, or upon the ability of government to overcome the potential conflict of wills in society. But even when this confidence lies in reason or in government, the actual character of the egotism which must be restrained is frequently measured in the dimension of the natural impulse of survival only. Thus John Locke, who thinks government necessary in order to overcome the "inconvenience of the state of nature," sees self-interest in conflict with the general interest only on the low level where "self-preservation" stands in contrast to the interests of others. He therefore can express the sense of obligation to others in terms which assume no final conflict between egotism and the wider interest: "Everyone," he writes, "as he is bound to preserve himself and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not into competition, ought as much as he can preserve the rest of mankind."[6] This is obviously no creed of a moral cynic; but neither is it a profound expression of the sense of universal obligation. For most of the gigantic conflicts of will

6 John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, Book II, ch. 19, par. 221.

in human history, whether between individuals or groups, take place on a level, where "self-preservation" is not immediately but only indirectly involved. They are conflicts of rival lusts and ambitions.

The general confidence of an identity between self-interest and the commonweal, which underlies liberal democratic political theory, is succinctly expressed in Thomas Paine's simple creed: "Public good is not a term opposed to the good of the individual; on the contrary it is the good of every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of every one; for as the public body is every individual collected, so the public good is the collected good of those individuals."[7]

While there is a sense in which this identity between a particular and the general interest is ultimately true, it is never absolutely true in an immediate situation; and such identity as could be validly claimed in an immediate situation is not usually recognized by the proponents of particular interest.[8] Human intelligence is never as pure an instrument of the universal perspective as the liberal democratic theory assumes, though neither is it as purely the instrument of the ego, as is assumed by the anti-democratic theory, derived from the pessimism of such men as Thomas Hobbes and Martin Luther.[9]

The most naive form of the democratic faith in an identity between the individual and the general interest is developed by the utilitarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their theory manages to extract a covertly expressed sense of obligation toward the "greatest good of the

7 *Dissertations on Government, The Affairs of the Bank, and Paper-Money* (1786).

8 The peril of inflation which faces nations in war-time is a case in point. Each group seeks to secure a larger income, and if all groups succeeded, the gap between increased income and limited consumer goods available to satisfy consumer demand would be widened to the point at which all groups would suffer from higher prices. But this does not deter shortsighted groups from seeking special advantages which threaten the commonweal. Nor would such special advantage threaten the welfare of the whole, if it could be confined to a single group which desires the advantage. The problem is further complicated by the fact that an inflationary peril never develops in a "just" social situation. Some groups therefore have a moral right to demand that their share of the common social fund be increased before the total situation is "frozen." But who is to determine just how much "injustice" can be redressed by a better distribution of the common fund in war-time, before the procedure threatens the whole community?

9 Editor's note: Both Hobbes and Luther held pessimistic views about the nature of man. Their understanding of the human condition informed anti-democratic theory, though they themselves were not necessarily opposed to democracy.

greatest number" from a hedonistic analysis of morals which really lacks all logical presuppositions for any idea of obligation, and which cannot logically rise above an egoistic view of life. This utilitarianism therefore expresses the stupidity of the children of light in its most vivid form. Traditional moralists may point to any hedonistic doctrine as the creed of the children of darkness, because it has no real escape from egotism. But since it thinks it has, it illustrates the stupidity of the children of light, rather than the malice of the children of darkness. It must be observed of course that the children of darkness are well able to make use of such a creed. Utilitarianism's conception of the wise egotist, who in his prudence manages to serve interests wider than his own, supported exactly the same kind of political philosophy as Adam Smith's conception of the harmless egotist, who did not even have to be wise, since the providential laws of nature held his egotism in cheek. So Jeremy Bentham's influence was added to that of Adam Smith in support of a *laissez-faire* political philosophy; and this philosophy encouraged an unrestrained expression of human greed at the precise moment in history when an advancing industrialism required more, rather than less, moral and political restraint upon economic forces.

It must be added that, whenever the democratic idealists were challenged to explain the contrast between the actual behavior of men and their conception of it, they had recourse to the evolutionary hope; and declared with William Godwin, that human history is moving toward a form of rationality which will finally achieve a perfect identity of self-interest and the public good.[10]

Perhaps the most remarkable proof of the power of this optimistic creed, which underlies democratic thought, is that Marxism, which is ostensibly a revolt against it, manages to express the same optimism in another form. While liberal democrats dreamed of a simple social harmony, to be achieved by a cool prudence and a calculating egotism, the actual facts of social history revealed that the static class struggle of agrarian societies had been fanned into the flames of a dynamic struggle.

10 William Godwin, *Political Justice*, Book VIII, ch. ix.

Marxism was the social creed and the social cry of those classes who knew by their miseries that the creed of the liberal optimists was a snare and a delusion. Marxism insisted that the increasingly overt social conflict in democratic society would have to become even more overt, and would finally be fought to a bitter conclusion.

But Marxism was also convinced that after the triumph of the lower classes of society, a new society would emerge in which exactly that kind of harmony between all social forces would be established, which Adam Smith had regarded as a possibility for any kind of society. The similarities between classical *laissez-faire* theory and the vision of an anarchistic millennium in Marxism are significant, whatever may be the superficial differences. Thus the provisionally cynical Lenin, who can trace all the complexities of social conflict in contemporary society with penetrating shrewdness, can also express the utopian hope that the revolution will usher in a period of history which will culminate in the Marxist millennium of anarchism. "All need for force will vanish," declared Lenin, "since people will grow accustomed to observing the elementary conditions of social existence without force and without subjection."[11]

...[This] error is very similar to [the error of the universalists] whether naturalistic or idealistic, positivist or romantic. It is the error of a too great reliance upon the human capacity for transcendence over self-interest. There is indeed such a capacity. If there were not, any form of social harmony among men would be impossible; and certainly a democratic version of such harmony would be quite unthinkable. But the same man who displays this capacity also reveals varying degrees of the power of self-interest and of the subservience of the mind to these interests.

11 Lenin, *Toward the Seizure of Power,* Vol. II, p. 214.

Sometimes this egotism stands in frank contradiction to the professed ideal or sense of obligation to higher and wider values; and sometimes it uses the ideal as its instrument.

It is this fact which a few pessimists in our modern culture have realized, only to draw undemocratic and sometimes completely cynical conclusions from it. The democratic idealists of practically all schools of thought have managed to remain remarkably oblivious to the obvious facts. Democratic theory therefore has not squared with the facts of history. This grave defect in democratic theory was comparatively innocuous in the heyday of the bourgeois period, when the youth and the power of democratic civilization surmounted all errors of judgment and confusions of mind. But in this latter day, when it has become important to save what is valuable in democratic life from the destruction of what is false in bourgeois civilization, it has also become necessary to distinguish what is false in democratic theory from what is true in democratic life.

The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community.

PRAYERS

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, guide, we beseech you, the nations of the world into the ways of justice and truth and establish among them the peace which is the fruit of righteousness. Temper the pride of victors by the knowledge that your judgment is meant for victors and vanquished. Transfigure the despair of the vanquished into hope, and let not the pride of the victors obscure the mercy of the judge before whom they will be judged. Bind us together, victors and vanquished, uneasy partners and former enemies, into a new community and thus make the wrath of man to praise you.

We pray to you this day mindful of the sorry confusion of our world. Look with mercy upon this generation of your children so steeped in misery of their own contriving, so far strayed from your ways and so blinded by passions. We pray for the victims of tyranny, that they may resist oppression with courage and may preserve their integrity by a hope which defies the terror of the moment. We pray for wicked and cruel men, whose arrogance reveals to us what the sin of our own hearts is like when it has conceived and

brought forth its final fruit. O God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, bring down the mighty from their seats.

We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue, or rest content to have our ease at the price of other men's sorrow and tribulation.

We pray for all who have some vision of your will, despite the confusions and betrayals of human sin, that they may humbly and resolutely plan for and fashion the foundations of a just peace between men, even while they seek to preserve what is fair and just among us against the threat of malignant power. Grant us grace to see what we can do, but also to know what are the limits of our powers, so that courage may feed on trust in you, who are able to rule and overrule the angry passions of men and make the wrath of men to praise you.

O God, the sovereign of nations and the judge of men, look with compassion upon this sad world so full of misery and sorrow. Enlighten our eyes that we may see the justice of your judgments. Increase our faith that we may discern the greatness of your mercy. Save us from the sorrow of the world which works death and despair.

Fill us with the godly sorrow which works repentance, and the desire to do your will. Teach us how we may build a common life in which the nations of the world may find peace and justice. Show us what we ought to do. Show us also what are the limits of our powers and what we cannot do. So may our purpose to do your will be supported by our faith, for you are able to overrule our will and make the wrath of man to praise you. Recall us to our dignity as co-workers together with you. Remind us of our weakness that we may look to you who works in us both to will and to do your good pleasure and supplies what is needed beyond our powers.

Group Discussion Guide

Discussion Questions

1 Niebuhr believed the doctrine of original sin, or human depravity, had been brushed aside by the Social Gospel and modernism. How did his theological response to the Social Gospel influence his political philosophy and his views on social responsibility? Can you imagine other ways, different from Niebuhr's, that the doctrine of original sin might be applied to politics?

2 Why was Niebuhr skeptical of "progress"? What kind of progress would he support?

3 According to Niebuhr, how does a failure to recognize our sinful nature threaten the viability of democracy? What evidence of this tendency, if any, do you see in our political culture today?

4 Why, in Niebuhr's view, is democracy the best hope for a political system? In embracing that view, what must good citizens also recognize and presuppose? Is our preference for democracy merely a modern Western prejudice, or does it have deeper grounding?

5 How does Niebuhr describe the rise of the middle classes—the bourgeois—and the concomitant success of democracy? Why does he assert that bourgeois society began to decline in the twentieth century? How does he then distinguish between bourgeois society and democracy? Does he hold hope that democracy can flourish? If so, why?

6 Why does Niebuhr say that communities need freedom as well as individuals? What might that mean in practice? How does his understanding of the role of community support his vision of democracy?

7 Niebuhr says that the children of darkness "know no law beyond their will and interest." But Niebuhr is just as critical of the far more high-minded "children of light." Why? What is the nature of his criticism? Do you think it is fair? Why or why not?

8 Can you describe how the tension between self-interest and the general interest manifests itself in your own life and in your communities?

9 For Niebuhr, what is the difference between hope and optimism? Why does this distinction matter? What grounds does he offer for hope?

10 Are there particular phrases from the prayers that stand out to you as applicable to the political and social challenges we face today? Which prayer would you be most likely to pray?

11 If Niebuhr were here today and released a 60th anniversary edition of *The Children of Light*, are there statements or arguments he might revise? If so, why?

12 Can you think of an example of a time you had to operate using the principles of Christian Realism? How might the concept of Christian Realism help you in your sphere(s) of influence? Are there dangers inherent in the concept? If so, what are they?

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Further Resources

Robert McAfee Brown, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (Yale, 1986)

Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Cornell, 1996)

Charles Lemert, *Why Niebuhr Matters* (Yale, 2011)

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