

# The Niebuhr connection: His history with our magazine

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian whose work Andrew Finstuen [invokes](#) in this issue, had an interesting relationship with the *Christian Century*. He started writing for the magazine in 1922 while he was a pastor in Detroit. Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the magazine from 1908 until 1947, was so impressed with Niebuhr that he brought him to Chicago for a three-day visit in 1925 and invited him to join the staff as an associate editor. Niebuhr declined. But he contributed to the *Century* frequently, writing from Detroit and then from New York after he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary.

With the emergence of fascism in Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1930s, Niebuhr became uncomfortable with the magazine's and Morrison's antiwar stance. Morrison was not a pacifist, but the magazine certainly leaned toward pacifism, as did many of its contributors. Morrison described himself as a "pragmatic noninterventionist." Niebuhr viewed Morrison as an isolationist, a position Niebuhr regarded as irresponsible. The United States, Niebuhr argued, could not and should not refuse to be part of the world. The argument became heated, the rift widened.

Niebuhr dissociated himself from the *Century*, contributing a final article in 1939, and in 1941 he established *Christianity and Crisis* as an alternative "realist" voice. But he resumed writing for the *Century* in 1947 and contributed some 30 articles before his death in 1971.

The summer of the year I graduated from divinity school I took up Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. It was slow going, but I loved it. I read it again 20 years later—and liked it even more. I'm aiming for another rereading next summer.

There isn't much of Niebuhr's work that isn't helpful. Richard Fox has written an excellent biography, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, and Robert McAfee Brown assembled *Selected Essays and Addresses: The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*. Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, wrote a fascinating book, *The Serenity Prayer, Faith and Politics in*

*Times of Peace and War.*

Niebuhr wrote theology for the church and for preachers (of which he was one), always with an eye on the culture, the nation and world. Niebuhr's realism about the human condition and his willingness to talk about sin continues to be important. It's impossible to know exactly what Niebuhr would think about the post-9/11 world, but we do know he would insist that Christians cannot walk away from the issues facing the world, the nation and our cities—messy as those issues are.

The *Century* office features in its entryway a poster-size picture of Reinhold Niebuhr (and one of Martin Luther King Jr.) with a characteristic quotation from an article Niebuhr wrote for the *Century* in 1927: "The experience of Jesus upon the cross is not one of a dreamy pantheist who imagines God in easy and magical control of every process in the universe. It was the experience of a spiritual adventurer who saw life as a struggle between love and chaos but who also discovered the love at the center of things which guarantees the victory in every apparent defeat."