The fall of a Niebuhrian

James Comey's story illustrates Niebuhr’s conviction that historical events tend to refute our illusions.

by K. Healan Gaston

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James Comey. Illustration by DonkeyHotey, some rights reserved.

Last fall, my students were reading Reinhold Niebuhr’s 1952 classic, “The Irony of American History,” when the renowned theologian’s title came alive for them: Soon after FBI Director James Comey announced an investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails, she lost the presidential election to Donald Trump.

As Comey came under the microscope of national attention, we learned that he had written his undergraduate thesis on Niebuhr.

The plot thickened this spring, when cybersleuth Ashley Feinberg discovered that he uses the name “Reinhold Niebuhr” on his private Twitter and Instagram accounts.

Comey’s abrupt dismissal by President Trump this week raises the question anew: What is the significance, if any, of his attachment to the leading political theologian of the 20th century?

Raised in a Catholic family in Yonkers, N.Y., Comey earned his undergraduate degree in chemistry and religious studies from William & Mary in 1982. His senior thesis, which compared the thinking of socialist-turned-liberal Niebuhr with that of archconservative Jerry Falwell on the role of the Christian in politics, was the work of a young man in flux.

Niebuhr, who called himself a “Christian realist,” advanced a chastened view of human nature as sinful and an ironic interpretation of history at the height of American power after World War II. Falwell, who created the Moral Majority in 1979, championed the fervent Christian nationalism of the Reagan years.

How did Comey bring together these strange bedfellows?

He argued that Falwell and Niebuhr shared a conviction that the Christian has a duty and a mandate to participate in politics. By taking this tack, Comey placed himself, the would-be Christian politician, at the center of his inquiry.

Although clearly attracted to Falwell’s new religious right, the young Comey found much to admire in Niebuhr’s more complex view of religion and politics. James Livingston, Comey’s thesis adviser, had studied with Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary in the 1950s.

Comey’s thesis treats Niebuhr’s writings as a kind of wisdom literature for Christian office seekers. “Every aspiring world leader,” he advised, should study “Niebuhr’s classic statement of the human condition.”

Reducing Niebuhr’s corpus to a simple “formula,” Comey declared: “The Christian is to seek justice. Politics holds the power necessary for the establishment of justice. Therefore the Christian must participate in the political process.” According to Comey, Niebuhr believed that “the Christian and politics are made for each other” — indeed, that the Christian is “the perfect political animal.”

This view has long predominated among Niebuhr’s conservative enthusiasts. They read him as urging Christians (or Judeo-Christians) to exert political leadership, despite the moral ambiguities of politics. What they tend to overlook is Niebuhr’s

emphasis on sin and human fallibility.

As the recent documentary by Martin Doblmeier, “An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story,” makes clear, Niebuhr was preoccupied with the complex and often unanticipated effects of power in the world. Given the ubiquitous ethical dilemmas that ensnare all of us, even the best Christian was, for him, imperfectly fit for politics.

In his famed book, “Moral Man and Immoral Society,” Niebuhr argued that the most upright individuals could never rise above the conflicts endemic to politics and society. During World War II, he called democracy the morally dubious, albeit necessary, art of “finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems.”

Did Comey, who became a Methodist and a Sunday school teacher, turn out to be the perfect political animal of his youthful imagining? Not by a long shot. His rise and fall neatly illustrates Niebuhr’s conviction that historical events tend to refute our illusions.

Were Niebuhr alive today, he would surely relish the ironies.

He would connect Trump’s dig at Comey in January (“He’s become more famous than me”) to his current bullying insults (“grandstander” and “showboat”). He would point to Comey’s persistent belief that he could stay above the political fray, and to the way his public moralizing about Hillary Clinton’s emails contributed to his fall.

Niebuhr might even be able to admit an unintended consequence of his own writings — that they enabled a moral man to harbor illusions that, in the end, made him an immoral society’s latest victim.