

Reading *The Irony of American History* 70 years later

What do Reinhold Niebuhr's blind spots tell us about our own?

by [James K. A. Smith](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue



Reinhold Niebuhr holding court in New York, 1949 (Photo by Lilo Kaskell / Holding repository: The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University)

When Reinhold Niebuhr published *The Irony of American History* in 1952, the United States was a very different place. The cataclysm of World War II was still a fresh wound, even as the postwar economy and reproduction rates were booming. Victors in a clash of good and evil, the United States nonetheless emerged from the war with a terrifying moral stain: this was the country that dropped the atomic bomb.

These were the realities most on Niebuhr's mind when he published the book to widespread acclaim. Indeed, the reception of the book is another reminder of the difference between Niebuhr's generation and our own. That the musings of a theologian and minister on matters foreign and domestic could garner widespread public attention is hard to imagine today.

All of this could make *Irony* a curious relic from the past. And yet, 70 years on, reading the book still feels timely. And in ways he couldn't have anticipated, Niebuhr's own blind spots are the reason this book deserves our renewed attention.

Niebuhr paints his analysis with bold, at times broad strokes. Speaking on the epic scale of nations and world history, he avails himself of an ancient Greek taxonomy to diagnose America's midcentury condition. Was the situation *pathetic*, eliciting pity? The United States was hardly some hapless victim of forces beyond its control. Was the situation tragic, then? Was US guilt the price to be paid for achieving some higher good, the dirty hands of one who was willing to be evil for the sake of a greater good? And in that case, should the country be admired as a tragic hero on the global stage? Those only vaguely familiar with Niebuhr's "realism" might have expected this to be his take.

But in fact Niebuhr sees a third scenario. Neither pathetic nor tragic, the United States found itself in an *ironic* situation, he argues. There's something almost laughable about an ironic situation, he admits. There is a comic element to seeing a character or country tied up in knots, caught in a web of incongruities. But what makes a comic situation ironic, he argues, is the fact that the tangled web of contradictions is the product of our own best intentions. Our courage hides our ignorance, say, or our strength shrouds a subtle but profound weakness. As Graham Greene so well displays in *The Quiet American*, beware the well-intentioned naïf. The pretzeled, tortured convolutions of the ironic actor are not because of environmental conditions that befall them but rather the result of their own intentions and actions.

Our courage hides our ignorance. Our strength shrouds a profound weakness.

In a pathetic situation, the character is a victim who deserves our pity; in an ironic situation, the character is a victim of their own actions, for which they bear responsibility. In a tragic situation, the character makes a purposeful resolution to transgress some good to achieve a higher good; in an ironic situation, the character's failure is instead the outcome of some unconscious weakness, for which they are nonetheless responsible. In an ironic situation, there are neither heroes nor victims, only sad, muddled, messy players who have no excuse and are their own worst enemies. The ironic character is not a monster; it's just that their virtues are what got them into this mess.

If you're looking for heroes and villains, proverbial white hats and black hats, you're bound to be disappointed by Niebuhr. He will frustrate both White nationalists and those eager players of what Jonathan Yardley has called "the America Sucks Sweepstakes." No heroes, no monsters, and even many victims are not blameless. This does not sound like a way to gain followers on Twitter. But this is precisely why *The Irony of American History* deserves our attention.

Those of us born much later might be inclined to imagine the 1950s as an era of unbridled optimism. But on Niebuhr's account, it was an age in which American hubris was running aground on the rough shores of history. And that hubris was distinctly progressive in character. The dream of modernity was to manage history, and those who thought they could see its machinations behind the curtain believed they had both the insight and character to navigate us into a promised future. This combined confidence in both our knowledge and our purity turned history into something to manage.

For Niebuhr, this was a decided rejection of an older (Christian) understanding of providence as well as "an equally unequivocal rejection of the Christian idea of the ambiguity of human virtue." Niebuhr is quick to point out the cruelties of communism, but he's equally inclined to interrogate "every illusion of a liberal culture" that "has achieved a special emphasis in the United States." "One has an uneasy feeling," he concludes, "that some of our dreams of managing history might have resulted in similar cruelties if they had flowered into action."

For example, Niebuhr recognizes that, in important ways, "modern commercial civilization" was made possible because of "Christian ideals of personality, history and community." But when those were enmeshed with "typical bourgeois concepts," then we got the crass world of consumption, accumulation, and inequality in which we find ourselves. We settle for a this-worldliness that represents a collapse of the ecstatic longing that should infuse Christian faith:

Everything in the Christian faith which points to ultimate and transcendent possibilities is changed into simple historical achievements. The religious vision of a final realm of perfect love in which life is related to life without the coercion of power is changed into the pretension that a community, governed by prudence, using covert rather than overt forms of power, and attaining a certain harmony of balanced competitive forces has achieved

an ideal social harmony.

Animated by a vision of the beloved community, we end up settling for a social contract. Working from Christian convictions about individual dignity and freedom, we end up making a world where we're free to shop. We make a mess of the world because of what we do with our virtues and strengths. For example, "we have been so deluded by the concept of our innocency," writes Niebuhr, "that we are ill prepared to deal with the temptations of power which now assail us."

What is refreshing about Niebuhr in *Irony*—especially if secondhand caricatures have led you to expect him to be an apologist for American greatness, the proverbial chaplain of the state—is his willingness to both recognize our best intentions and refuse to let us off the hook. Here is a history where Christianity makes a difference in the world, but that difference is profoundly ambiguous, full of both gifts and poison and, sometimes, poisoned gifts.

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What is galling about Niebuhr's *Irony* are his own astounding blind spots, which, 70 years on, are glaring. These are often tucked into his brash use of the first-person plural, his grand claims about what "we" have done or what's true of "us." Somehow, in 1952, Niebuhr can unabashedly talk about "the justice which we have established in our society" even as Jim Crow continues to reign in that same society. Fending off communist criticism, and pointing out the "monstrous evil" of such an ideology, Niebuhr concedes our own "milder forms" of the same pretensions to innocence, but then remarks: "Fortunately they have not resulted in the same evils." Such an evaluation could only be plausible with willful ignorance of the genocidal dispossession of indigenous peoples and the integral role of slavery in our economic history—an evaluation that could only be entertained if one is not haunted by the Middle Passage and the Trail of Tears.

There's a maddening but illuminating passage in *Irony* where Niebuhr is prescient and unseeing at the same time: "We are, in short, more virtuous than our detractors, whether foes or allies, admit, because we know ourselves to be less innocent than our theories assume." But then comes a claim that feels grossly ignorant, as if Niebuhr's brilliance harbors an unwillingness to see: "In our domestic affairs we have thus builded better than we knew because we have not taken the early dreams of our peculiar innocency too seriously."

Even though Niebuhr is a staunch critic of the failures of the United States, including all the ironic ways its best intentions have generated harm, it is the failures he *doesn't* see that stand out when we read him today. Take, for example, this assessment: "Our success in establishing justice and insuring domestic tranquillity has exceeded the characteristic insights of a bourgeois culture." In just a few years, Emmett Till would be brutally lynched in Mississippi, and Rosa Parks would bring to the surface a seething injustice that could no longer remain capped by some brokered "tranquility."

It would be a mistake to conclude that such gaping blind spots are a reason to ignore this book as dated and out of touch. Instead, they only underscore its enduring relevance. I say this not in spite of but because of Niebuhr's own failures and blind spots. *Irony* almost performs the point it argues. Niebuhr's own unconscious weaknesses are a stumbling block. But instead of undermining his argument, recognizing Niebuhr's weaknesses only illustrates how to extend and expand his analysis. We can't dismiss Niebuhr as a monster, for just the reasons he gives us. Similarly, we shouldn't be congratulating ourselves as enlightened heroes.

The book famously ends with laughter. Not just any laughter, but divine laughter—with God laughing at us. In what he calls "the Biblical interpretation of the human situation," the "whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations." History is a divine comedy with an ironic twist—because so often evil is the result of inventive, creative creatures who forget their creaturehood. "Man is an ironic creature," Niebuhr remarks, "because he forgets that he is not simply a creator but also a creature." And so "the One who sits in the heavens laughs" (Ps. 2:4).

But rather than mockery, there is an empathy in that laughter of divine judgment. And therein lies the possibility of a different future.

Irony almost performs its own point. Its weaknesses illustrate its analysis.

A key principle governs Niebuhr's account of the irony of our situation: "Consciousness of an ironic situation tends to dissolve it." The tragic actor can't change the rules he must transgress for some higher good. No awareness can change Antigone's situation. And the pathetic victim can't change the tragedy that befalls them, generating pathos and evoking our pity. But for someone in an ironic

situation, where the problem is generated by their own weaknesses and blind spots and shadow side, becoming aware of such can begin to undo the convoluted “incongruities” of the situation. An epiphany is possible in an ironic situation that could change things if we let it change us.

Niebuhr grants that not everyone responds constructively when such ironies are pointed out. If we dismiss such revelations of our weaknesses and blind spots as merely the vindictive schadenfreude of our foes, the irony only dissolves into anger and despair. Then, Niebuhr concedes, “an ironic smile must turn into bitter laughter or into bitterness without laughter if no covert relation is acknowledged between an unjust indictment and the facts of the case.”

From his perch in 1952, Niebuhr diagnoses a problem that will feel familiar today: “No laughter from heaven could possibly penetrate through the liturgy of moral self-appreciation.” He finds this abounds “in the religion of communism,” but I fear it is alive and well among those of us who take ourselves to be progressives. So confident are we in our own ability to conduct moral appraisal, we resent any analysis that would question our own purity of motive. We become inured to the revelatory possibility of the Creator’s laughter at our situation.

But we can imagine a very different reception of the unveiled ironies of our situation, Niebuhr says.

If, on the other hand, a religious sense of an ultimate judgment upon our individual and collective actions should create an awareness of our own pretensions of wisdom, virtue or power which have helped to fashion the ironic incongruity, the irony would tend to dissolve into the experience of contrition.

In other words, if we’re able to drop our defensiveness and look at ourselves with an eye trained by the practice of confession, then the recognition of irony can dissolve into an occasion for repentance and forgiveness.

“Gotcha” anachronism is easy and self-congratulatory. To point out Niebuhr’s blind spots 70 years on is not particularly enlightened or virtuous. We do so on the backs of decades that gave us a new perspective. More daring would be to return to Niebuhr and absorb the lesson as if it was still relevant to us.

Niebuhr, more than many who have followed, was keenly aware of how ongoing such labor is. “Even the most ‘Christian’ civilization and even the most pious church,” he concludes, “must be reminded that the true God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes, even on the highest level of human aspirations.” After recognizing the irony of our situation, there are always more ironies yet to be unveiled. Only God gets the last laugh, and that laugh is an invitation.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Niebuhr’s blind spots and ours.”