

Niebuhr's *Irony of American History*, Chapter 4
Wesley Advocates 30 October 2016

Happiness, Prosperity, and Virtue

For how many of us has earth been “transformed from a place of misery to an abode of happiness and contentment”? To what do we attribute that transformation or lack thereof? For those without transformation, what hope is there that it will come? Can we ensure it?

Supposing we do so, how did we come to believe that “it is more noble to be concerned with the pains and sorrows which arise from human cruelties and injustices than to seek after physical comfort for oneself”? Do we perceive that to be true of generations coming behind us? Of persons not American?

How and when have we shifted emphasis from other-worldly existence to “emphasis upon the goodness and significance of life in history”? Do you think that true throughout Christianity? Limited to American Christianity? To American Protestantism? Explain.

Note RN's quotation from Priestly on p. 45: “Nature, including both its materials and its laws, will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable; they will prolong their existence in it and grow daily more happy. . . . *Thus whatever the beginning of the world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal beyond that our imaginations can now conceive.*” [Italics mine] Has this been the predominant experience in America since the settlers first arrived from Europe? And what “glorious and paradisiacal” end do we move toward?

What elements of our current political situation, even during this election season, but particularly our response to Middle-Eastern upheavals arises from our feeling “offended by the contumely of allies as well as foes”? Evidence?

Do we continue our faith in the divine Providence which guaranteed both Puritans and Jeffersonians their prosperity? What is the nature of that divine Providence?

On p. 45, note that RN comments on the Puritan view of prosperity as not a “primary proof or fruit of virtue.” Indeed, according to Calvin, God “gives and denies success according to His own good pleasure”—precisely what we learned about Calvin's view of divine election. But the resources, riches in the New World changed the Puritans' notions about prosperity—how?

Do we attribute American prosperity mainly to dour skill, our diligence, our devotion to freedom? Where is divine Providence in this scheme?

What are “God’s uncovenanted mercies”? How do we assure ourselves of them?

See top of p. 50: “The one element. . . . The other element . . . the belief that godliness is profitable to all things. . . . Any grateful acceptance of God’s uncovenanted mercies is easily corrupted from gratitude to self-congratulation.” Can we cite any specific instances of this corruption? How often are we guilty of it? Also, note in the Wigglesworth verse that *crave* rhymes with *have*.

Do we believe our conduct—as Americans, as Christians—is so meritorious as to illustrate God’s special providence? Evidence?

Who can speak to the shift from Puritans who sought prosperity in the service of God to Yankees who sought prosperity for its own sake?

How have the “awe and gratitude” once felt for “unmerited” mercies become dissipated in American life? Is our Thanksgiving now merely lip-service for congratulating God on choosing the American people as His people?

See p. 53: “The Puritans regarded virtue as the basis of prosperity, rather than prosperity as the basis of virtue.” Where are we now?

RN says that communism sees “religion . . . as consolation for weak hearts who have failed to master life’s ‘extraneous forces.’” What are those extraneous forces? In what ways do even we perceive religion as the comfort of the weak? What evidence might we cite to support the assertion that “religion is the opium of the people”?

According to RN and Spengler, has the American cult of prosperity, preoccupied with living standards, resulted in virtue?

What can we answer to the charge that Americans meet ethical and social problems by merely enlarging privileges of life either (a) to achieve an equitable distribution of privileges or (b) to make the lack of equity less noticeable? An example or two?

Where do we find evidence of the vulgarization of culture? How is “television . . . a threat to our culture analogous to the threat of atomic weapons to our civilization”?

Do we seek a solution to social and ethical problems purely in quantitative terms? Examples?

On p. 62, RN discusses the individual: "He cannot find his fulfillment outside of the community, but he also cannot find fulfillment completely within society. In so far as he finds fulfillment within society he must abate his individual ambitions. He must 'die to self' if he would truly live." Do Christians offer a workable response to these charges? What, if any, is the church's role in integrating the individual into community, society, civilization?

RN remarks on the "fragmentary character" of our lives and says that we must move beyond incongruity (and irony) to achieve serenity. How do we do that? In what ways does American culture contribute to this fragmented life? In what ways is it at odds with Christianity? What do we do to achieve serenity in our lives?

***Key quotation from p. 63: **"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."** Let's talk about these points.

Is God laughing at us derisively? How stinging is his judgment? How merciful?