

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, Chapter 8
Wesley Advocates 4 December 2016

The Significance of Irony--Quotations we may consider discussing

“ . . . is an ironic interpretation of current history generally plausible; or does its credibility depend upon a Christian view of history in which the ironic view seems to be particularly grounded?” (152)

“Yet, the Christian faith tends to make the ironic view of human evil in history the normative one. Its conception of redemption from evil carries it beyond the limits of irony, but its interpretation of the nature of evil in human history is consistently ironic.” (155)

“The Biblical interpretation of the human situation is ironic, rather than tragic or pathetic, because of its unique formulation of the problem of human freedom.” (155)

“The evil in human history is regarded as the consequence of man’s wrong use of his unique capacities. The wrong use is always due to some failure to recognize the limits of his capacities of power, wisdom, and virtue.” (156)

“ . . . a purely tragic view of life is not finally viable. It is, at any rate, not the Christian view.” (157)

“There is always the ideal possibility that man will break and transcend the simple harmonies and necessities of nature, and yet not be destructive.” (158)

“Divine jealousy is aroused by man’s refusal to observe the limits of his freedom. There are such limits because man is a creature as well as creator. The limits cannot be sharply defined. Therefore, distinctions between good and evil cannot be made with absolute precision. But it is clear that the great evils of history are caused by human pretensions which are not inherent in the gift of freedom. They are a corruption of that gift.” (158)

“The possible destruction of a technical civilization, of which the ‘skyscraper’ is a neat symbol, may become a modern analogue to the Tower of Babel.” (159)

“The prophets never weary of warning both the powerful nations and Israel, the righteous nation, of the judgment which waits on human pretension.” (159)

"No human eminence can escape the limits of man's mortality (Ezekiel 31)." (159)

"But the pretensions of virtue are as offensive to God as the pretensions of power. One has the uneasy feeling that America as both a powerful nation and as a 'virtuous' one is involved in ironic perils which compound the experiences of Babylon and Israel." (160)

"Christ is crucified by the priests of the purest religion of his day and by the minions of the justest, the Roman Law. The fanaticism of the priests is the fanaticism of all good men, who do not know that they are not as good as they esteem themselves. The complacency of Pilate represents the moral mediocrity of all communities, however just. They cannot distinguish between a criminal and the Saviour because each violates the laws and customs which represent some minimal order, too low for the Saviour and too high for the criminal." (160)

"For as wealth and power lead to pride, so weakness and poverty tend to remind men of the limits of human achievement." (162)

"But in those ironic experiences, in which our very virtues become the occasion for mistrust against us, our history does not seem to fit into the general Christian pattern of irony. According to that pattern, the poor and outcast, despised of their fellows, are finally exalted. We, on the other hand, are condemned by an impoverished world because we are fortunate, powerful, and rich." (162-163)

"But this does not prove that they are morally inferior to the poor in every court of judgment. Even in the final judgment there is no guarantee that poverty will be accompanied by the virtue of humility." (163)

See bottom of 163 for Niebuhr's contrast of Luke's and Matthew's beatitude on the poor.

"The poor are not actually as disinterested and pure as the Marxist apocalypse assumes. . . . Utopia is, in fact, 'the ideology of the poor.'" (164)

"An ironic situation is distinguished from a pathetic one by the fact that a person involved in it bears some responsibility for it. It is distinguished from a tragic one by the fact that the responsibility is not due to a conscious choice, but to an unconscious weakness." (166-167)

"But it is also recognized that man is constantly tempted to overestimate the degree of his freedom and forget that he is also a creature." (168)

“The difficulties in facing this issue are threefold. In the first place, nations (and, for that matter, all communities as distinguished from individuals) do not easily achieve any degree of self-transcendence, for they have only inchoate organs of self-criticism. . . . This tendency is accentuated in our own day by the humorless idealism of our culture with its simple moral distinctions between good and bad nations, the good nations being those which are devoted to ‘liberty.’” (169)

“The second reason for our difficulty in sensing the ironies in which we are involved is our encounter with a foe the fires of whose hostility are fed by an even more humorless pretension.” (170)

“There is the final difficulty that involvement in the actual urgencies of history, even when men and nations are confronted with less vindictiveness than communism generates, makes the detachment, necessary for the detection of irony difficult.” (170)

In RN’s discussion of Lincoln and the Civil War: “Yet his brooding sense of charity was derived from a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning than that of the immediate political conflict.” (171)

“This combination of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment must be regarded as almost a perfect model of the difficult but not impossible task of remaining loyal and responsible toward the moral treasures of a free civilization on the one hand while yet having some religious vantage point over the struggle.” (172)

“Lincoln’s model also rules out our effort to establish the righteousness of our cause by a monotonous reiteration of the virtues of freedom compared with the evils of tyranny.” (173)

“We, on the other hand, as all ‘God-fearing’ men of all ages, are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire.” (173)