Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*
Chapter 2, "The Innocent Nation in an Innocent World"
Wesley Advocates 16 October 2016

Where do we stand, as 21st-century Christians, Methodists, and intellectuals, on the question of original sin? Do we concur with Augustine or not? Do we actually see ourselves as innocent and our nation as innocent? Or do we perceive ourselves as guilty and our nation as guilty, whether of "original sin" or other sin?

On what basis do we, as individuals, as Americans, distinguish justice and injustice? How often have we, as individuals, as Americans, opted to overlook our complicity in injustice? Or simply our refusal to call injustice what it is? How frequently have we stood for and fought for justice when it involved persons not ourselves? Persons not even Americans?

Do we agree with Marx, for instance, that the proletarian class remains innocent because it lacks interests to defend, lacks property? Why or why not? Indeed, do we even perceive a separate proletariat nowadays?

RN quotes Armstrong, who is actually interpreting Bukharin (see bottom of p. 20), "Just as capitalism cannot live without war, so war cannot live with Communism." True? Untrue? Why?

RN also quotes John Adams, "Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws." Where do we see evidence of such belief today? Examples?

Can we think of examples of disinterested power significant in American history? Power unswayed, unaffected by passions, ambitions, avarice, love, resentment, envy, greed?

RN remarks of Communism, "In any event we have to deal with a vast religious-political movement which generates more extravagant forms of political injustice and cruelty out of the pretensions of innocency [*sic*] than we have ever known in human history" (p. 22). What does he mean here—how was Communism a religious-political movement? How did the movement maintain its innocence? How do most Westerners respond to such a claim?

RN says that "a tremendous amount of illusion about human nature expresses itself in American culture" (p. 22). What illusions about human nature continue to dominate our culture?

How do our political institutions seek to safeguard us against the worst instances of human nature?

I dare say that you all will echo John Cotton's remark that "they that have the liberty to speak great things . . . will speak great blasphemies" (p. 23). Is that true for all peoples, all times? Or do we think it just especially at its worst in this election?

Please reflect on the note on page 23 about Calvin and Hobbes (no, not the great cartoon) and the purported attempt of those writing our Constitution "to leave open for transgressors no door which they could possibly shut." What evidence do we see for that? Can we argue from this Constitution a sound belief in original sin amongst the writers?

This past week we talked about exploring our paradoxical dependence on Calvin and Jefferson, on the former's emphasis on virtue and the latter's emphasis on prosperity. RN discusses that paradox at length on pages 24-32. If we complete nothing else, let us review together the ideas in those pages.

Had Americans held strictly to the Jeffersonian maxim that the "best possible government is the least possible government," how would our federal and state and local governments differ today from what we experience? Specifics? What would we gain? What would we lose?

Consider power again: do the American privileged classes—and let's define those specifically—try merely to act as if power is a trivial element in our social life? See p. 33. Do those classes truly seek to neglect the importance of power? And do the less-privileged classes—again, let's define those—appreciate and long for power?

Is America, in its own eyes, still "a symbol of pure innocence and justice"? Evidence?

RN contends that although we sought to maintain "not only . . . the illusion, [but also] . . . the reality of innocency [*sic*] in our foreign relations, we simply disavowed "the responsibilities of power." What do you think? With what consequences?

What does RN mean by a "will to power"?

What does RN mean by this sentence: "For the fact is that every nation is caught in the moral paradox of refusing to go to war unless it can be proved that the national interest is imperiled, and of continuing in the war only by proving that something *much more* [italics mine] than national interest is at stake" (p. 36).

What examples can you think of to illustrate that "all nations, unlike some individuals, lack the capacity to prefer a noble death to a morally ambiguous survival"?

What "varied compounds of ethnic loyalties, cultural traditions, social hopes, envies and fears" enter into the policies of our nation? Which ones lie at the foundation of our political cohesion? Of our political divisions? (See p. 41)