

Fayetteville State University

DigitalCommons@Fayetteville State University

Government and History Faculty Working
Papers

Government and History

Fall 9-6-2021

Pragmatism and Faith: A University Administrator's Reading of Reinhold Niebuhr

Jon Young

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/govt_hist_wp



Part of the [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Pragmatism and Faith: A University Administrator's Reading of Reinhold Niebuhr

Theology and university administration would seem to have little in common. And, yet, while serving as provost (chief academic officer) and chief of staff at Fayetteville State University (FSU) in North Carolina, I developed a growing affinity for the writings of Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971).¹ I found Niebuhr's pragmatism and the vision of Christian faith that informs it especially meaningful as I carried out my divergent responsibilities for supporting the aspirations and passions embodied in a university's core missions of teaching, research, and service while managing budgets, making personnel decisions, and resolving disputes about grades, policies, space allocations, and funding. Featured on the cover of *Time* Magazine's 25th anniversary edition in March 1948, Niebuhr is perhaps best known as the author of the "Serenity Prayer," but his incisive analyses of politics and society have inspired social activists, writers, and presidents including Martin Luther King, Jr., Cornel West, David Brooks, Jimmy Carter, and Barack Obama among scores of others. Though I earned degrees in religion and philosophy, I read little of Niebuhr as a student in the 1970s because by then the "Establishment theologian" of the 1940s and 1950s had largely fallen out of favor.² But the resurgence of interest in Niebuhr's writings in the first decade of this century piqued my intellectual curiosity sufficiently to read the 2008 republication of his 1952 work, *The Irony of American History* (subsequently, *Irony*), fortuitously, just as I became provost.³ The pragmatic warnings I discovered in *Irony* about "either-or" thinking and "ironic reversals" were initially the most relevant features of Niebuhr's thought, but as I explored his vision of Christian faith, again for reasons entirely unrelated to my job, his analyses of human creative freedom, meaning and mystery, and love and justice became rich sources of reflection about my responsibilities. This seemingly unlikely intersection of theology and university administration convinced me of a fundamental tenet of Niebuhr's writings, namely, that Biblical/Christian faith helps us make sense of the ambiguities and conflicts of experience in ways that alternate visions do not.⁴

The challenges of university administration are boringly commonplace compared to the urgency of the issues Niebuhr addressed – the exploitation of auto workers; the abuse and violence that arise from inequities of power and privilege; America's moral irresponsibility, prior to Pearl Harbor, in ignoring the threats of Fascism; the injustices endured by African-Americans; the follies of American exceptionalism, complacency, and overconfidence; the balance of power among nations; the threat of global destruction, and many more. A university administrator's

experience, moreover, seems trivial compared to that of the powerful and important individuals who claim Niebuhr's influence. Yet, for Niebuhr, we, as humans, are driven by our need for meaningful lives, which requires discovering how our often-fragmented experiences fit into larger, more comprehensive pictures, patterns, schemas, or stories. The fact that Niebuhr's writings gave meaning to even the mundane experiences of a university administrator confirms his enduring wisdom.

Pragmatic Warnings

Two warnings that emerge from *Irony* – the risks of either-or thinking and the potential for ironic reversals of good intentions – proved especially significant. The first of these warnings reflects one of the most distinctive features of Niebuhr's thought, namely, his refusal to resolve the dilemmas and ambiguities of experience with neat, either-or categories and alternatives.⁵ Our rational aversion to paradox often serves to eliminate *unnecessary* ambiguity, but it can also lead us to oversimplify problems and their solutions. Writing at the height of the Cold War, Niebuhr warned that America's ascendancy as the world's most powerful defender of democracy poses moral dilemmas which cannot be resolved by either the idealists' confidence in reason and moral suasion or the realists' conviction that the evils of communism justify the use of any weapons. The idealists fail to acknowledge that reason and logic typically serve rather than control the passions and interests that drive nations while the realists ignore the perils of presuming that use of power in the service of good intentions will have unambiguously good outcomes.⁶ The inadequacy of the views of idealists and realists, Niebuhr writes, "... proves that there is no purely moral solutions for the ultimate moral issues of life; but neither is there a viable solution that disregards the moral factors."⁷ The challenge for America is not whether to follow the dictates of morality and reason *or* to rely on power as the sole arbiter in human affairs, but to balance moral considerations and use of power in ways that preserve civilization and avoid catastrophe. Of course, rejecting the too simplistic approaches of idealists and realists offers no foolproof formula for determining when, to what degree, and for what reasons power should be exercised. Decisions seemingly prudent at the moment may have disastrous consequences. Awareness of moral ambiguity does not resolve it, but such awareness may help us avoid the even worse consequences of settling for simple answers to complex problems.

Niebuhr's resistance to either-or thinking became an important model as I responded to competing requests and demands that often emerged as stark either-or choices: accommodating

the demands of one group meant rejecting the requests of others. One of the most challenging of these dilemmas was responding to the demands of legislators and governing board members for universities to operate more like businesses even though so many aspects of a university do not fit easily into business models.⁸ The greatest expense at any university, for example, are the “labor costs” of faculty members, but “return on investment” is difficult to quantify. Use of any single measure – student evaluations; results of pre- and post-test; numbers of students taught, papers published, or service projects completed – will oversimplify the varying responsibilities of faculty members. The faculty role in university governance challenges the top-down decision-making processes that are the sources of many business efficiencies. From a business perspective, students are customers; this recognition may have the beneficial consequence of prompting improvements in university services and support programs, but it misses the fact that a university’s responsibility for students is much greater than any company’s obligations to customers. Universities must guide students in developing the knowledge, skills, and habits essential for personal well-being and productive, socially responsible membership in communities and, perhaps most importantly, evoke in them one of the greatest blessings of being human, namely, a restless curiosity that leads to indeterminate possibilities of continuous discovery and creativity. Universities must transform students’ lives; this impact is lifelong and irreducible to business-customer transactions or the profit-loss columns of an Excel spreadsheet.

Yet, to acknowledge the many ways universities are different from businesses does not require rejecting business principles altogether. To do so is to fall into a trap of either-or thinking: either universities are businesses or they are not; either business principles can/should be applied or they can/should not. I found myself paraphrasing the passage cited above as “There is no purely *business* solution to the challenges the university faces; but there is no viable solution that disregards *business* factors.” Avoiding either-or thinking made it possible to apply business principles without “selling out” the unique features of a university. The devastating impact of the 2008 financial collapse on state tax revenues and thus state agency budgets for multiple, subsequent years forced public universities to admit what every business owner understands very profoundly, namely, that one cannot take revenue for granted. Hence, a university cannot assume that the status-quo of programs, services, and research initiatives are good and effective – which my experience proved was all too common despite the well-known critical tendencies of academicians – but must apply clearly defined measures of success to

determine which activities to maintain, curtail, or eliminate. In a time of diminishing resources, funds must either be reallocated from less to more effective programs or cuts must be meted out equally among all groups. The latter alternative assumes that preserving the status quo is more important than using funds prudently. Business leaders know that their survival and growth depend upon adapting to ever-changing market demands: such adaptations often involve identifying new needs and meeting them effectively. The financial crisis impressed upon universities the importance of imitating this entrepreneurial spirit. Even though “return on investment” may be much more difficult for universities to measure precisely than businesses, this difficulty does not absolve universities from their moral responsibility of ensuring and demonstrating that they yield beneficial consequences for the students, their families, and taxpayers who invest in them.

The second warning I took away from reading Niebuhr is derived from his analysis of “ironic reversals” that occur when “...strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; [and] wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its limits.”⁹ Such an ironic reversal occurred when the Soviet Union, seeking to usher in the economic justice of the supposed “end of history,” committed “noxious forms of tyranny.”¹⁰ Niebuhr’s primary interest was not to reiterate the horrors of communism, however, but to expose American illusions about our own knowledge, virtue, and power that harbored the risk of similar ironic reversals.¹¹ These American illusions include the belief that we, as Americans, are God’s new chosen people, that our prosperity is proof of our virtue, that our superior military power can permit us to “manage history” by imposing our vision of world order on other nations. American “exceptionalism,” Niebuhr warned, is nothing more than our version of the national pride that all groups feel about themselves and our prosperity is consequence of our vast natural resources which have permitted ongoing economic expansion (which he warned will reach its limit and create serious problems of economic justice).¹² Our presumptions about the goodness of our intentions leads to the naïve belief that other nations will trust that our use of power is driven by their interests rather than our own. He summarizes his warnings in a rather humbling image that America could be like Cervantes’ Don Quixote galloping around the world professing ideals that are obviously out of touch with reality.¹³

No idea derived from Niebuhr’s thought “haunted” me more than the risk that colleges and universities could ironically harm the students whose lives they promise to improve. Higher education institutions harm their students when, contrary to their professed good intentions, they

use students to drive their budgets so professors can continue to teach, staff members can continue to be employed, facilities can be maintained, and marketing can be improved to attract more students. Universities also harm their students when instead of trying to contain costs, they pass them on to students in form of increased tuition which, in turn, leads many students to amass debt with its potentially debilitating impact on their financial well-being for years to come. Universities do further harm to their students when they continue to offer degrees that offer little opportunities for professional success and advancement. I am not suggesting that the only purpose of a university degree is to get a high-paying job. Certainly, the benefits of earning a university degree extend far beyond income to physical, social, and intellectual health. But any person who earns a degree *should* enjoy personally fulfilling work *and* an income that permits financial well-being and independence. *These outcomes can be attained with a degree from any academic discipline.* The popular notion that only a few majors can ensure financial security is guided by small-minded measures of outcomes, i.e., starting salaries rather than lifelong earnings. Promoting continuing professional success of students, however, requires faculty members to regularly evaluate and adapt their programs to include experiences and applications within degree programs that will help graduates meet rapidly-changing workforce demands. If the only employment options for graduates are positions that do not require a university degree and offer few opportunities for advancement, then universities are betraying their promises to improve students' lives.

If ironic reversals are a risk for all universities, they are especially so for Fayetteville State University given its status as an Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). FSU was established in the aftermath of the Civil War to provide the education necessary for former slaves to participate meaningfully in a free society. Even as the population of students served has expanded beyond African-Americans to include other individuals – especially low-income students, Hispanics, and Native Americans, soldiers, veterans and older adults resuming study after a hiatus – this commitment to extending the benefits of higher education remains the same. A professed commitment to this mission, however, does not guarantee its attainment. Students served by FSU often do not have the level of college readiness as those admitted to highly selective institutions, which does not mean they lack potential or ability, but points to the necessity of providing effective support resources. Such resources include wholistic and intrusive advisement, effective academic support and tutoring, faculty development resources

that promote teaching methods that support learning by all students, transparent and user-friendly bureaucratic processes (bill payment, financial aid, registration), and rigorous methods for evaluating and improving these resources. Institutions that enroll students known to have such varied needs but fail to address them effectively pervert the social justice mission into social injustice.

I did not need to read theology to recognize that professed goals and intentions could be undermined by ineffective programs and inefficient services. Yet, reading Niebuhr shaped my sense of responsibility as a senior administrator to turn awareness of these risks into actions to prevent their realization; reading Niebuhr deepened my commitment to continuous improvement, the processes that involve ongoing reflection on missions and goals, consistent and systematic evaluation of progress in achieving these goals, and, most importantly, making improvements based on the evaluative results. I devoted considerable time and energy engaging directly with units, faculty, and staff to think with them about mission, goals, evaluation results, and strategies for improvement based on the results.¹⁴ My aim was to “internalize” continuous improvement by encouraging honest self-reflection about what we were trying to accomplish and how we knew if we were doing so and then doing something about what we learned. The ultimate goal was to become better at who we are and what we do.¹⁵

Certainly, I did not have to read Niebuhr to gain these pragmatic insights. In fact, I could very likely have acquired them more quickly by participating in the readily available courses, workshops, and seminars on university leadership. If pragmatism were my only takeaway from reading *Irony*, then I would likely not have read more of Niebuhr’s writings. It was the practical *and* religious significance of this often-quoted passage from *Irony* that prompted my interest in the vision of Christian faith that informs his pragmatism.

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 can do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be 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.¹⁶ This passage is remarkable for its articulation of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) in terms applicable to my role. It reminded me that any projects I initiated would become part of a

larger web of events within a wider community so that I would ultimately have little, if any, control over the longer-term impact of my efforts. Initiating anything, then, is an act of hope and faith. Individual efforts, moreover, are futile apart from cooperation, critical dialogue, and support of a community held together by bonds of mutual affection and regard that reflect our capacity and need for love. I reminded myself perhaps more often than any other passage from Niebuhr that neither “friend nor foe” would perceive my efforts or actions to be as virtuous as I perceived them. So, in the daily give and take of my position I was dependent to some extent on the willingness of others to forgive, or at least at times to give me the benefit of the doubt. This recognition was also a warning not to succumb to a self-righteous indignation that comes when the goodness of one’s own intentions is not immediately accepted by others.

Quite unexpectedly, I found Niebuhr’s more theologically focused works relevant to my administrative responsibilities.

Human Freedom: Creative, Transcendent, Destructive

Creative freedom, for Niebuhr, is the defining attribute of being human.¹⁷ This freedom consists of the capacity to reflect on what is, imagine what could be, and act individually or with others to create new realities. Human creative freedom is the source of indeterminate possibilities of new, unexpected, and potentially good accomplishments that have led to all that constitutes civilization. Yet, this creative freedom is always expressed by particular individuals at specific places and times who are never exempt from the limitations imposed by the natural cycles of birth and death nor the social, political, and cultural circumstances into which they are born. Creative freedom, thus, is always transcendent -- dependent on nature and shaped by history -- but never defined absolutely by these conditions. To be human, then, is to be free and finite at the same time, a dynamic unity of spirit and body, intellect and passion, conscience and desire; what we call “spirit” is the expression of creative freedom transcending the limitations imposed by given conditions, but every ability and attribute that comprise spirit is an articulation of capacities given by our bodies.

For Niebuhr, it is this creative freedom that warrants the Biblical description of humans created in the image of God; the only way to express adequately this remarkable and unique capacity of humans is by suggesting it is a reflection of the creative power of God that transformed the primeval chaos into a good creation. This passage affirms that as humans we are like God as creators, but we are also creatures. This ambiguity of being creators and creatures

who are free and finite at the same time – we know we die -- is the source of the anxiety and insecurity that lead to what Niebuhr suggests is the most fundamental dilemma of being human: whether to deny or ignore our finitude by seeking security in our own creations or accept our creaturely dependence and trust God as the sole and ultimate source of our security. The former temptation -- *to which we all inevitably succumb* -- is expressed in the temptation "... to be like gods" (Adam and Eve) or "build towers into heaven to make a name for ourselves" (the builders of the Tower of Babel). "Original sin," for Niebuhr refers not to some primeval act whose consequences are passed down as biological inheritance, but to the persistent tendency inherent in our nature to misuse our creative freedom by asserting our independence from God and making ourselves the center of life and meaning; it is expressed in excessive pride, egoism, self-interest, and self-love, which if left unchecked lead to abuse, violence, injustice, and evil, or the exact opposite of the Biblical injunctions to love God absolutely (with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength) and to love others as oneself.

Human beings, then, are creatures distinguished by their freedom to create the new, whose freedom is both rooted in and transcendent of nature and history, and whose tendency to use their creative freedom for prideful, selfish, and evil purposes must never be underestimated. These theological reflections about human nature may seem far removed from the mundane tasks of university administration but, in fact, the methods of educators at any level of practice rely on often inarticulate assumptions about the possibilities and limitations and the creative and destructive potential that inhere in being human or, in other words, human nature.¹⁸ Niebuhr's analysis of human nature provided an excellent resource for reflecting upon and understanding my responsibilities.

More than any other institution, universities cultivate creative freedom. Universities have many different responsibilities to their students just as students have widely varying expectations of universities, but underlying all of these responsibilities and expectations is the responsibility for nurturing the capacities to reflect, imagine, act, and create. Reading Niebuhr led me to see a unity of purpose, as implied by the name "uni-versity," that can easily be lost in the vast diversity of disciplines, activities, and competing purposes of any university. As one responsible for supporting the academic disciplines and student learning, I found this vision of creative freedom as the fundamental origin and purpose of a university much more helpful than the usual

distinctions with the values judgments they imply, such as liberal or professional education, the arts or the sciences, or the “hard” or “soft” sciences.

By describing creative freedom as the image of God, Niebuhr imbues this capacity, whose remarkable character can so easily be taken for granted, with an aura of majesty and mystery that was especially meaningful to my responsibilities. As is true of the overall account of Genesis 1, whose writers presume rather than try to prove God’s sovereignty over nature and history, the gift of creative freedom is among the many good things of the created order for which thanksgiving, praise, awe, and wonder are the most appropriate responses. This vision suggests urgent moral responsibilities for those charged with guiding learning. The simplest and yet most important point is that we possess creative freedom as a consequence of being human, not because we are of a specific race, gender, ethnicity, culture, nationality or any other attribute that distinguishes humans from one another. Few university administrators at any institution, I assume, would disagree with this view in the abstract, and yet, the persistently disparate outcomes of higher education in the United States --- wealthy and white individuals are much more likely to complete degrees than their less affluent counterparts, especially those who are African-American, Hispanic, or Native American – suggests that actual practice does not conform to this belief. The most practical consequence of this Niebuhrian vision was to heighten my discontent with a higher education status quo that seems content with outcomes that so evidently value some humans over others.

Niebuhr’s analysis of creative freedom as the defining attribute of being human proved applicable to important aspects of my administrative role, but equally influential was his analyses of unbridled self-interests as an expression of original sin.¹⁹ *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* offers a warning that is especially relevant to the aspirations and ideals that guide universities.

Through it [the doctrine of original sin] one may understand that no matter how wide the perspectives the human mind may reach, how broad the loyalties the human imagination may conceive, how universal the community which human statecraft may organize, or how pure the aspirations of the saintliest idealists may be, there is no level of moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love.”²⁰

The “children of darkness” (or the “children of this world,” from Luke 16:8) are evil because they “...know no law beyond their will and self-interests...” The “children of light,” by contrast,

are virtuous because they “...seek to bring self-interest under the discipline of a more universal law and in harmony with a more universal good.” With their commitments to human betterment; the discovery and transmission of knowledge; the pursuit of truth, justice, and beauty; and, above all else, their affirmation of reason as the final arbiter in the conflicts of self-interest, universities are citadels for the children of light. But if the children of light are virtuous, they are also “foolish not...merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness... but they underestimate this power among themselves.”²¹

Niebuhr’s warning about the power of self-interest even among the children of light of a university was confirmed by the often unyielding, insistent efforts by some faculty members, students, and governing board members to interpret policies and use institutional resources to serve their particular needs, wants, political agendas, or visions of what is good and right. An incident recounted by Langdon Gilkey to illustrate Niebuhr’s vision of original sin perfectly reflects my experience. Gilkey was teaching in Beijing when the Japanese invaded China at the beginning of World War II. Placed under house arrest with all the other teachers at the school, Gilkey was given the job of allocating space as increasing numbers of detainees were brought into the camp. When he discovered that one room had sixteen men and another had fourteen, he tried to transfer one resident to even the number. But the men in the room with the smaller number said they would not accept any other residents and would kick out anyone Gilkey tried to add. When Gilkey protested that it “... was absolutely fair and clearly just, fifteen persons in two rooms each of the same size as the other...” they replied that they “... couldn’t care less.”²²

This illustration resonated especially with me because I was initially shocked by the contentious nature of allocating physical space; individuals and groups requesting space almost never had any regard for the needs of others, only their own. But Gilkey’s concluding remark about this experience really drove home the general point, “So much for Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas!”²³ Gilkey’s reference to the seventeenth century “father of modern philosophy” is telling in that Descartes sought to develop methods of discovering truth based on reason alone; knowledge would be built on clear and distinct ideas. One of the greatest illusions the children of light have inherited from Descartes is confidence in the power of reason to override self-interests. Any university administrator who harbors this Cartesian illusion will be disappointed on a daily basis.

For the most part, this conflict of self-interests remained within the parameters of the normal give-and-take of decision making, but not always. Niebuhr's consistent emphasis on the power of self-interest was especially relevant to my role in ensuring institutional integrity, which consists most fundamentally of making sure practices conform to policies. The children of light are not exempt from the heedless disregard for policies and laws that leads to dishonest, fraudulent, and even criminal actions. While I didn't have to read Niebuhr to know this essential point, his realistic appraisal of human nature certainly confirmed it and heightened my sense of responsibility for preventing it. Senior administrators, above all else, are responsible for establishing and maintaining a culture of transparency, integrity, and truthfulness, one in which "business as usual" includes clarity about ethical expectations and the consequences for failing to meet these expectations. In the absence of such clarity from leaders, individuals will take their cues of appropriate action from what appears to be "acceptable" behavior, which though not explicitly permitted is endorsed implicitly by being tolerated.²⁴

The encounter with unyielding self-interests that any person in a leadership role will experience have driven many I suspect to what I call the "Machiavellian moment," when they bemoan the truth of Machiavelli's description in Chapter 17 of *the Prince* of humans in general as "...ungrateful, fickle, liars,... covetous of gain; as long as you benefit them they are entirely yours." While affirming the power of self-interests, this description misses an essential aspect of Niebuhr's notion of original sin, that it affects me as well as others. [Jesus' injunction not to see the speck in someone else's eye and miss the log in my own eye is relevant here. (Matt 7:5, Luke 6:42)] So, on those nearly daily occasions when I found myself angry and annoyed by raw self-interests in others, I would have a "Niebuhrian moment" when I reminded myself that I am not immune to the same self-interest I so easily discerned in others and that my anger and annoyance were, in fact, often expressions of my own selfishness.²⁵ This Niebuhrian moment serves as important prompt for the humility and charity that I discovered are essential to leadership roles.

Meaning and Mystery

The primary significance of meaning and mystery is theological. Christian faith affirms, Niebuhr writes,

...life has a source of *meaning* beyond the natural and social sequences that can be rationally discerned. This divine source and center must be discerned by faith because it

is enveloped in *mystery*, though being the basis for *meaning*. So discerned, it yields a *frame of meaning* in which human freedom is real and valid and not merely tragic or illusory.²⁶

Meaning is the product of the most basic and distinctively human expression of creative freedom, namely, the effort to “make sense of” experience by figuring out how facts, phenomena, and events fit together in unified, coherent patterns, configurations, pictures, schemas and stories.²⁷ The common question, “What does it mean?” -- whether “it” refers to a gesture, action, statement, phenomenon, event, data set, a specific moment in an individual life, or the life of an individual or nation in their entirety -- requires an answer that fits the puzzle piece(s) of “it” into a larger picture, a configuration of events, words and deeds in which “it” makes sense. To conclude that “it” makes no sense, or is meaningless, is to say that there is no discernible larger pattern, picture, configuration, schema, or story -- in which “it” can be fitted to “make sense.” The human quest for meaning gives rise to philosophies and scientific theories that establish coherences among natural, psychological, social, and historic phenomena in increasingly complex webs of causes, effects, choices, consequences, reasons, motives, and purposes. Our lives are meaningful -- have purpose, value, and direction -- to the extent that we can fit the fragments of intentions, desires, wishes, hopes, actions, and accomplishments of our lives into a larger, comprehensive pattern or story that give them coherence and unity. Niebuhr suggests that meaningful existence is one of the most essential needs of human beings and the despair that arises from the absence of such meaning is unbearable.²⁸

Christian faith affirms that God is the “divine source and center” of meaning but is “enveloped in mystery” because as the source and ground of existence, God is not simply one being among other beings that can be incorporated into the “natural and social sequences that can be rationally discerned.” Reason is limited, *not* because there are phenomena or beings that resist inclusion in its coherences; Niebuhr never doubted the boundless potential of reason to discover the causal sequences that underlie phenomena previously considered “mysteries.” Instead, reason is limited because its descriptions, analyses, classifications, tests, and theories begin and end with the “*irrational* givenness of things.”²⁹ Newton’s theory of gravitational force, for example, is one of the grandest achievements of human ingenuity because it establishes coherences among phenomena as diverse as falling objects and planetary orbits and makes it possible to build bridges and travel to the moon. And yet, the theory starts and finishes with

given realities – i.e., material bodies that *are* and *behave* in predictable ways. This givenness of things is *irrational*, beyond rational intelligibility, because, as the basis for all coherences reason can discover and devise, it cannot be incorporated *fully* into any of them.

Discerning God by faith, however, is more than acknowledging the limits of rational intelligibility; admitting reason's limits does not compel one to seek "a source and center of meaning" beyond rational intelligibility. Faith is born from the conviction that in our highest reaches of self-awareness we encounter the transcendent God who "passes all understanding."³¹ Though enveloped in mystery God is not entirely inscrutable because God has revealed Himself (Herself? Itself?) as creator, moral judge, and redeemer in the history of the ancient Hebrews, the words of the prophets, and most fully in Jesus' deeds, teachings, sacrificial death, and resurrection.³⁰ Niebuhr accepts the Biblical accounts as the definitive and authoritative sources for discerning God's relationship to all of creation, including humans, and God's will for life and history. These Biblical texts are rooted in a faith that assumes, rather than tries to "prove," God's sovereignty over nature and history. The "defense" of Christian faith that Niebuhr offers throughout his writings does *not* proceed from ontological arguments about the nature of being; neither does he suggest that faith involves a leap into irrationality.³² Rather, this faith may be prompted by the recognition that the "frame of meaning" yielded by this faith makes sense of life's ambiguities and paradoxes – i.e., we as humans are finite and free – more completely than alternate visions.

His reference to the "frame of meaning" yielded by Christian faith, introduces one of Niebuhr's most fundamental concepts, which he alternately refers to as "systems" or "schemes" of meaning, or even systems of coherence.³³ Niebuhr suggests that the truths we claim, the facts we know, and the beliefs we profess are always dependent upon a "frame" of meaning, a "window" consisting of beliefs and assumptions about the coherences that define reality, i.e., how things *usually* fit together and how people *normally* behave. These "frames of meaning" encompass presuppositions about what is real and important and good so they help us sort the barrage of sense data, phenomena, and events into coherent, meaningful patterns.³⁴ The taken-for-granted meaningfulness of everyday routines, for example, is dependent upon language whose words and structures embody presuppositions about the coherences that define what is real; our language "frames" reality for us; we do not come to know reality and then apply words to it, but rather we acquire a sense of reality as we learn a language. Most modern people share a

view of the world “framed” by modern science so that few of us take seriously threats posed by vampires, werewolves, and ghosts (despite their ubiquity in popular culture) because these beings do not conform to our generally pre-reflective presuppositions about what is real.³⁵ Each of us inherits frames of meaning embedded in family, group, and national histories; the media, culture, and religion. While these frames of meaning are usually held tacitly and uncritically, we can and do bring them under critical scrutiny; the intellectual and spiritual journeys of our lives (a journey that higher education should inspire) consist in large part of this ongoing re-evaluation of the beliefs and assumptions embedded in our inherited frames of meaning. But this re-evaluation is never “frameless” but always accomplished from the perspective of other (usually more comprehensive) frames of meaning.

The paradox that we as humans are finite and free at the same time, for example, makes most sense within a Christian frame of meaning that envisions humans as both creatures and creators. The beauty, goodness, order and harmonies of nature can be *described* by the causal sequences discoverable by reason, but these sequences are not self-generating or self-sustaining but point to a transcendent power of creation reflected in but not equivalent to its causal sequences, a power whose meaning *and* mystery is expressed most fully in the praise and wonder of the Psalmist’s proclamation, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands,” (Psalms 19:1) Similarly, we can assign meaning to good and evil as consequences of social, political, and economic conflicts, but when Paul writes, “My conscience is clear, but that does not mean that I am innocent. It is the Lord that judges me, (1 Cor 4:4)” he expresses the Christian conviction that all our tentative judgments of good and evil are subject finally to the mystery of God’s infinite goodness. The conflicts of justice and injustice in our collective lives – the struggle to ensure equality of rights, liberties, and opportunities based on respect for the inherent value of each person *despite* our contrary impulse to use, exploit, and commit violence against others for our own selfish purposes – is finally meaningful in light of a faith that never underestimates the evil of which humans are capable but also anticipates the triumph of God’s love in the Kingdom of God.

Niebuhr’s prolific body of analyses about the political and social events of his day reflected his conviction that Christian faith establishes a frame of meaning that yields insights and resolutions to the challenges and conflicts that arise from living together in societies and among other nations. The profound appreciation of human sinfulness embedded in Christian

faith (Niebuhr remains somewhat of an anomaly in Christian theology in emphasizing this sinfulness), is the basis for Niebuhr's penetrating analysis of inequities of power in his first major work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). In this work, he expressed profound skepticism about the hope that reason, better education, and moral suasion would lead to equality of rights for African-Americans. "However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so."³⁶ Recognizing at the same time, that "efforts at violent revolution... will accentuate the animosities and prejudices of their oppressors... and [cause] terrible social catastrophe," Niebuhr pointed to the necessity of non-violent resistance to force change. Such a strategy, he insists, depends upon "religious imagination." Writing further, he states,

There is no problem of political life to which religious imagination can make a larger contribution than this problem of non-violent resistance. The discovery of the elements of common human frailty in the foe... and the appreciation of all human life as possessing transcendent worth, creates attitudes which transcend social conflict and mitigates its cruelties.³⁷

Two decades later, in the context of the Cold War, he expressed similar insights regarding the conflict with the Soviet Union:

There is...even in a conflict with a foe with whom we have little in common the possibility and necessity of living in a dimension of meaning in which the urgencies of the struggle are subordinated to a sense of awe before the vastness of the historical drama in which we are jointly involved; to a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom, and power available to us for the resolution of its perplexities; to a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vainglories; and a sense of gratitude for the divine mercies which are promised to those who humble themselves.³⁸

The awe, modesty, contrition, and gratitude which are the fruits of Christian faith, Niebuhr suggests, are necessary to "...our purpose and duty of preserving our civilization."³⁹

The meaning(s) we derive from Christian faith, Niebuhr insists repeatedly, must be held in tension with awareness of mystery, a relationship best expressed in Paul's statement, "Now we see through a glass darkly."⁴⁰ Faith offers a window of reality, life, and nature, but the window is

foggy. Faith enables us to see, know, and understand, but our vision is always limited, partial and incomplete. The truths of God's self-revelation may be absolute, but our efforts to "make sense of" these truths in confessions, creeds, rituals, songs, institutional structures, theologies, and interpretations and practical applications of scripture respond to needs, passions, and interests that arise from our time place, and circumstances. As finite creatures who see through a glass darkly, we necessarily relativize the absolutes of faith in our affirmation of them. The confidence that there is a meaning and purpose to life and history in the face of seemingly meaningless events does not yield certainty about what the final meaning is; the hope of "one day seeing face to face" looks to God, not its own reason, for such final and complete understanding. Maintaining this tension of meaning and mystery reminds us that however sincere, devoted, or pious we may be, our thoughts are not God's thoughts and even our most noble-intentioned actions are affected by self-interests and always subject to the risks of pride and self-righteousness. "Even the most 'Christian' civilization and most pious church must be reminded," Niebuhr warns, "... that the true God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes, even at the highest level of human aspirations."⁴¹ Indeed, history and the daily news cycle provide numerous examples of people of faith ignoring mystery by presuming a perfect harmony between God's will and their interpretation and application of it in politics and society. Intolerant self-righteousness that casts its opponents as devils is too often the product of "faith." By contrast, mystery inspires a sense of awe, wonder, and humility that recognizes the limits of its own knowledge, virtue, and power and is tolerant of those who may disagree. Niebuhr's use of "the test of tolerance" as an evaluative criterion for theological systems reflects his insistence that mystery limits all the meanings we discern.⁴²

While the primary significance of these reflections is theological, the tension between meaning and mystery is evident in the academic disciplines which are at the heart of any university. One of the most urgent responsibilities of university administrators is to support the academic disciplines in developing proficient and innovative practitioners who effectively apply and develop a discipline's knowledge, theories, and methods in practical settings and/or who expand the discipline and its applications through research and creative works. These academic disciplines are among the most advanced products of human meaning making efforts as they articulate how the phenomena, data, and events of a specific domain of reality fit together in

increasingly complex relationships and coherences. The methods, concepts, theories, practices, techniques, applications, and accumulated knowledge of each discipline establish a highly specialized frame of meaning that opens up infinite possibilities for continuous discovery and ingenuity; this boundlessness is evident in the fact that every new achievement raises new questions whose resolution leads to further discoveries. Yet, these disciplinary frames of meaning are also profoundly limited by the presuppositions embedded in them about what is real, important, and good. The natural sciences limit the real to what is observable and mathematically measurable; the social sciences rest on the proposition that humans are social creatures; logic and mathematics presume a conformity between reason and reality; the arts and humanities presuppose the reality and value of creative expressions; the professional disciplines conduct research to improve the practices in a narrowly defined dimension of human interactions. These presuppositions necessarily narrow the scope of a discipline's insights; they shed great light on a narrow dimension of reality only by leaving other dimensions in darkness.⁴³

Niebuhr consistently insisted that every academic (or "cultural") discipline must be taken seriously, thereby rejecting a theological tradition that considers the "wisdom of the world" as irrelevant to the "foolishness of the Gospel."⁴⁴ But he also maintains that there is a "... point where the insights of various disciplines stand in contradiction to each other, signifying that the total of reality is more complex than any scheme of rational meaning [or frame of meaning] which may be invented to comprehend it."⁴⁵ This "point where disciplines stand in contradiction to one another" became evident from my perspective of supporting all the disciplines. Collectively the disciplines offer *not* a unified, coherent vision of reality (despite the name "*university*"), but a dizzying, kaleidoscope of competing visions, all offering deep insights in some aspects of reality but none of them offering a vision of the "total of reality." The competing visions of the academic disciplines confirm that "now we know in part" and suggest that the possibility and hope of "understanding fully" is dependent finally upon faith in God as the source of an "...ultimate unity of life,... a comprehensive purpose which holds all the various, and frequently contradictory realms of coherence and meaning together."⁴⁶

While an awareness of mystery challenges the religious pride that assumes a perfect harmony between God's will and its own understanding and application of it, this awareness equally challenges religious pride's not-too-distant relative, intellectual pride. This pride is rooted in the largely unquestioned assumption that all of reality can ultimately be understood by

the coherences discerned by reason. The most pervasive expression of such pride is the belief that the conflicts of history, the struggles between individual freedom and the demands of society, the dilemmas of conscience, the emotional impact of the arts, and all other phenomena of life are ultimately reducible to natural processes. This intellectual pride forgets that while intellect may attain great pinnacles, its knowledge is finite, attained from historically and culturally conditioned perspectives that will be judged as limited and possibly parochial by future scholars as those of the past seem to current ones. The towers of intellect which universities help build too easily become Towers of Babel intended to reach into heaven to make names for their builders, that “pretend to be higher than their real height; and... claim a finality which they cannot possess.”⁴⁷ Intellectual pride reveals the simple truth that an element of egoism always gets entangled with our intellectual pursuits; even the most objective and selfless scholars, writers, and artists that reside within universities will tend to confuse *my truth*” with *the truth*. Such egoism is usually harmless, expressed as demands for recognition and rewards, but it can also lead to manipulation of information and data to compel desired results. Since such fraud can have lasting, damaging consequences for an institution, senior administrators must be vigilant in guarding against it. The fact that committees dedicated to ethics in research are necessary at a university – where the “children of light” supposedly reign - gives witness to the potential destructiveness of intellectual pride.

The most consequential and influential expression of meaning and mystery in Niebuhr’s thought – and for me the most convincing -- is the relationship of love and justice. Our efforts to give meaning to our collective lives gives rise to the pursuit of just relations, which Niebuhr maintains has its deepest roots in the mystery of God’s love.

Love and Justice

Niebuhr’s vision of love and justice begins with an empirically observable fact – namely, that history is an ambiguous mix of good and evil as is especially evident in the conflict of justice and injustice.⁴⁸ Ongoing efforts to achieve just and fair relations in our collective lives have been consistently thwarted by the equally persistent efforts by individuals, families, clans, tribes, classes, races, religions, and nations to devalue, subdue, subordinate, exploit, and kill those who are outside their group. The question for Niebuhr is how to make sense of this ambiguity? What does it mean? In what comprehensive picture, configuration, schema or story is this struggle for justice meaningful? Niebuhr’s response is a vision of Christian faith that

never underestimates the evil and injustice of which humans are capable, but nonetheless affirms that God's love, not human sin, is the final norm and ideal for human existence. In Jesus' death, sin defeats the perfect love expressed in Jesus' acts, deeds, life, and self-sacrifice.⁴⁹ Jesus' resurrection, however, reveals that God's love rather than sin is the final norm and ideal of history; Jesus' promise of a second coming offers assurance that God's love will be realized fully in the Kingdom of God, which embodies the promise and expresses the hope that the final destiny of human beings is to live with one another in harmonious, loving relationships grounded in a common love of God. History as we know it, is the *interim* between the revelation of the meaning of history in Jesus and its full realization in the Kingdom of God.⁵ During this interim, love – what the New Testament calls *agape* -- is expressed in the pursuit of justice. Contrary to the theological tradition that limits agape love to the community of believers, Niebuhr insists that it is relevant to every social situation as the norm and ideal for criticizing and seeking to transform social relations. In practical terms, this task entails transforming the systems of justice (institutions, laws, practices, and prejudices) that shape our collective lives so they affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every human being and, consistent with this affirmation, ensure personal liberty and equality of opportunity and legal rights. Seeking justice is among the “historical responsibilities” that Christian faith should inspire men and women to “accept gladly.”⁵¹

The persistence of sin, Niebuhr consistently asserts, makes perfect justice unattainable. No system of justice will conform fully to the ideals that flow from loving one's neighbor as oneself; none will eliminate fully our inclination to confuse “justice” with self-interests or to seek “justice” that is little more than selfish interest fueled by resentment, anger, or self-righteousness.⁵² Though perfect justice is unattainable, we *can* nonetheless achieve *greater* justice or social relations that conform *more closely* to the ideal of love.⁵³ Our pursuit of and successes in achieving such greater justice, moreover, are evidence of God's ongoing involvement in history. Consider America's struggle to ensure equality of rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. Advances in this struggle depend upon advocacy not just from those historically deprived of these rights (i.e, women, racial minorities, economically disadvantaged, gay individuals) but from those who are privileged by the status quo (primarily men, white, affluent, straight people). Such advances are possible only when love “calls” us beyond selfish interests to demand for *all* others – not just those who look, think, and

live like us -- the liberties, rights, protections, and opportunities we claim for ourselves. When people of all races, classes, and nations are moved to seek greater justice in the wake of church bombings that killed children, accounts of sexual exploitation by powerful men of less powerful women, a brutal murder of someone for being gay, or the image of a white policeman pressing his knee on the neck of a subdued African-American man to the point of death, it is love that causes us to recoil in horror at such evil and it is the “call” of love that compels us to seek greater justice. Such experiences of people uniting in the quest for justice point to a truth affirmed by faith, that we are creatures whose natures call us to love others as much as we love ourselves and that we are such creatures because we are created by a God whose love for humans is so great He became human in the person of Jesus and who, as “Christ crucified,” both accepts the punishment we all deserve for our sinfulness but also offers the grace that makes possible a new life marked by reconciliation with God and others in love. Glimpses of such reconciliation, redemption, and love may be seen in churches and communities of faith, but they can also be seen in the moments when justice triumphs. It is love that calls us beyond ourselves to seek the good of others. The hope that our efforts to achieve greater justice will ultimately succeed is sustained by a faith in God who, as creator and moral judge, is a God of love.

Such theological reflections seem far removed from the mundane routines of academic administration, but Niebuhr’s vision of love and justice resonated with my personal experiences as a white male whose entire professional career was at Fayetteville State University, a historically Black university (HBCU). The history of HBCUs and African-American churches are inextricably intertwined; it is difficult to imagine the perseverance of HBCUs over the past century and a half without the support and guidance of individuals with deep faith in God’s loving providence. As a consequence of this faith, the love ethic – the conviction that we are to love God without qualification and love others as much as we love ourselves -- that is so powerful in African-American churches is much more a part of HBCU culture than most other public institutions.⁵¹ I was a beneficiary of this love. As one who could easily be viewed as nothing more than the face of racial injustice, I enjoyed a level of acceptance and affirmation that flowed out of this love ethic. I am certainly not suggesting that in my nearly forty-year career, I never experienced any racially-fueled animosity, but even in such moments I was confident that I was treated more fairly and respectfully and with more grace than typically experienced by my African-American counterparts at majority white institutions. Moreover, I was fortunate to

progress from the rank of instructor with no tenure benefits to a tenured, full professor; I served in various administrative positions, culminating in senior roles of provost and chief of staff. These advances were not entirely unmerited, but all were dependent upon the consent and support of colleagues and administrators who could have easily opposed me, but were willing to look beyond issues of race. The Christian witness I observed in so many of my students and colleagues profoundly influenced my intellectual and spiritual growth and provided a context in which Niebuhr's writings became especially meaningful.⁵³

Reading Niebuhr, I came to see the growing concern for inclusion versus exclusion in American higher education as a tentative triumph of justice, a development that points (though not unambiguously so) to God's love as a force working in and through history. This development was especially apparent from my vantage point as a senior administrator at an institution whose primary mission is to extend the benefits of higher education to those historically deprived of them. This mission is a social justice imperative. The benefits of earning a college degree are well documented. Those who earn degrees tend to be happier and healthier financially, physically, and socially than those who do not earn degrees. Higher education, moreover, permits individuals to develop their talents and aspirations to become persons and make accomplishments that they never dreamed possible. College degree completion rates, however, indicate clearly that the benefits of higher education have been disproportionately distributed to those whose wealth give them access to resources and experiences that increase their potential for college success, such as well-funded, high-quality K-12 schools, advanced placement and honors classes, travel abroad, and multiple extracurricular program options. What is perceived as individual merit is in part the product of social and economic privilege. One of the most consistent facts about U.S. higher education is the relationship of wealth to degree completion. Of the students who enrolled in college in fall 2012 nationwide, for example, the percentage who earned either an associate's or bachelor's degree from the lowest to the highest family income groups were 26%, 36%, 49%, and 69%, respectively. Moreover, while completion rates for the top three quartiles have improved consistently over the past two decades, the rate for the poorest students has remained essentially constant.⁵⁵ U.S. Higher Education does not create the inequities of power and privilege in American society, but it certainly perpetuates them.⁵⁶ Minimizing such disparities is essential to creating a more just society, one where freedoms, rights, and opportunities available to some are available to all.

As I noted above, this social justice mission can ironically become social injustice if institutions fail to provide the support structures that are often needed by students from less-affluent backgrounds. Perhaps more fundamental than establishing specific programs, however, are the challenges posed by the deeply-rooted perceptions and prejudices derived from a model of higher education based on exclusion, a mindset about higher education driven by the nation's most prestigious and selective institutions. These prejudices equate institutional excellence with exclusivity so that the "best" institutions are those that exclude the most applicants; the task of universities is to "weed out" the deserving from the undeserving so that those who fail deserve to fail; and programs to accommodate student academic and social needs serve only to "water down" quality. The endurance of this model of exclusion is derived in part from our sinful tendency to define our own worth and dignity by the "groups" (races, tribes, social classes, ethnicities) to which we belong and those "our group" excludes. This model of exclusion also has enormous market value. It permits elite institutions to charge tuition and fees that only the most affluent can afford. Certainly, these institutions will provide highly touted financial support for a few exceptionally-talented, economically disadvantaged students, but the fact that 4% of the lowest income group enroll at these institutions compared to 337% from the highest income group, indicates that these institutions exist primarily for the affluent.⁵⁷

The quality of educational experiences provided by these elite institutions is not in question. There are good reasons for students to aspire for admission to them. When the nation's most intelligent and motivated students come together with brilliant and accomplished faculty members, they collectively create learning environments that inspire and motivate great achievement. Indeed, the graduates, research, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship these institutions produce have contributed much to the ascendancy of the United States. Despite its historical importance, however, this model of exclusion and the perceptions and prejudices it promotes now jeopardize the future economic prosperity of the nation. This model will, at best, permit one-third of American adults to earn university degrees at a time when the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century requires an increasing number of adults to have the knowledge and skills obtained by postsecondary education. The "big goal" advocated by the Lumina Foundation, for example, is for at least 60% of U.S. adults to earn a high-quality college degree or credential by 2025 and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation estimates that U.S. colleges and universities must increase their productivity of credentials and degrees by one-third

to meet future economic demands.⁵⁸ Certainly, elite institutions will continue to market their respective “brands” that equate excellence with exclusivity; parents, counselors, and students will continue to buy into this model in making choices about higher education, but it is safe to conclude that the U.S. higher education enterprise is now driven by the ideal of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The shift of priority is evident in the vast bodies of research devoted to helping improve college completion rates of all students, the wide array of data resources readily available to the public about student outcomes, accreditation standards that require institutions to address disparities in degree completion based on income and race, the development of sophisticated technology tools to improve advisement and curricular planning, policies and agreements designed to facilitate transfer from two- to four-year institutions, and early college high schools that permit lower-income students to earn credits toward a college degree while completing high school.⁵⁹

Issues of exclusion versus inclusion are also reflected in the five-year plan (2017-2022) of the University of North Carolina (UNC) system developed during my tenure as a senior administrator.⁶⁰ Developing a plan that encompasses 16 universities ranging from the highly to less selective requires achieving consensus among many different competing groups with conflicting interests. Emerging from this complex process was a plan that included nine goals, four of which focus on increasing enrollment and degree completion among low-income students and students from rural counties, populations that have earned degrees at lower rates than their more affluent counterparts. Implementation of the plan required each institution to set targets for each goal with progress in achieving these targets a factor in institutional assessments and chancellor evaluations. The plan was more than nice-sounding aspirations; it also included means of measuring progress in achieving these ideals.

The primary impetus for the UNC system’s emphasis on inclusion, as is true of the nation as a whole, is the need to produce graduates who can meet the economic needs of the state and the nation. Yet, meeting this economic need *requires affirmation of the social justice imperative of inclusion*, of extending benefits previously reserved for some (primarily white and affluent) to all (including non-whites and the poor). This convergence of economic interests and social justice is especially remarkable in light of the fact that in so many other areas, economic interests and social justice are in conflict. The profit motive is too often amoral. Tax avoidance is

considered good regardless of its impact on our collective lives. Laws and guidelines designed to protect consumers, preserve the environment, reduce global warming, or serve public health are too often dismissed as “job-killing” regulations.

Reading Niebuhr led me to see this shift of priority from exclusion to inclusion in higher education as a tentative triumph of justice. This triumph must be considered tentative since privilege, power, political conflicts, and economic status will continue to shape the future of higher education. The wealthy and exceptionally talented will continue to enjoy vast opportunities not available to everyone. Many university leaders will continue to be much more concerned about enrollment funding, alumni giving, and endowment growth than the social ends their institutions serve. College recruiting material will continue to appeal, though never explicitly so, to the desire to exclude the “other” (undeserving, the different) from their groups. Yet few will assert what was common a half-century ago, namely, that higher education is only for a few, that it *rightfully* serves as a tool for weeding out the deserving from the undeserving. The fact that the new priority of inclusion has been driven primarily by workforce demands demonstrates that even economic interests are never so consistently narrow as to exclude concern for others, even concern for “the least of these” among us, those previously marginalized and excluded.

Even what I am calling this tentative triumph of justice in the shift of priority in higher education from exclusion to inclusion reflects Niebuhr’s claim that justice arises from love. To extend to the many the rights, privileges, and opportunities available to a few is to assert the ideals that flow from loving others as much as we love ourselves, that is, respect for the inherent dignity and worth of each person; equality of liberties, opportunities, and legal rights. Worldly pursuits of justice and the love which inspires it point to a truth of faith, that we exist in a universe created, judged, and redeemed by a God whose essence is love and that it is His love that both “calls” and empowers us to seek justice. The fact that those with so many conflicting interests, demands, goals, aspirations, motives, and perceptions of the good can come together – even in something so “this-worldly” and pragmatic as a university system’s five-year plan – to affirm the necessity of expanding the benefits of higher education to those previously deprived of them is evidence that God’s love works within and among us to inspire justice, even among those who might otherwise scoff at the notion that God’s love is a force in history.

My descriptions of these experiences as a university senior administrator are offered to highlight a basic tenet of Niebuhr's apologetic task, namely, that Christian faith gives greater clarity to experience, including its paradoxes and contradictions, than other, especially modern, systems of meaning. He was fond of referring to Pascal's description of the Gospel as the "mystery without which I would remain a mystery to myself" to describe this task. This approach, which Niebuhr referred to as "validation by inference," is primarily an intellectual task of comparing alternative visions of reality, life, and history. This intellectual task, Niebuhr understood, does not "prove" the truth of Christian faith, as if belief could be a conclusion that follows logically from a set of propositions. Validation by inference cannot substitute for the inner experience of faith that acknowledges one's own fallen condition and looks to God's love as revealed in Jesus as the only remedy to this fallen state, a love from which nothing can separate us. (Romans 8:38 was among scriptures Niebuhr frequently quoted.) The only "proof" of these twin convictions is the transformed lives they make possible in those who accept them, in lives marked by humility, charity, faith, hope, and love. No doubt, the validation of Niebuhr's thought I discerned in my experiences reflects my own predisposition to this faith. And yet, even if the intellectual task is not a substitute for inner faith, it is not irrelevant to it; my experience has demonstrated, I hope, that the former can strengthen and give clarity to the latter.

NOTES

1. I served as provost (2008-2017) and chief of staff (2017-2019) at Fayetteville State University (FSU), a public, regional university and one of 16 universities in the University of North Carolina System and also one of approximately 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in the nation. Previously, I served as a department chair, acting dean, and various associate vice chancellor roles, but none of these positions had the university-wide responsibilities of these senior administrative roles.
2. The term “Establishment theologian” is from Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 238. “By 1949, he [Niebuhr] was not only the mass media pick as the most influential American Protestant theologian; he was the choice of the U.S. State Department. Since his government-sponsored tour of Germany in 1946 – the same year that Allen Dulles nominated him for membership in the elite Council on Foreign Relations – he met regularly with the State Department’s Advisory Commission on Cultural Policy in Occupied Territories.”

Niebuhr’s status as “Establishment theologian” was sealed by his appearance on the cover of the 25th anniversary edition of *Time* Magazine on March 3, 1948. Represented with a bemused expression looking across a landscape covered with dark clouds at a small cross in the distance with the caption, “Man’s Story is Not a Success Story,” has become a somewhat iconic image of Niebuhr, appearing on the cover of *The Irony of American History* and the 2015 Library of America, *Essential Writings*. Niebuhr’s status was based on a career that began as pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit from 1915-1928 and then as professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 1928-1960 where he wrote a series of important books about the “terrors and tumults of the 20th century,” books frequently cited for their prophetic insight. These works include *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *Beyond Tragedy* (1935), collection of sermons essays; *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1936), *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (1941, 1943, respectively), *Faith in History* (1944), *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), and subsequent to the Time Cover Story, *The Irony of American History* (1952), and *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1956). Niebuhr’s influence and reputation were based as much on his prolific output of articles and commentaries on the political, social, and economic issues of his day in publications like *Christianity in Crisis*, *The Christian Century* and others, which one scholar estimates exceeds 2600, and his frequent preaching and lecturing across the country. In the mid-1950s he suffered a series of strokes that severely restricted his professional activities.

Niebuhr is perhaps best known for the “Serenity Prayer; Prayer,” in its original formulation, “God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.” It’s worth noting that in an article published posthumously as “From the Sidelines,” he points to the irony that in the depression that he experienced about his stroke, he was not following the advice of the Serenity Prayer. For more about authorship of the Serenity

Prayer see the 2005 book by Elizabeth Sifton, Niebuhr's daughter, and the article in *Chronicle of Higher Education*) Fred Shapiro, April 28, 2014.

3. As Krista Tippet noted in the introduction to the 2009 radio program, "Obama's Theologian," Niebuhr's "star began to rise again." As Andrew Bacevich argued in his introduction to the 2008 republication of *The Irony of American History* (1952), Niebuhr's warnings of a half century earlier about the folly of trying to "manage history" and the dangers of "outsized confidence" in our power, virtue, and righteousness assumed new relevance as the U.S. failed to achieve the quick and easy victory in the Iraq War that most Americans assumed was assured by our superior military and the presumed righteousness of our cause. Bacevich refers to Niebuhr's text as the "most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy." Bacevich's own, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, also from 2008 offers what he terms a "Niebuhrian analysis" of American foreign policy.

Bacevich's reference to Niebuhr frequently as "our prophet," appropriately links Niebuhr back to the ancient Hebrew prophets. (In his biography of Niebuhr, Richard Fox notes that regarding the 1961 biography by June Bingham, Niebuhr wrote, "I would like to have end my days without anyone making a 'prophet' out of me." Fox writes, "Niebuhr like the position on the pedestal but distrusted it as a threat to humility." P. 273.

The election of Barack Obama also contributed significantly to the renewed interest in Niebuhr. In an interview in April 2007 with David Brooks, Obama described Niebuhr as "one of his favorite philosophers." When asked to state his "takeaway" from Niebuhr, Obama nicely summarized what I would call Niebuhr's pragmatism, "I take away...the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism." (NY Times, April 16, 2007) Obama's election sparked considerable speculation about Niebuhr's influence on Obama, an example of which was a 2009 symposium at Georgetown University entitled, "Obama's theologian," which featured E.J. Dionne and David Brooks. Obama's acceptance speech for the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize reflects Niebuhr's influence.

The renewed interest in Niebuhr was reflected in further republications of Niebuhr's writings. In 2013, Niebuhr's 1932 *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was republished with a new introduction by Cornell West and Niebuhr's 1935 *A Christian Interpretation of Ethics* with a new introduction by Edmund N. Santurri. A new compilation of works, entitled *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, was published in 2015.

As Niebuhr's books become available, scholarly analysis of his works also began to emerge. A few examples are a collection of essays edited by Daniel Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited* (2009); John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?: Richard Crouter's Reinhold Niebuhr: On Religion, Politics, and Christian faith.* (2010). In 2017, *An American Conscience: The*

Reinhold Niebuhr Story, a documentary released by Journey Films and directed by Martin Doblmeier and a companion book by Jeremy Sabella and published by Wm. B. Eerdsman's were released. These works include interviews with numerous prestigious scholars, politicians, scholars, clergy, and activists, including President Jimmy Carter, former Congressman and Mayor Andrew Young, Philosopher and Activist Cornel West, New York Times columnist David Brooks.

4. In the first chapter of his important study of Niebuhr, Langdon Gilkey, who was among Niebuhr most astute interpreters and an important theologian in his own right, was Langdon Gilkey, described his own journey that led to him becoming “thoroughly and irretrievably a Niebuhrian. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 15. Though very different from Gilkey’s in time, place, and substance, my own journey had a similar outcome.
5. Niebuhr’s rejection of either-or thinking is evident in his consistent insistence that we, as humans, are finite and free *at the same time*. We struggle throughout our lives with the limitations imposed by the natural cycles of birth, growth, and death as well as the social, political, and economic conditions into which we are born. And yet, the very act of reflecting on these conditions and considering their influence is an expression of the transcendent freedom that enables us to change these conditions and imagine and create new ones. If we focus on our experience, we can no more ignore the lifelong influence of the limiting conditions of our birth – including gender, race, and class -- than we can deny our sense of freedom, and the responsibility it implies, for the choices we make in defining who we are. Our experience of both finitude *and* freedom may seem so self-evident and commonsensical that it is not worth noting. Yet, the religious, philosophical, and scientific systems that have shaped human civilization have tended to define humans as *either* finite *or* free. The impulse to *escape* finitude (perhaps most succinctly expressed by Plato’s suggestion that to love wisdom is to love death) is reflected in the classical ideal of contemplation which yields truths (supposedly) immune to the growth and decay that define finitude; it is expressed in religious notions that identify our *true* selves with the spirit and consider the body evil; it is expressed in the mystical impulse which arises from the discovery that at the highest (or deepest) reaches of meditative inwardness, the self *seems* infinite since reflection *seems* unbounded by space and time (I can imagine myself anywhere and at any time) and thus *is already* or *can be* one with God, whether God is conceived in Biblical terms or as undifferentiated Being. The impulse to escape finitude is matched only by the tendency to dismiss freedom as an illusion that is *really* a product of chemical, biological, social, political, economic, and cultural mechanisms that are readily discoverable in nature and other animals. The love of another or the weight of a guilty conscience, among the highest expression of freedom, are *really* the products of chemicals in the brain and the influences of parents and society, and thus fully explicable in terms of natural causal sequences. The natural and social sciences have yielded important insights about the finite conditions that shape our lives, but to leap to the conclusion – as is often the case – that it is arrogant for humans to presume that we are free in comparison with the other animals, fails to acknowledge that humans seem to be the only animal with the inclination and ability to make such a presumption, which is itself an expression of transcendent freedom.

Finitude and freedom is one of more than 100 such “polarities” in Niebuhr’s writings, according to scholar. Robert E. Fitch, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Philosophy of History,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: MacMillan, 1956), p. 300. Consider, for example, the relationship of mind (or self) to body, “The self, even in the highest reaches of its self-consciousness is still the finite self...qualified by its ‘here and now’ relation to a particular body.” *Nature and Destiny of Man (NDM)* I:170.

6. Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). New introduction by Andrew Bacevich, 2008. pp. 40-41; 5.
7. *Irony*, p. 40.
8. From 2008-2017, the university budget was cut by nearly 20%; whatever your household budget it, imagine the difficult decisions you would have to make if you cut the budget by 20%. – the single most overriding question of tenure as provost was how to meet the budget cuts? My knowledge of economics is limited, but as I understand it, a major source of budget crisis was the collapse of financial institutions due to individuals defaulting on home mortgages. There is a Niebuhrian lesson here in that the goal of expanding home ownership is a good intention, but it was corrupted by institutions that knowingly extended mortgages that were doomed to default, but by that time, those institutions would have made their money from the deals. None of these institutions set out to bring the American economy to the brink of collapse, but that was the consequence that followed from unconstrained self-interests.
9. *Irony*, p. xxiv. Niebuhr’s favorite word in describing irony is “incongruity.” Since the word is not as common now, I am using the word “contradiction” instead. I recognize that the former term is more nuanced than the latter, but I am sacrificing nuance for readability.

Irony is comic to the extent both involve a contradiction between professed intentions and outcomes, but it is unlike comedy in that the contradiction is a consequence of a defect in the virtue. “Irony consists of apparent fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous. Incongruity as such as comic. It elicits laughter. This element of comedy is never fully eliminated from irony. But irony is something more than comedy. A comic situation is proven to be an ironic if a hidden relation is discovered in the incongruity. If virtue become vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits – in all such cases the situation is ironic.” *Irony*, p. xxiv.

Niebuhr further distinguishes the ironic situation from the pathetic one; in the latter, humans are the victims of forces beyond their control and so bear no responsibility for the situation. Because irony arises from a weakness in the actors, they bear responsibility for it. The ironic situation is distinct from the tragic situation because in the latter the actors accept the responsibility for the violence that they presume is necessary for achieving positive

outcomes. (You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs). As Niebuhr explains in the last chapter of *Irony*, an ironic view of history is based on Biblical/Christian faith.

10. *Irony*, p. xxiv. The contradiction between the Marxist dream of universal justice and the monstrous evils committed by the Soviet Union to achieve it is a perfect example of ironic reversals in history fueled by presumptions of wisdom and virtue. Convinced that Marxism offered the “key” to history, the Soviet Communists believed they could “manage” history – much in the way science enables nature to be managed -- to bring history to its proper end. The consolidation and use of power to achieve the “end of history” was further supposedly justified by the virtue of the proletariat in whose name the Communist acted. As the propertyless class, the proletariat was presumed to be innocent of the class struggles that had shaped all previous history. Even as he called communism a “noxious creed” and affirmed that the Soviet Union must be opposed, he was not concerned with offering “monotonous reiterations” of the benefits of freedom over tyranny,” but to warn that that American bourgeois liberalism rests on illusions similar to the Communists and could lead to similar ironic reversals. These warnings have proven timeless in that nations, like individuals, can be led to disaster when they presume a wisdom, power, and virtue not available to mere mortals, presumptions that lead nations to try to “manage” history. Democracy provides the most effective governmental structures for exposing the potential overconfidence that can lead to ironic reversals. *Irony, Irony*, pp. 12-16; 127-129; 173-174.

See also, “The fact that its [Communism’s] illusory hopes are capable of generating cruelties and tyrannies that exceed even those of a cynical creed [Nazism] can be understood only if it is realized how much more plausible and dangerous the corruption of the good can be in human history than explicit evil.” The potential for ironic reversals in higher education is a perfect example of harm that come from the corruption of good intentions. “ *Irony*, p. 12.

11. “The modern liberal culture, of which America civilization is such an unalloyed exemplar, is involved in many ironic refutations of its original pretensions of virtue, wisdom, and power. Insofar as communism has already elaborated some of these pretentions into noxious forms of tyranny, we are involved in the double irony of confronting evils that are not generally different from our own.” *Ibid*, p. xxiv.
12. “Every nation has it own from of spiritual pride. The examples of American self-appreciation could be matched by similar sentiments in other nations. Our version is that our nation turned its back on the vices of Europe and made a new beginning.” *Ibid.*, p. 28
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-16.
14. In March 2016 the American Council for Education (ACE) awarded the ACE/Fidelity Investment Innovation Award to FSU for the tool and process the university developed to support continuous improvement.
15. It is not uncommon for institutions to view the demands for continuous improvement as a necessity imposed by external agencies, i.e, accrediting bodies with compliance understood as necessary for everyone to keep their jobs. Unfortunately, such a view assumes the quality and effectiveness of the status quo of programs, services, and research initiatives. To shift the focus of continuous improvement from the threat posed by external agencies to the internal practices and mindsets that could lead to ironic reversals echoes Niebuhr’s often-

quoted warning at the end of *Irony*, “If we [America] should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature of history but by hatred and vainglory. *Irony*, p. 174.

In the context of Niebuhr’s thought, the aim was to evoke the “ironic smile” of insight, which acknowledges the goodness of intentions while recognizing the many ways we fall short of our intentions and using this insight to prompt actions to ameliorate the contradictions between intentions and outcomes. The “ironic smile” is dependent upon an observer who is not so hostile to the victims of irony as to deny the element of virtue which much constitute a part of the ironic situation; nor yet so sympathetic as to discount the weakness, the vanity, the weakness, and pretension which constitute another element.” *Ibid.*, p. 153. This perspective that balances detachment with sympathy, I concluded, was essential to promoting continuous improvement.

16. *Irony*, p. 63.

17. My account of Niebuhr’s vision of human nature represents my effort to summarize Niebuhr’s sweeping analysis in volume I of *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature*; this view echoes throughout his writings. Also instructive is “The Tower of Babel,” included in *Beyond Tragedy*, pp. 25-46; one of the best commentaries on Niebuhr’s vision of human nature can be found in Langdon Gilkey’s *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*, pp. 78 – 101.

18. One prominent example of Niebuhr’s influence was my advocacy for Dee Fink’s method of course design in a semester-long seminar I conducted for faculty members for nine years.²⁰ Fink maintains that course design must be guided by a faculty member’s highest aspirations for what students will know, think, apply, feel, and learn about themselves and others in their courses, but must also address “situational factors,” i.e., the “place” of the course in the curriculum, the faculty member’s interests, and students’ backgrounds, needs, and likely levels of readiness. The method guides faculty members in the hard work of developing learning goals, assessment methods, and teaching techniques that mutually reinforce one another and connect the aspirational goals with the situational factors. The merit of Fink’s approach is that it challenges the all-too-common assumption that teaching consists primarily of delivering content – a profoundly non-aspirational goal – to students in the abstract who are presumed to have (or should have) the same level of interest and motivation as the instructor. Fink’s approach, moreover, affirms a vision of human as possessing creative freedom, but always situated in time, place, and circumstances. Many approaches to course design are available to faculty members but, thanks in large measure to my reading of Niebuhr, I am convinced that any effective method must link the aspirational with the situational. L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. (The Josey-Bass Higher and Adult Education) (Revised and Expanded), 2013.

The Faculty Seminar focused on numerous topics, but Fink’s method of course design was always central. The seminar ran from fall 2009 to fall 2017. From 2013-2017 Professor Emily Lenning co-taught the seminar.

19. Niebuhr's definition of "original sin" in *Irony* emphasizes this link between original sin and unbridled self-interests. "This doctrine [original sin] asserts the obvious fact that all men [and women] are persistently inclined to regard themselves more highly and are more assiduously concerned about their own interests than any 'objective' view of their importance would warrant." p. 17.

Niebuhr provides his most complete explication of sin in volume I of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, chapters VII, VIII, and IX; because he was concerned primarily with the social consequences of sin, he focused less on the sins of sensuality than on the sins of pride, egoism, selfishness, and self-interests, which if left unchecked, lead to violence, abuse, exploitation, and evil of many sorts. For instructive commentary, see Gilkey, pp. 102-141; Richard Crouter notes that Niebuhr's emphasis on sin runs counter to much contemporary theology, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) pp. 53-56.

The condition of the temptation that leads to sin is the anxiety that arises from our ambiguous status as finite and free; we are mortal and we know it. In a distinction only a theologian would make, sin is not the necessary consequence of anxiety, but it is the inevitable outcome. "Anxiety is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion. The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. It is significant that Jesus justifies his injunction, 'Be not anxious,' with the observation, 'For your heavenly Father knoweth ye have need of these things.' The freedom from anxiety which he enjoins is a possibility only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved...[but] no life, even the most saintly, perfectly conforms to the injunction not to be anxious." *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, pp. 182-183.

Perhaps Niebuhr's most succinct description of sin comes from his essay, "The Tower of Babel," "Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin." *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 28.

20. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*, in Elizabeth Sifton, editor, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics* (New York: Library of America, 2015), p. 365.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 360; 361.
22. Gilkey, pp. 116-118.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 118
24. Chancellor James A. Anderson bears primary credit for establishing an environment of integrity during my tenure as senior administrator. His efforts received important support and guidance from University Attorney Wanda Jenkins. My efforts to ensure integrity were profoundly dependent upon the work of these two individuals.

25. Regarding the observation of sin in others *and oneself*, the following passage is illuminating. “My view of what human character and historical existence is like may be wrong, but I have arrived at it by as honest analysis of human behavior, *including my own*, as I am capable of. [My italics] “An Open Letter (to Richard Roberts,” in D.B. Robertson, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), p. 268.
26. *Irony*, p. 168. My emphasis.
27. My understanding of Niebuhr conception of meaning as “making sense of” by discerning coherence of parts in a whole (picture, pattern, configuration, schema, story) is based on his 1951 essay, “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, edited by Robert McAfee Brown. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) pp. 218-236. This notion of meaning seems to inform numerous statements. For example, “Nothing that is true or beautiful or good *makes complete sense* in any immediate *context of history*.” *Irony*, p. 63. “The concept of the ‘value and dignity of the individual,’ of which our modern culture has made so much is finally only meaningful in a religious dimension.” *Irony*, p. 62. Both passages refer to an event or phenomena in a larger context that gives it meaning.

See also Gilkey, pp. 53-77.

The difference between noise and music provides a perfect example of meaning as coherence versus meaninglessness: a random group of sounds is meaningless, the same sounds in a pattern or configuration becomes music, and thus meaningful. Efforts by some composers to blur this distinction by creating works of random sounds are meaningful only in light of the distinction.

28. This point is unfortunately confirmed by recent research on “deaths of despair,” as for example, Ann Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

In *The Self and the Dramas of History*, pp. 63-65, Niebuhr outlines three typical approaches to establishing a sense of *ultimate* meaning in our lives. The first involves the assertion of one’s individual will over against all external constraints, an impulse which may, ironically, lead to one’s identification of self with a collective self (hence the perennial appeal of racist and nationalist ideologies). The second alternative is the impulse of mysticism, which is the effort to “... transcend all finite values and systems of meaning, including the self as particular existence, and to arrive at ‘universality’ and ‘unconditioned; being.’ The persistent of this mystic tendency in the religions of the world is a telling proof of the ability of the self, in the ultimate reaches of its freedom and self-awareness, to find some affinity between the mystery within itself and the mystery behind observable phenomena and to find the key to universality in the joining of these two mysteries.” The third alternative is a Biblical view which “interpret[s] the self’s experience with the ultimate in the final reaches of its self-awareness as a dialogue with God.”

29. This phrase, “the irrational givenness of things,” comes from “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” p. 222. The entire passage: “The concept of creation defines the mystery beyond both natural and rational causalities, and its suprarational character is understood when Christian theology is pressed to accept the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Thereby a realm of freedom and mystery is indicated beyond the capacity of reason to comprehend. This is where reason starts and ends. The final irrationality of the givenness of things is frankly accepted.”
30. Niebuhr spoke often of the Biblical accounts as “clues” to the mystery of existence. “The Christian faith... is a faith in revelation. It believes that God has made Himself known. It believes that He has spoken through the prophets and finally in His Son. It accepts the revelation in Christ as the ultimate clue to the mystery of God’s nature and purpose in the world, particularly the mystery of the relation of His justice to His mercy. But these clues to the mystery do not eliminate the periphery of mystery God remains *deus absconditus*.” “Mystery and Meaning,” p. 238-239.
31. “Biblical faith must remain a commitment of the self rather than a conclusion of its mind.” *The Self and the Dramas of History*, p. 242.
32. In his encounter with God in the burning bush in which God directs Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses asks who shall tell the people sent him. God’s response, “I am that I am,” (Exodus 3:14) has inspired much philosophical and theological discussion of God as Being itself, or the ground of Being. Niebuhr does not specifically reject such speculation, but it does not occupy a prominent place in his own writings. In the final paragraphs of second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he echoes this conception when he refers to God as the “eternal ground of existence.” P. 321.
33. My account of Niebuhr’s conception of frames of meaning is dependent upon my understanding of Michael Polanyi’s concept of “tacit knowledge,” and to a lesser extent, Thomas Kuhn’s use of the term “paradigm.”
34. Niebuhr’s view of meaning suggests that the discernment of meaning is always an *interpretive* act; meaning is partially discovered and partially constructed. Meaning is discovered to the extent that its focus is on the facts of experience (natural phenomena, historical events, the moments in our collective and individual lives); these facts both drive our pursuit of meaning and validate the meanings we discern. Such a view, of course, accepts the “common sense” view that our senses reveal a reality beyond ourselves that we share with others. Yet, meaning is also constructed because the facts of experience do not announce their own meanings; we must create or establish the coherences that give meaning to the facts. Now, since the coherences or meanings we discern are inevitably shaped by the frames of meaning we already hold, we risk finding in the facts of experience only those meanings we already believe. This potential circularity is remedied by the fact that the validation of the meaning(s) we discern always occurs in dialogue with others who bring alternate points of view on commonly shared realities and this dialogue may lead us to expand, revise, or reject the frames of meaning we previously relied upon. The most important test for our interpretations of meanings is not just that the facts conform to our interpretation, but the breadth and height and depth of the array of facts and experiences our interpretation helps us “make sense of.” Niebuhr seems to assume that we will seek out such

dialogue. Moreover, the value of democratic institutions is their preservation of this dialogue with others who bring alternate perspectives to bear on a common reality. This assumption is challenged by proliferation of social media which permits one to interact only with those who share a similar perspective, which then tends to erode any sense of a reality shared with those who disagree. Whether democratic institutions can continue to provide a space for meaningful dialogue and debate or whether they will become subservient to disparate interest groups remains to be seen.

Niebuhr's acknowledgement of this interpretive nature of discerning meaning is reflected the title of works, such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. He addresses the question of historical interpretation in *Irony* when he asks if the ironic interpretation is justified by the facts of history or is an interpretation imposed on events somewhat like patients describing what they see in the ink blots of a Rorschach test. The interpretation reveals more about the interpreter than what is interpreted. "Patterns of meaning are arbitrary," he writes, if they do violence to the facts, or single out correlations or sequences of events which are so fortuitous that only some special interest or passion could persuade the observer of the significance of the correlations." He cites as an example of doing such violence to the facts, a politician who claimed that the growth of the number of people in the world living under communism from 1932 to 1950 was evidence of the complicity of the "New Deal" in spreading communism. "Such conclusions can be advanced only from the standpoint of an obvious bias, and are credible only to an equally biased mind." *Irony*, p. 152. (This description, unfortunately, seems accurate to much of current American political discourse.)

35. "Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith," p. 218.
36. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 253.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.
38. *Irony*, p. 174.
39. *Ibid.*
40. See "Mystery and Meaning," in the *Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 237-249 and "We See Through a Glass Darkly," in *Niebuhr, Justice and Mercy*. Edited by Ursula M. Niebuhr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 29-37. *Nature and Destiny of Man*, volume II, Chapter VIII. In this chapter, Niebuhr refers to "having and not having the truth," to describe "seeing through a glass darkly."
41. *Irony*, p. 173.
42. The "test of tolerance" serves to identify those theological systems that fail to acknowledge the limitations of their own knowledge. *The Nature and Destiny of Many*, vol. 1. Pp. 221-243.
43. For example, the claim that only the observable and mathematically measurable are "real" is not itself a statement that is observable or mathematically measurable. This claim is not real or provable on its own grounds. Once accepted, however, as the starting point of inquiry, these assumptions lead to important discoveries with significant practical applications. I find it interesting that Niebuhr's makes a similar point about Christian faith.

The Gospel is “foolish” from a fully rational perspective, but once this faith is accepted, it illumines life and experience in ways that other systems of meaning do not.

44. See his critique of Kierkegaard and Barth for their disregard of the “cultural disciplines” in terms of “foolishness of the Gospel” and the wisdom of the world,” “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” pp. 228-231. His comment, “One could not from this standpoint [one that disregards the cultural disciplines] engage in a debate with psychologists on the question of what level of human selfhood is illuminated by psychiatric techniques and what level of the self as subject and free spirit evades these analyses.” (p. 230. This remark is interesting for Niebuhr’s own reliance on psychiatric techniques when he experienced sever depression in the wake of a series of strokes that severely limited his teaching, preaching and writing. See “The View From the Sidelines,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 250.
45. “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” p. 231.
46. “Mystery and Meaning,” p. 238
47. “Tower of Babel,” p. 29. See also *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, volume 1, pp. 194-198 for Niebuhr’s most complete discussion of intellectual pride and its relationship to other forms of pride, the will to power, moral pride, and religious pride.
48. The ambiguity of good and evil in history and the “...necessity and possibility of a *final* judgment of good and evil” is expressed in Jesus’ parable of the “Wheat and the Tares.” (Matthew 13: 24-30) When the man who sowed good seed discovers his enemy had sowed bad seed among the good but refuses to pull up bad since the two or hard to distinguish and the good may be pulled up with the bad. Instead, they will wait until the harvest (final judgment) to separate them. The Sermon is included in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 41-48.

The ambiguity of history and the impossibility of making *absolute* distinctions between good and evil in history does not make *relative* distinctions impossible. The Nazis, as is the case with all Fascist and Totalitarian governments, were evil. The defeat of the Nazis was good. But any such judgments we make about historical conflicts are tentative, relative to other alternatives available in the given circumstances. The democratic nations were not unambiguously good, but they were far better than the Nazis. Defeat of the Nazis -- including America’s alliance with a totalitarian regime, the immediate and consequent horrors of the introduction of atomic weapons, and a tenuous balance of power that followed -- were not unambiguously good. The Christian symbol of the Last Judgment, to which the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares alludes, claims that this ambiguity can only be resolved by faith in a just God whose final judgment we must wait upon.

Niebuhr writes, “When history confronts God the differences between good and evil are not swallowed up in a distinction-less eternity. All historical realities are indeed ambiguous. Therefore, no absolute distinctions between them is possible. But this does not obviate the possibility and necessity of a *final* judgment. To be sure, the righteous, standing before God, do not believe themselves to be righteous [see Matthew 25:25: 31-46, the sheep are as perplexed by the judgment as the goats] and their uneasy conscience proves the final problem

of history to be that, before God, ‘no living man is righteous.’ There is no solution to this problem short of the divine mercy and “forgiveness of sins... [but] the ultimate mercy does not efface the distinction between good and evil except by taking it into and upon Himself... The very rigor with which all judgments in history culminate in a final judgment is thus an expression of meaningfulness of all historic conflicts between good and evil. Yet, the necessity of a ‘final’ judgment upon all other judgments is derived from the ambiguity of these conflicts.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, pp. 292-293.

49. Jesus’ refusal to defend himself, which all the Gospels affirm, suggests that in a fallen world, perfect love is necessarily self-sacrificial since in the conflicts of self-interests love will be exploited as a weakness. Jesus could have only have defended himself by entering into the conflicts of self-interests at the moment - Romans versus Jews, Pharisees versus Sadducees – and thus undermining his perfect love. The sacrificial love of the fallen world contrasts the triumphant love of the Kingdom of God when all will live in harmony with self, others, and God.
50. “In thus conceiving history after Christ as an interim between disclosure of its full meaning and fulfillment of that meaning, between the revelation of the divine sovereignty and the full establishment of that sovereignty, a continued element of inner contradiction in history is accepted as the its perennial characteristic. Sin is overcome in principle but not in fact. Love must continue to be suffering love rather than triumphant love. This distinction becomes a basic category of interpreting history in all profound versions of the Christian faith, and has only recently been eliminated in modern sentimentalized versions of the faith.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p. 49.

Terms like “interim,” “the Last Judgment,” and “Kingdom of God” suggest that these are events in linear time, but since these terms refer to eternal realities, they must also be conceived as ever-present possibilities hovering over every moment in history. If we understand the eternal exclusively in terms of linear time, then we have robbed them of their full meaning. Whether Niebuhr is dismissing the temporal in favor of the eternal, or whether he is affirming both, I am not sure.

To deny that complete and final justice in history is attainable through human efforts does not make the effort meaningless because it is sustained by faith in a God who is the ground of all existence and also involved in human striving.

The often-quoted statement from Martin Luther King, Jr., “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” seems to me makes sense only on the basis of a Christian view of history consistent with Niebuhr’s analysis.

51. If Christian faith is really ‘persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depths, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord,’ it may dissuade men [and women] from the idolatrous pursuit of false securities and redemptions in life and history. *By its confidence in an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man’s historical striving to the very point of suffering with*

and for him, this faith can prompt men [and women] to accept their historical responsibilities gladly. From the standpoint of such a faith, history is not meaningless because it cannot complete itself; though it cannot be denied that it is tragic because men [and women] always seek prematurely to complete it.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, pp. 320-321. My emphasis.

52. Recent discussions of “tax justice” offer a perfect illustration. Most would agree with the principle of paying one’s “fair share” of taxes, but the formulas that define “fair share” will be largely determined by what those devising the formulas have to gain or lose by them.⁴⁹ Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).
53. Niebuhr uses some of his most creative language to describe the relationship of love and justice. In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, for example, he describes love as “impossible possibility,” which suggests that even if perfect and complete love is unachievable in fact, the possibility of such love drives us to seek justice. A prophetic faith, he writes, “...present Christian ethics afresh with the problems of compromise, the problem of creating and maintaining tentative harmonies of life in the world in terms of the possibilities of the human situation, while yet at the same time preserving the indictment upon all human life of the impossible possibility, the law of love.” *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 59.

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he refers to love as “fulfillment and negation” of justice. This “...relationship of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievements of justice in history may rise to indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood, but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which in contradiction to perfect love. There are therefore obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfillment.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p. 246. The fact that all our efforts to achieve justice that conforms to the ideals inherent in love will never be realized in history does not absolve us from the responsibility to try.

54. In his memoir, Cornel West provides a moving account of his own experience of this love ethic growing up in Shiloh Baptist Church. *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, with David Ritz. New York: Smiley Books, 2009. Some of the families of the nine victims of the shootings in the Emmanuel AME Zion Church reflected this love ethic when they expressed their forgiveness of the murderer. Though the willingness to forgive was not as uniform as early press accounts suggest, nonetheless, the events demonstrate the power of the love ethic in the lives of the faithful. Jennifer Berry Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring, Journey to Forgiveness*. New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2019. John Lewis’ life and career demonstrate the power of this love ethic that was so much a part of the African-American church. See Jon Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*. New York: Random House, 2020.

The question of whether to include prayer in the university's public ceremonies (Convocation, Founders Day, Commencement) offers an illuminating example of the effects of the impulse of love. Even though FSU is a public university, for much of its history, prayers were an unquestioned part of these ceremonies. Given the faith that was so important to the FSU's heritage, it always seems appropriate; and the majority of members of the community obviously agreed, as indicated by the loud echoes of "Amen!" prompted by these prayers. Moreover, despite the claims of some who objected, a prayer at a university is no more unconstitutional than at legislative sessions. Yet, as the students and faculty increasingly included individuals who did not share the same background of faith, the practice was increasingly questioned. After considerable discussion (in which I remained silent) the

university leadership during my tenure as senior administrator agreed that we should eliminate these prayers. While this decision may seem like a betrayal of faith it seemed to me that respecting the beliefs of others who may not share one's faith is an expression of love and the product of a confident faith that doesn't need to reassure itself by forcing others to conform to its practices.

55. *Indicators of Educational Equity in the United States: 2020 Historical Trend Report*. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity for Higher Education. 2020, p. 153.
56. "Higher education is the engine of division, enriching the rich and leaving everyone else out." Thomas G. Mortenson, "Roots of the Crisis (I Hate to Say I Told You So)," blog posted January 16, 2021, on New England Board of Higher Education.
57. Pell 2020, p. 83.

In the wake of the scandal regarding efforts of movie stars to attain admission to elite institutions through bribery, the student body presidents of four institutions involved in this scandal – USC, UCLA, Stanford, and Yale – chronicled the advantages of affluence in securing admission to such institutions. They write, "As students at selective universities, we acknowledge the many ways in which we have personally benefited from this system of privilege. Many of us come from well-resourced parts of the country and were surrounded by people familiar with the college admissions process. We would not be where we are today without certain opportunities provided to us that other students could not afford, and we want to make sure that this significant injustice is not lost in the sensational headlines about Operation Varsity Blues. The real scandal is about the millions of kids who will never have an equitable chance in an extremely complex, competitive and costly process." Robert Blake Watson, Trenton Stone, Erica Scott, and Kahill Green, "What's Legal in College Admissions is a Real Scandal," *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 2019.

58. Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2021/#nation> accessed August 8, 2021. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation *The Frontier Set* <https://www.frontierset.org/> accessed August 8, 2021.
59. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which asks students to assess the extent to which they are engaged in purposeful learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, is a good example of a resource use to assess and improve conditions that promote success of all students. The voluminous research based on the NSSE, see work of

George Kuh and Jillian Kinzie among many others, has shown that increased engagement improves learning for all students, but has an even greater, “compensatory” impact on students who enter college with lower test scores and high school GPAs. The Education Trust, the U.S. Department of Education College Scorecard, the Pell Foundation’s annual report on *Indicators of Educational Equity* (cited above) are good examples of such data resource. The standards for accreditation of the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools – Commission on Colleges include standards related to student success. Degree audit tools, early warning systems, and curricular planning, and predictive analytics programs are among the technology tools that are now available. The Comprehensive Articulation Agreement of the North Carolina Community Colleges and the University of North Carolina system articulation agreement is a model for enabling students to minimize loss of academic credit when transferring from a community college to a senior institution. This policy is especially beneficial to lower-income students who are more likely than their more affluent counterparts to begin postsecondary education at a community college. In my nearly forty-year career devoted to improving college outcomes for low-income students, early college high schools are among the most effective. I was especially proud of FSU’s support of two such colleges that resided on the campus, the Cross Creek Early College High School and the Cumberland International Early College High School.

60. *Higher Expectations: The Strategic Plan of the University of North Carolina, 2017-2022.*
<https://www.northcarolina.edu/impact/strategic-plan/>