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## PROTESTANT NEO-ORTHODOXY AND SPIRITUALITY

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The monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam pose formidable challenges to modernist singular constructions of the self. The one true God of monotheism is, in Paul Tillich's term, wholly Other. This Other is a powerful, rational, conscious supernatural being who is intimately involved in human affairs. Since this God is a caring being and not an impersonal eternal essence, believers can enter into a relationship with God, asking for and receiving favors while attempting to live up to the moral standard that God demands.<sup>1</sup>

How are thoroughly modern people to believe in such a God, or in any realm, force, or beings beyond the senses? Lying beneath the surface of this paper is a belief, stated so clearly by Douglas Sloan,<sup>2</sup> that modernity, with its celebration of quantitative rational thought, has closed itself off from all manner of truly qualitative ways of knowing. The resulting split between faith and knowledge has left modern people unable to speak confidently with precision about universal realities or human values. Religion has great potential to aid in the construction of scholarship that is unafraid to draw from the qualitative, the immaterial, and the non-sensory realm, which are sites from which truly new and radical social ideas might spring. Casting about for scholars who have attempted to bridge the faith-knowledge gap, I find Reinhold Niebuhr, a neo-orthodox Protestant theologian. I examine one of his texts before turning to questions regarding true belief in the postmodern academy and the role of spirituality in discourses of educational leadership.

### WHY NEO-ORTHODOXY?

Protestant neo-orthodoxy is a theological movement that rose and fell in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born as a response to cynical post-World War I intellectual trends, neo-orthodoxy proclaimed the existence of a transcendent God who is working through humanity to establish equal justice on earth. Not to be confused with neo-conservatism or religious fundamentalism, neo-orthodox theology has much to offer left/progressive thinkers who work for justice in a profoundly unjust world.

Douglas Sloan offers a history of neo-orthodoxy that tells how theologians like Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr tried to blend faith and knowledge in the American university. According to Sloan, "the neo-orthodox theological renaissance held forth the promise that the Christian faith could be presented in an intellectually rigorous and respectable way, and that the Protestant church, therefore, in renewed and vital engagement with the university, could reclaim a major role in giving shape and meaning to modern culture."<sup>3</sup>

I claim identity as a Protestant Christian, a public elementary school teacher and a novice intellectual. I would like to blend these three roles. Since beginning a program of doctoral study at Miami University in 2000, I have been eager to bring academic social theories to bear on practical problems in education. Yet, I notice the “disconnect” between theory and practice every day in my workplace. Colloquially speaking, ain’t no one quoting Derrida in the teachers’ lounge! Yet, there are times when some teachers in my school do use a language of faith to encourage one another and to collectively imagine a better system of American education. I ask if an understanding of Protestant neo-orthodoxy can help faith and knowledge work hand-in-hand to improve the lot of America’s schoolchildren.

The social theories I use, regardless of their basis, must have something useful to say about power. They must function as something more than esoteric discussions of the relationship between theory and practice. I am leery of the character to whom Gayatri Spivak refers:

And if, like Derrida and Foucault, you are a scrupulous academic who *is* largely an academic, you stage the crisis relationship between theory and practice in the practice of your theoretical production in various ways instead of legitimizing the polarization between the academic world and the real world by disavowing it, and then producing elegant solutions that will never be tested seriously either in large-scale decision-making or among the disenfranchised.<sup>4</sup>

So that’s why I admire neo-orthodox scholars like Paul Tillich, who influenced the work of Martin Luther King, indeed, who is quoted by King in the letter from the Birmingham City Jail. I admire Reinhold Niebuhr, who used his Christian faith to grapple with the formidable social problems of the mid-twentieth century. In his influential 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, Niebuhr shunned the typical Christian responses of moral absolutism or sentimental pacifism. Instead, he took square aim at “that zone where ethics and power meet, defending the necessity of power in ordering society while refusing to yield on ethical standards.”<sup>5</sup> *Moral Man and Immoral Society* made quite a splash when it first appeared. Having more in common with the Brooks Brothers suit than the leisure suit, the book’s arguments and observations have held up quite well over the past seventy years. May the following summary stimulate you to read this classic.

#### MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY

Niebuhr argues that while a certain amount of caring and selflessness can be cultivated in relationships between individuals, these qualities are largely lacking when social groups interact. There is nothing sufficiently powerful yet developed by society to check the egoistic impulses of national, racial, and

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economic groups. Social scientists and religious moralists make the mistake of believing that greater intelligence or increased piety is sufficient to lead society to perfection. To be sure, these both can lead to positive developments; they often don't make things worse. But only power can dislodge hegemonic power.

Niebuhr proceeds to survey potential sources of social change, weighing the abilities of these resources to actually bring about a more just society. His comments on religious resources are most important to the development of this paper, but I must note Niebuhr's insightful analyses of reason, justice, love, middle class liberal intellectuals, ruling classes, nation-states, and Marxist revolutionaries. He concludes none of these resources are singly capable of meeting the challenges of modern society. He also notes the idealism inherent in the positions of many who work for social justice (a legacy of The Enlightenment) and their vision of a social future characterized by anarchy.

Regarding religion, Niebuhr notes its great power to help believers as they struggle to bring about change. It does this by creating a moral vision and by supplying hope. Niebuhr is a realist in that he believes history to show that social groups have nearly always acted selfishly, and probably always will. If people who wish to change society paused to reflect on this reality, it would be difficult to muster any enthusiasm or motivation to take on so difficult a project. Religion helps by providing the comforting illusion that radical social change is possible.

Niebuhr feels that an honest intellectual assessment of society must end up flirting with cynicism. In a brutal modern age, high moral ideals can seem unattainable, yet they are an absolute necessity. But an honest look at the vicissitudes of modernity will finally relieve the religious moralist of some illusions, especially the one that it is satisfactory to conduct one's personal life according to the highest ethical standard while leaving "the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions."

In the task of that redemption the most effective agents will be [people] who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of [humankind] can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places." The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.<sup>6</sup>

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Niebuhr’s work foreshadowed a paradox of the postmodern academy. The paradox, crudely stated, is: if you believe in something with all your heart, it’s probably wrong, but if you analyze and qualify your belief too much, who is going to care enough to act upon your assertions? Svi Shapiro notes the same dilemma when he detects a “state of intellectual and moral schizophrenia so cogently captured by the liberation theologian Sharon Welch in what she calls the dual contemporary imperatives of acting with ‘infinite suspicion and absolute commitment.’”<sup>7</sup>

I echo Shapiro<sup>8</sup> when I note how the Right, particularly its religious fundamentalist and evangelical component, has succeeded in mobilizing so much political action in recent years. Academics may sit back and criticize the intellectual underpinnings of fundamentalists’ activities or refuse to use similar tactics, but the fact remains that, by and large, academics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have had a hard time rivaling the results achieved by religious true believers. Yet, aren’t we academics secretly jealous of those who perceive the world in simple terms and can work cheerfully and tirelessly at achieving a practical goal? I fear the university is growing increasingly irrelevant in the larger American conversation and I believe a combination of faith and knowledge might help buck that trend. I do not want to be counted among the “tragically hip,”<sup>9</sup> those who are oh-so knowing about how rotten things are, and oh-so powerless to generate movement toward improving things.

Niebuhr notes the modernist “loss of confidence in moral forces.”<sup>10</sup> I think it is possible to confidently believe in a God of cosmic social justice and to heed the prophet’s call to go beyond natural human limitations in joining the struggle for a better society. Yet, unlike the fundamentalist, I don’t think it is necessary to believe God has already spoken the last word of truth. In a spirit of free intellectual inquiry, we must be open to learning what our Gods have to tell us through the stories of those who believe differently; perhaps Niebuhr might say through those whose illusions differ from ours.

#### RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Having asserted the importance of tempering one’s own belief with other kinds of understanding, I now encounter discourses of spirituality. Might discourses of spirituality help bridge the faith-knowledge gap in the academy identified by Sloan? Spirituality is a language that is encountered, among other places, in corporate management theories and in schools of educational administration and educational leadership. Gilbert Fairholm defines spirit as

each person’s vital, energizing force or principle, the core of self... Spirit lies at the heart of all things. Our spirit defines our meaning and motivates our actions... Spirit, along with mind and body compose the soul—the whole person... We can define spiritual as

the essential human values from around the world and across time that teach us how humanity belongs within the greater scheme of circumstance and how we can realize harmony in life and work.<sup>11</sup>

Do those who advocate spirituality see a difference between spirituality and religion? Michael Dantley and Judy Rogers tell us

there is a poignant difference between spirituality and religion. Religion serves as the structured embodiment of moral codes and the institutionalized guardian of the forms and anatomy of our performed reverence for a supernatural power. Religion systematizes and canonizes the rites and rituals, the parcels and practices that are deemed legitimate in humans' encounters with the divine.<sup>12</sup>

What are we to make of such a discourse, one that seems to position itself as a theory of everything and as a set of beliefs independent of religion? Marxist scholars such as Slavoj Zizek<sup>13</sup> and Majia Nadesian<sup>14</sup> are quite skeptical about spirituality. Both see it as the perfect compliment to the project of global corporate capitalism. They explain how spirituality can easily be used by management to gain the assent of workers and discourage critical thought. Workers who are engaged in a spiritual project of self-actualization and corporate team building become more willing to substitute corporate interests for their own. Workers who fail have only themselves, not corporate values and practices, to blame for their misery. They just weren't spiritual enough.

Richard Quantz (personal communication) has studied spirituality and is puzzled by what the term ultimately refers to in phrases such as "mind, body, and spirit." He sees spirituality arising from a baby-boom era suspicion of institutions and as an expression of American individualism. He thinks it might be understood in sociological terms as being the opposite of alienation, a feeling of connectedness with other people and/or parts of the self. He notes the ability of people to consider themselves "spiritual" without being "religious," which enables them to avoid institutionalized approaches to matters of the spirit.

I think one reason discourses of spirituality have gained currency is that they overcome "separation of church and state" issues posed by the First Amendment. Those who advocate incorporating a spiritual voice in educational leadership discourses seem to see religions as ideological superstructures that derive from one true spiritual base. The spirit is universal and unchanging. Religions are thought to be imperfect and incomplete reflections of the spirit. So in places where bringing up one's religious beliefs would be considered illegal or to be an imposition of one's culture on others, the spiritual voice is acceptable because it is culturally and ideologically neutral. I applaud the

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development of the spiritual voice for this reason—it does allow conversations about American public schooling to go beyond the technical and rational.

Although I am willing to utilize the opening that spirituality has created in educational leadership discourses, I have difficulty accepting spirituality's claims to universality and neutrality. I argue that spiritual discourses uncritically choose certain theological positions and reject others, and that these choices make a difference. I proceed no further without rejecting certain arguments employed by white male Protestants through the centuries. I am not arguing that my Protestant beliefs make me culturally superior or doctrinally correct. I am merely stating that I have difficulty seeing my specific set of beliefs subsumed under the umbrella of spirituality. By holding my beliefs up for inspection, I invite others to join in an honest and honorable dialogue about the effects of belief on specific practices in education.

Discourses of spirituality assume that the Holy is an eternal essence, not a conscious being. The God of Protestant neo-orthodoxy is a being who demands and offers much. This is a God who stands for social justice on a cosmic scale. This can be frightening at times and reassuring at others. Frightening because the way God wants us to live is directly at odds with the way of life that results from ideologies and practices of our world's power elites. John Dominic Crossan<sup>15</sup> reminds us that Jesus did not meet death at the hands of a fringe group. Christ's execution was a legal and intentional act of the Roman Empire, which represented the normacy of civilization at the time. As a Christian educator, I heed God's call to enact a just system of education, and it is frightening to think that to follow Christ is to jump on a collision course with the mainstream of civilization. Dantley and Rogers say, "Spirituality will cause school leaders to deconstruct or demystify their present situation and construct a project for change."<sup>16</sup> Neo-orthodox Protestantism affords an opportunity to inject this noble project with a sense of radical urgency. Yet God is there when things look bleakest with a message of hope symbolized by Christ's resurrection. Easter Sunday is a signal that God's kingdom of justice on earth has already begun. This can come as good news to those who work each day to improve opportunities for children in America's schools. The impersonal eternal essence of spirituality is not able to be as demanding or as comforting as this God.

Discourses of spirituality uncritically assume that the Holy resides within the self. Fairholm defines our spirituality as the very "core of self."<sup>17</sup> Religious services I have attended that were based on spirituality emphasized a message that I would paraphrase as "everything's gonna be OK because you are special inside." Comforting as this message is, the neo-orthodox Protestant message is more so because it is based on a set of statements about the human condition that are more believable to me. It begins with the assertion that humans are irreparably flawed. This is completely different from the Augustinian notion of

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original sin, passed through the generations by sexual intercourse. The Protestant belief is that we are separated from God by what we do and by what we leave undone. As a teacher, I constantly feel unequal to the task I'm called to do. I feel so limited—in love, knowledge, patience, time, energy, wisdom, and so on. But God forgives me completely even though I've not done enough to earn it. With God's forgiveness, I am emboldened to keep fighting the good fight in my classroom, growing each day in my ability to selflessly serve all my students, even those I don't find to be very likeable. Only a God who resides outside of me can call me to see powerful social forces of hegemony and oppression for what they are and to struggle mightily, flawed as I am, to make the world better. And God is there at the end of the day to help me lick my wounds and come out fighting hard again tomorrow.

Discourses of spirituality are for those who wish to think beyond the technical and rational without encountering the problematic aspects of institutionalized religions. It is understandable to want to de-emphasize religion, for a record of wrongs committed in the name of religion would fill a library. But even if we understand it solely as myth, religion speaks directly to human problems that defy easy definition or solution. The modernist rational mind cannot grasp how one can be committed to a religious worldview and remain open-minded. Scholars like Tillich and Niebuhr show it is possible by demonstrating the flexibility and resourcefulness of the religious social imagination. I hold up neo-orthodox Protestant theology as a wellspring of ideas for educational leaders who wish to confront the world as it is and work toward a world that might be better.

#### NOTES

1. Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
  2. Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).
  3. Ibid., 2.
  4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "More on Power/Knowledge," in *Rethinking Power*, Ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 172.
  5. William Pfaff, "Religiosity and Foreign Policy: When Power Disdains Realism," *International Herald Tribune*, 3 February 2003.
  6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932, 2001), 276-277.
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7. Svi Shapiro, in Wendy Kohli (Ed.), *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 300.
  8. Ibid., 304.
  9. The Tragically Hip is a rock band from Ontario, Canada.
  10. Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 154.
  11. Gilbert Fairholm, *Capturing the Heart of Leadership: Spirituality and Community in the New American Workplace* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 25.
  12. Michael Dantley & Judy Rogers, “Including a Spiritual Voice in Educational Leadership and School Reform Discourses,” *International Journal of School Reform* (10) 2 (January 2001), 94.
  13. Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief: Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001).
  14. Majia Holmer Nadesan, “The Discourses of Corporate Capitalism and Evangelical Capitalism,” *Management Communication Quarterly* (13)2, (August 1999), 3-42.
  15. John Dominic Crossan, “Historical Jesus Scholarship Methods and Results” (The Arthur C. Wickenden Lecture, Miami University, Oxford, OH, November 20-21, 2002).
  16. Dantley and Rogers, “Spiritual Voice,” 87.
  17. Fairholm, *Capturing the Heart*, 25.
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