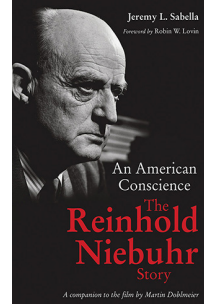


## Book Review

Jeremy L. Sabella.  
*An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*  
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017. Pbk, xvi, 155.  
ISBN: 978-0-8028-7527-3. \$19.99.

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Twentieth-century America endured many monumental shifts and developments within society, politics, and religion. Reinhold Niebuhr served as a guiding voice throughout his life. Jeremy Sabella's work seeks to demonstrate how Niebuhr's theology and politics often functioned as the true "American Conscience," guiding major thinkers of Niebuhr's own time and shaping future leaders within society. Sabella's work serves as a companion text to a recent (2016) documentary film with the same title, directed by renowned documentarian Martin Doblmeier (p. x). The film interviewed prominent figures for their opinions on thought and influence of Reinhold Niebuhr. Sabella assembles his text on Niebuhr in conversation with the transcripts of interviews used for the film, and consequently benefits from the incorporation of so many unique perspectives.

Sabella structures his volume by breaking down Niebuhr's years of influence into five separate chapters, each seeking to analyze a given epoch of Niebuhr's career. The first chapter opens with an analysis of Niebuhr the pastor, examining his thirteen years serving at the Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit from 1915-1928. Here the reader sees Niebuhr emerging onto the national stage, largely through his criticisms of automaker Henry

Ford's labor practices (pp. 3-4, 16). Niebuhr's support of the American cause in World War I further elevated his platform within the American religious landscape. The chapter also covers Niebuhr's relocation to New York City as he began serving as a professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, from which he published his first major book, *Moral Man and the Immoral Society* in 1932, which firmly cemented himself as one of the leading theological voices in America. The transition from pastor to academic thus guides chapter one.

Sabella's second chapter frames Niebuhr's continued rise to national prominence around several key contributions to American life during the Great Depression, as well as during the beginning of World War II. The foundations of Niebuhr's future position as "the establishment theologian" are well-established by Sabella in chapter two. Sabella points to the "Serenity Prayer," possibly Niebuhr's most commonly-known contribution among American life, his interactions at Union with theological giants Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich, and to several additional books written in the 1930s and 1940s to underscore how prolific and impactful these years were to Niebuhr's career.

The third chapter describes Niebuhr's contributions during World War II, as well as in the half-decade after the war. Sabella highlights Niebuhr's work *The Children of Light and the*

*Children of Darkness* (1944), which embodied his Christian realist viewpoint in examining the world (p. 68). The fourth chapter analyzes his influence throughout the 1950s, and his attempts to understand his own theology in light of the advent of the nuclear age. Sabella's analysis in chapter four emphasizes Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* (1952), as well as his life-changing stroke, which forced him to slow down his torrid pace. As a result, Niebuhr was able to strike up a profound friendship with Jewish intellectual, Abraham Joshua Heschel—an important interfaith development at the time (pp. 102-3). In the 1950s, Niebuhr also interacted with major religious figures like Billy Graham and John Courtney Murray. The final chapter, the fifth, concludes the book with a discussion of Niebuhr's legacy in the latter half of the twentieth century, and on into the twenty-first, drawing heavily on many of the interviewees.

I found the book to be a very helpful overview of the career of one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the twentieth century. By covering such a prominent and long-lasting career at the center of American theology and politics, Sabella has given his readers a strong glimpse of Niebuhr's legacy and impact on twentieth-century thought. Due to the brevity of the text, Sabella is unable to truly dive deeply into the nuance and development of each of Niebuhr's theological constructs. Nevertheless, Sabella often succeeds at succinctly explaining a complicated topic in order for readers to focus on Niebuhr's contributions as opposed to bogging the reader down with protracted explanations of theological concepts.

Sabella's book also helpfully utilizes many of Niebuhr's prominent works as signposts for the reader in order to summarize key developments and shifts in his thinking and worldview.

But the true gift of the book comes from the insights and reflections by the prestigious interviewees. Sabella's access to the transcripts of the interviews allows him to frame his arguments with reflections by some of the most famous intellectuals of the twentieth century, even including former President Jimmy Carter. Likewise, Reinhold Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, provides excellent insights and personal reflections throughout the book regarding who Niebuhr was as a father.

While Sabella's work succeeds in providing an overarching view of Reinhold Niebuhr's contributions to American theology, politics, and social ideologies, it unfortunately tends to read Niebuhr's later positions and thinking back into his early works. For example, Sabella often will view developments in Niebuhr's thought with the perspective of hindsight, such as noting how Niebuhr was a pacifist in the aftermath of World War I but would change his mind later during World War II (p. 10). While revisionist readings of Niebuhr's early thoughts and positions help to understand that he did not always ascribe to specific tenets such as pacifism, it also unfortunately shapes the ways in which the reader might encounter the "early Niebuhr."

As mentioned above, the impact of the book lies in the access to interviewees and their testimonies to Niebuhr's thought and influence upon their own communities and their own lives; however, the final chapter, chapter five, claims to "place the voices of our interviewees in conversation with one another" (p. 117). Unfortunately, Sabella does not entirely deliver on the promise. Chapter five sees the interviewees and their testimonies on given topics more or less as support for Sabella's own assertions and synopses of Niebuhr's legacy. Perhaps it would have been more exciting to

hear lengthier responses by the interviewees in lieu of Sabella's own, informed arguments on Niebuhr's impact upon theology and politics in twentieth-century America. Intriguingly, Sabella also highlights feminist scholars' critiques of Niebuhr's concepts of power, due to the fact that women have traditionally been excluded from positions of power (p.132). However, Sabella is quick to react to these critiques and others from scholars of race, by noting that "neither critique undermines the underlying logic of Niebuhr's ethic" (p.134). Sabella instead could have let these critiques stand on their own, forcing the reader to decide for him or herself.

Despite these minor issues, the book remains a helpful introduction for new Niebuhr enthusiasts, or a helpful summary text for veteran Niebuhr fans. Sabella's incorporation of the reflections of people who knew Niebuhr well, including his own daughter, and those intellectuals who later would shape the theological landscape of American Christianity gives readers a new text that provides an understanding of how Niebuhr directly contributed to many people in many ways.

