Christianity, Dissent, and the Cold War: Reinhold Niebuhr and A.J. Muste

Leilah Danielson, Ph.D.
Northern Arizona University

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Reinhold Niebuhr's influence on the development of Cold War internationalism has received enormous attention from scholars interested in the cultural and ideological foundations of the Cold War – and rightly so. His argument that liberals between the two world wars were sentimental about human nature and naïve about the realities of power informed the *realpolitick* that characterized American foreign policy after World War II.[1] Niebuhr's ideas, however, did not go unchallenged.

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The most insightful alternative to Niebuhr's "Christian realism" came from A.J. Muste, the organizational, intellectual, and spiritual head of the anti-nuclear and anti-war movements from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki until his death in February 1967. Indeed, contemporaries viewed Niebuhr and Muste as "contrasting symbols of nonpacifist and pacifist Christianity" after World War II.[2] Re-visiting Muste's thought thus demonstrates that Christianity shaped resistance as well as accommodation to the Cold War and reminds us that Christianity, like all powerful cultural constructions, is contested and multi-vocal. It also

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[1] See, for example, Walter LeFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002* (9th edition, McGraw-Hill).
[2] Nat Hentoff, Peace Agitator: *The Story of A.J. Muste* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 42.

helps to explain why Muste assumed so much influence and importance to the anti-war movement of the 1960s, while Niebuhr appeared irrelevant to younger activists, even as he denounced the war in Vietnam.[3]

The careers of Niebuhr and Muste are strikingly similar, but there are divergences that I would suggest are crucial for understanding their different responses to the Cold War. Both men came from immigrant families. Niebuhr was the son of German immigrants and Muste himself emigrated from Holland when he was six years old. Both men hailed from the Midwest and came under the influence of the Social Gospel early in their careers as ministers. Muste's background was more modest than Niebuhr's, and more theologically conservative. Niebuhr's father was a prominent minister, while Muste's was a factory worker. Niebuhr's father mixed liberal and evangelical elements in his theological outlook, while Muste was raised on a strict diet of Dutch Reformed Calvinism.[4]

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Their engagement with the Social Gospel brought both men into social reform. Niebuhr moved tentatively toward socialism and pacifism,

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[3] For how younger Protestants and New Left activists viewed Niebuhr, see Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993*. For Muste and the New Left, see, for example, Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).
[4] See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*; Robinson, *Abraham Went Out*; and Muste, "Sketches for an Autobiography," [1957-1960] reprinted in Nat Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 14-38.

while Muste embraced both ideologies during World War I and consequently lost his pulpit. From that point on, Muste's home was the labor movement and other movements for social change rather than the church.[5]

Through their involvement in left-wing politics, both Niebuhr and Muste developed critiques of pacifism, critiques that help explain the subsequent trajectories of their careers. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr criticized his fellow liberal Protestants, many of whom identified as pacifists, for failing to recognize the distinction between the morality of individuals and groups. He also argued that, in a society of competing interests, some level of coercion was necessary for creating social change.[6]

Niebuhr wrote *Moral Man* to convince middle-class Protestants to side with labor against capital, but his argument had implications for international relations. While most Protestant clergy and many liberals were opposed to American entry into the European conflict, Niebuhr engaged in a one-man crusade for intervention, arguing that the Nazis could not be repelled by anything but force. In early 1942, he wrote in *Christianity and Crisis* that if "the opponent is resolute and will not yield without using every available resource to execute his will…either we must yield or use all our

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[5] See Muste, "Sketches," 57-123.
[6] Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; reprint 1948), xx, 172.

resources," an argument that foreshadowed his support for saturation bombing and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[7]

As early as 1942, Niebuhr extended this argument to the Soviet Union.[8] The tyrannical nature of the Soviet government meant that there was scant possibility of genuine international cooperation after the war, and he dismissed the notion of a federal world government as yet another manifestation of liberal idealism. By 1946, he had become convinced of the expansionist character of Russian foreign policy and called upon the United States to confront the Soviet Union. This was not merely containment; in true realist fashion, Niebuhr believed that the United States had to be willing to risk war if it were to maintain its position in Europe.[9]

In positing the United States as the savior of "democratic civilization" against Soviet tyranny, Niebuhr always struck a reluctant, tragic note. Yet, as Campbell Craig has recently argued, if international politics was a struggle between aggressive totalitarianism and defensive democracy, "a battle in which the Children of Light would 'have to play hardball' if they were to survive, then it becomes difficult to see how Niebuhr could plausibly

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[7] Niebuhr, Lead Editorial, *Christianity and Crisis* (March 9, 1942), 2 and Lead Editorial, *Christianity and Crisis* (August 10, 1942), 1.
[8] See, for example, Niebuhr, "The Anglo-Russian Pact," *Christianity and Crisis* (June 29, 1942) in which he argues that the Russians subscribed to "a kind of religion which has sought to achieve its ends in opposition to the western Christian culture and civilization" (3).
[9] Niebuhr, "The Fight for Germany," *Life* (October 21, 1946), 65, 67. For a more detailed discussion of Niebuhr's early Cold War activism, see Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press).

oppose anything the United States might do to prevail over the Soviet Union."[10] Moreover, as Craig also points out, at least until 1960, Niebuhr failed to grapple with the challenge to "realist" thinking posed by the thermonuclear revolution. Realist thinking relies ultimately on the willingness of a nation to wage war. However, with the development of the thermonuclear weapon and the intercontinental ballistic missile in 1950s, the American rationale of "great war was becoming absurd…major war to stop potential Soviet aggression appeared likely to bring such destruction to the United States as to destroy its society indefinitely."[11]

Like Niebuhr, Muste found himself increasingly at odds with the pacifist community in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In a 1928 article, he criticized pacifists for their efforts to dissuade workers from using violence in the struggle against capitalism, and contended that the economic and social system was the real source of violence and conflict in society.[12] Within a few years, Muste had broken with pacifism and become a Marxist-Leninist. He and his followers – known as Musteites – were instrumental in

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[10] Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 79.
[11] Ibid, 29.
[12] Muste, "Pacifism and Class War" [1928], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, 179-85.

helping to build the powerful movement for industrial unionism of the 1930s.[13]

By 1936, Muste had returned to the Christian, pacifist fold. In an argument he would later use against Niebuhr, he argued that the reason the secular Left was rent with sectarianism was that it had been corrupted by "the philosophy of power." Once one assumes, he wrote, that "in some situations, you must forswear the way of love, of truth, must accept the method of domination, deceit, violence,…there is no stopping place."[14] His "return to pacifism" did not, however, signify an abandonment of his radical politics, and he spent the rest of his life attempting to fuse the commitment, dedication, and self-sacrifice he found on the radical left with the emphasis on means, individual conscience, and spirituality that he found within the pacifist community. This quest led him to embrace Gandhian nonviolence.[15]

Muste's commitment to Gandhian nonviolence reflected a particular understanding of Christianity, one that was rooted in the Social Gospel. First, he argued that Christianity recognized the "absolute value of the

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[13] See Muste, "Sketches," 132-54; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-33* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966); and Ray Rosenzweig, "Radicals and the Jobless: The Musteites and the Unemployed Leagues, 1932-1936," *Labor History* 16 (Winter 1975), 51-77.
[14] Muste, "Return to Pacifism" [1936], reprinted in Hentoff, ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, 199-201.
[15] See ibid and Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), 175, 125-26. For a more detailed discussion of Muste and Gandhian nonviolence, see Leilah Danielson, "'In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi': American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915-41," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72, no. 2 (June 2003), 361-88.

individual," which was the starting point for nonviolence.[16] Second, Muste believed that Christianity was a "social concept" as opposed to an individual ethic. "The notion that there is or can be one law for the individual and another for society…seems to me to find no support what ever in the Jewish-Christian scriptures." While he granted that violence and the struggle for power were "indubitable facts," he denied – in an explicit attack on Niebuhrian realism – that they could be "accepted by Christian teachers as normative for Christian thought and practice."[17] Instead, Christians should follow the example of Jesus Christ and the prophets, who had demonstrated the power of repentance and suffering love.

Historians have followed Niebuhr's lead and portrayed Muste as an idealist, who expressed the "pure, unmixed, unadulterated soul of the Social Gospel," in the words of Donald Meyer.[18] Yet Muste's theological orientation always retained elements of his Calvinist past, and he had a "strong conviction about human frailty and corruption." But he insisted that this was "not the Christian last word." God was "infinite justice and righteousness," but also "infinite mercy." Forgiveness, moreover, came with

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[16] Muste, *Non-Violence in an Aggressive World*, 21-25.
[17] Muste, *Not By Might: Christianity, the Way to Human Decency* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 91, 109.
[18] Historians have tended to go along with Donald Meyer's characterization of Niebuhr's opponents as naïve idealists who remained stuck in the past. See Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 369. Richard Fox comments that Niebuhr misrepresented his liberal colleagues, but fails to substantiate this claim by seriously considering their criticism of Niebuhr. See Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 168.

the charge “go and sin no more.”[19] “The Scriptures,” he later wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr, “are not simply an extended commentary on the single text, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ We read in them the commandment, ‘Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,’ and the promise, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”[20] The role of a prophet was not only to invoke a realization of God’s judgment, but also to offer the possibility of escape from that judgment through repentance; otherwise, all one offered was a “theology of despair.”

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Muste’s theological perspective shaped his response to the atomic bomb and to the Cold War. In a 1947 book on the bomb, *Not by Might: Christianity, the Way to Human Decency*, he suggested that the way for Americans to overcome the moral and political crisis engendered by the bomb was to recognize that atomic war was “sin of the most hideous kind” and that they were complicit in it. If Americans, he wrote, stopped “to look more closely, we would realize…[that] we are who have waged war, who dropped atomic bombs... who make atomic bombs and the instruments of germ warfare....” The question was not, therefore, how to prevent other countries from waging war on the United States, “but how we [can be] purged of the guilt of war and selfishness....” The only answer was for

[19] Muste, “Pacifism and Perfectionism” [1948], reprinted in Hentoff,ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, 312, 319.
[20] Muste, “Theology of Despair” [1948], reprinted in Hentoff,ed., *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, 307.

Americans to repent, and repentance, according to Muste, required unilateral disarmament. The United States had to take personal responsibility for introducing the atomic bomb by demonstrating its willingness "to lay down its life that mankind may live."[21]

This perspective explains why Muste and other radical pacifists openly advocated draft resistance, refusal to pay taxes, and other forms of civil disobedience for war as a way of protesting the Cold War. They believed that their example of refusing to go along – and suffering for it – would convince their fellow Americans that they bore responsibility for ending the nuclear arms race.[22] This call for unilateral disarmament placed Muste and his followers in the radical wing of the peace movement; while most peace activists viewed universal disarmament and world government as solutions to the current crisis, radical pacifists believed that only dramatic, unilateral action in a spirit of humility and repentance could break the cycle of suspicion and fear that drove the arms race.[23]

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[21] Muste, *Not By Might*, 117-18, 123. It should be noted that Muste was no apologist for the Soviet Union, but he believed that the United States had a special responsibility to resolve the international crisis. See, for example, Muste, "The Spiritual Menace of Russian Communism," *Fellowship* 10, no. 6 (June 1944): 103-05. Paul Boyer discusses the differences between Muste and Niebuhr regarding the morality of the atomic bomb in *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 219-20.

[22] See, for example, minutes of the "Continuation Committee of Chicago Conference," Yellow Springs, Ohio, April 20-22, 1948, Peacemakers Box, Swarthmore College Peace Collection; leaflet distributed by CNVA, circa 1962, Barbara Deming Collection, Schlesinger Library.

[23] For a discussion of the tactics of the peace and anti-nuclear movements from 1945 through 1970, see Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, volumes 1 & 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 1997).

Muste's calls for unilateral disarmament were indeed utopian, yet, as he frequently pointed out, not necessarily more utopian than Niebuhrian Christian realism. In articles and speeches too numerous to discuss in detail here, Muste challenged realism on its own terms. For example, in a 1954 article he criticized the notion put forward by realists that nuclear war was a lesser evil than Communism and that an arms race could prevent war. "The *fear* engendered by the awful nature of the modern weapons stimulate suspicion, bitterness, recrimination, hysteria," not a genuine desire to resolve differences and negotiate. Moreover, an arsenal of hydrogen bombs would not "deter communist advance in Asia," but instead further convince Asian peoples that the United States aimed to dominate them, "one thing they will not tolerate from any Western nation." Muste concluded by warning ominously of the consequences of U.S. aid to Indochina, noting that the "U.S. is regarded as a military interloper in Asia," as "the 'new imperialism.'"[24]

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As Muste predicted, the logic of a nuclear arms race and containment ideology led to the Vietnam War. In his tireless efforts to build an anti-war movement (he was founder and chairman of Mobe, the Spring Mobilization Committee against the War in Vietnam), Muste maintained that Vietnam

[24] Muste, "The H-Bomb as Deterrent," *Christianity and Crisis* (June 14, 1954), 77-79.

was not an aberration but rather the fulfillment of American foreign policy and demanded that the United States unilaterally withdraw.[25] Such efforts endeared him to the New Left and the emerging antiwar movement.[26]

By 1966, Niebuhr had also come out against the war in Vietnam, but only tentatively and within classic realist terms, maintaining simply that it was a disaster for U.S. Cold War interests.[27] He also began to emphasize co-existence – as opposed to retaliation – and to consider world government as a restraint upon the possibility of nuclear war, recognizing that "the evils of a general war with modern means of mass destruction are so terrible and so incalculable that it is immoral to prefer them to [Communist domination]."[28] Such a position implied a retreat from realism, which is based on the assumption of international anarchy and the willingness of the nation-state to risk war to defend its interests. Niebuhr, however, as Campbell Craig has recently pointed out, "did nothing to transform his insight into a political manifesto, much less a new scholarly argument."[29] He increasingly seemed irrelevant to younger, more radical Protestants, who explored liberation theology and engaged in draft resistance and civil disobedience to protest the

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[25] See, for example, Muste, "Memo on Vietnam," *WRL News* (July 15, 1964); "Vietnam: The Political Reality," *Liberation* 9, no. 7 (October 1964), 20-22; "A Visit to Saigon," *Liberation* 11, no. 3 (May-June 1966), 7-10; and "Is There a Way Out?" *Liberation* 11, no. 7 (October 1966), 19-22.
[26] See, for example, Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer...The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), xiii.
[27] See Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 92 and Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left*, 129.
[28] Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 90.
[29] Ibid, 92.

Vietnam War, tactics Muste had pioneered in the early years of the Cold War.[30]

This analysis of the dispute between Niebuhr and Muste contributes to the ongoing discussion of the relationship between culture and American foreign policy. For Niebuhr, the Christian ethic of love was inapplicable to nations, and, while he found violence personally repugnant, he was willing to condone it in the interest of promoting the national interest. For Muste, on the other hand, both nations and individuals were subject to the moral law. As a believer, therefore, his role was to bring the nation to a realization of its sin and show the way to forgiveness. These theological differences had important consequences for the political culture of the Cold War. Niebuhr became an important figure and symbol of Cold War liberalism, while Muste became an important figure and inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the movement against the war in Vietnam.

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[30] For differences between Niebuhr and the younger generation of Protestants, see Hulsether, 132.