

Christian realism – a classification

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This article investigates the notion of Christian realism through various definitions and conceptualisations. The classification differentiates three approaches: Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism, Niebuhr's contemporaries and followers, and Christian realism as a phenomenon in the history of thought. This method allows us to present this much-discussed concept briefly but comprehensively from different perspectives.

Keywords: *Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, history of political thought, Christian political thought*

Introduction

Christian realism has been defined and conceptualised in various ways. Still, it is related chiefly to 20th-century American Protestant theologians and political thinkers, especially Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). Indeed, several researchers equate Niebuhr's thought with Christian realism. However, his – like-minded – contemporaries (or colleagues) and his followers are also often considered Christian realists. Moreover, others broaden the concept in order to include historical figures who preceded (or influenced) Niebuhr and 20th-century Christian realists; in this way, a few scholars and intellectuals might even denote those authors as Christian realists who are both Christian and (political) realists. This article will venture into these different approaches to introduce key definitions and conceptualisations of Christian realism.

This will be approached developmentally, meaning that ideas on Niebuhr's Christian realism (both his and other scholars') will be shared first.¹ Then, the interpretations focusing on Niebuhr's contemporaries and followers will be presented. After, Christian realism will be conceptualised as a phenomenon in the history of thought. It should be emphasised that the literature on Christian realism is vast, which implies that only a few authoritative interpretations that fit the article's structure will be introduced. During the analysis, the representatives of each group will be mentioned as examples. To make it clear, this article does not wish to provide a final answer on Christian realism but intends to present a diversity of clarifications around this concept.

Niebuhr's Christian realism

„Christian Realism is a very complex set of ideas that do not easily conform to a short and simple definition“, wisely argues Tsoncho Tsonchev. Referring to Robin Lovin, he adds: „[p]erhaps this explains why Reinhold Niebuhr, who is most closely associated with this theological and political perspective, was 'reluctant' to use the term 'Christian Realism' as a 'proper name'.“² This statement is valid; Niebuhr was indeed reluctant to use the term.³ The term „Christian realism“ occurs exceptionally rarely, around ten times in nineteen books Niebuhr authored alone throughout his scholarship.⁴ Furthermore,

it appears frequently only in the 1950's, so in Niebuhr's mature/late scholarship. Finally, he does not provide a systematic or comprehensive description of Christian realism.

Probably Niebuhr's most valuable – and certainly the most cited – text regarding Christian realism is his volume *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, published in 1953, especially its first chapter titled *Faith and the Empirical Method in Modern Realism* and his essay on *Augustine's Political Realism*.⁵

In the introduction, Niebuhr sets Christian realism in opposition to the „scientific culture” or „scientific method” dominant in his era (and collectively to the modern times), which stands on religious presupposition and suffers from two fundamental mistakes: the idea of the perfectibility of man and the idea of progress.⁶ He argues that in order to avoid (or at least mitigate) grievous errors and their consequences, more realism is needed in social theories, especially in regard to the nature of man. The Christian view of man (and especially the Augustinian version of it) adequately understands that the human being is an „independent and self-determining force in the very social process and historical continuum, in which it is also a creature,” and the fact that its radical freedom „is the basis of the self's destructive as well as creative powers...”.⁷ In other words, one of the foundations of Christian realism is the Christian (Augustinian) theological anthropology, which simultaneously accepts the doctrine of the image of God in man and its sinfulness.

Now, we have one essential element specified by Niebuhr, but does that mean Christian realism rests only on theological anthropology? Does that mean that Niebuhr's previous works, such as the *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which did not focus on individuals, are entirely free from Christian realism? Certainly not. That is why it is advisable to turn to the scholars who can complete (or at least add to) our knowledge of Niebuhr's Christian realism.

Richards W. Fox, one of the prominent biographers of Niebuhr, highlights the oppositional nature of Niebuhr's Christian realism (as we could see, it was posed against the scientific culture also by Niebuhr in the 1950s). Fox explains:

“Niebuhr’s Christian realism was in one sense a more negative than a positive perspective. It did not ordain specific positions on political issues. It demanded only that its adherents follow a middle path between the twin pitfalls of utopianism and resignation, sentimentality and cynicism.”⁸

Fox’s description not only sheds light on the flexibility of Niebuhr’s Christian realism but also on the rejection of the extremes and his dialecticism. The latter, i.e. dialecticism, also occurs in other conceptualisations of Christian realism. Robin Lovin – himself a contemporary Christian realist and one of the most authoritative sources regarding Niebuhr and Christian realism – emphasizes this feature. In his book on *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, he convincingly argues, “[w]e understand what Christian realism is largely by identifying the many less adequate views that it is not.”⁹

In his distinguished dissertation titled *From a Christian Socialist to a Christian Realist: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Soviet Union, 1930-1945*, Chen Liang, in relation to Niebuhr’s argument of the relationship between love and justice, argues that “[t]his was by far Niebuhr’s clearest formulation of one pillar of Christian realism, that is, the dialectic relationship between love and justice.”¹⁰ He later confirms that: “Christian realism, a political ethic that established a dialectic relationship between love and justice, already attracted an array of religious as well as atheist followers.”¹¹

It must be added that Liang underlines at least three critical characteristics of Christian realism: sin as a “linchpin” or the “dogma of sin” as “the cornerstone of Christian realism;¹² equality and equal justice as a basis of Christian realism;¹³ and the idea of necessity and corruption of power in Christian realism.¹⁴ In short, Liang follows the way – he also directly quotes in his dissertation, namely that – of Lovin, who argued that “Niebuhr’s position emerges as a complex of theological conviction, moral theory, and meditation on human nature in which the elements are mutually reinforcing rather than systematically related.”¹⁵

Many other original clarifications and definitions deserve to be mentioned that are directly related to Niebuhr, such as Larry Rasmussen’s, who stresses that the “qualifier

'Christian' injects the critical theological element and leads directly to the structure of Niebuhr's thought as one of idealism/realism."¹⁶ Nevertheless, the article intends to classify rather than cite all existing definitions.

Niebuhr's contemporaries and followers

Lovin is one of the many scholars who correctly underlines that even though „Reinhold Niebuhr was the most important voice of this movement,”¹⁷ it would be a mistake to ignore his like-minded contemporaries. Probably the most related figure is John Coleman Bennett (1902-1995), Niebuhr's friend and close colleague, who wrote a whole systematic work titled *Christian Realism*.¹⁸ In light of his treatise, it might be argued that the difference in style between Bennett and Niebuhr is more visible than the difference in principles.¹⁹

Lovin broadens the perspective on Christian realism by highlighting the following:

“It is, however, important to remember that the theological movement originated before Niebuhr took it up as his own. From the early 1930s, D.C. Macintosh and Walter Marshall Horton who wrote about 'religious realism' or 'realistic theology' in ways that influenced Niebuhr's call for a church that would produce 'religious or Christian realists'.”²⁰

Lovin's conclusion – one that has been accepted by many others – is that “Christian realism is a combination of different 'realisms' – political, moral, and theological.”²¹ At this point, it might be necessary to endorse the idea that in this attempt at classification, the categories are not mutually exclusive in regard to the researchers' descriptions. As we can see, Lovin is present in both groups since he conceptualises Niebuhr's Christian realism and Christian realism as a tradition (but the same might have been applied to Liang).

That Christian realism can be understood as a tradition or movement is also found in Ronald Stone, who argues that

“Christian realism was a reforming tradition drawn from the Social Gospel movement, the reforming populism of Robert La Follette, Woodrow Wilson’s reform program, and an appreciation of the hard realities of twentieth-century America.”²²

Another possible – and substantial – addition to the Christian realist movement beyond the formerly mentioned is to include the followers of Niebuhr or those who acted on similar principles. In order to acquire knowledge related to this group, it is suggested to consider a recent volume edited by Eric D. Patterson and Robert J. Joustra, published in 2022. As the title *Power Politics and Moral Order: Three Generations of Christian Realism – A Reader* indicates, the editors divide the Christian realists and their texts into three groups.²³ The first group involves the classical Christian realists, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Herbert Butterfield, John Foster Dulles, and Martin Wright. The second includes the Cold War Christian realists such as Kenneth W. Thompson, Paul Ramsey, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Ernest W. Lefever. Finally, the third consists of Jean Bethke Elshtain, George Weigel, Patterson, and Joustra themselves and a few others.

We might cite here the most significant arguments of a paper by Patterson and Joustra related to their book available at the Religious Freedom Institute Website. In this – above calling Christian realism “an Augustinian approach to foreign policy” – they cite James A. Herrick’s definition, which states that Christian realism is a “ ‘community of discourse’ meaning a group ‘that enable(s) people to think and act with unity to address a wide range of serious social problem’.”²⁴ This suggestion parallels the idea that Christian realism is not a well-defined ideology but rather a perspective.

The authors also recall Roger Shinn’s description, which defines the two parts of the phrase (Christian and realism) separately to present their adequate connection in Christian realism.²⁵ Last, and most importantly, they enlist and describe eight assumptions of Christian realism, which – or very similar – can also be found in an article written by Patterson titled *Eight Principles for Christian Realism* on the Providence Website.²⁶ These – in short – include the acceptance of basic realist tenets, Augustinian

theological grounds, the necessity of political order, a strong focus on power, the criticism of collective chauvinism, the consideration of all three levels of analysis (man, state, war), the rejection of idealism and conservatism, and the emphasis on the limits and restraints of politics. Again, Patterson and Joustra still consider Niebuhr a crucial figure in the tradition, but their perspective is not so narrow as to identify Christian realism only with Niebuhr.

Christian realism in the history of thought

„Niebuhr saw Augustine as the first Christian realist”, states Ronald Stone.²⁷ Indeed, Niebuhr argues that “Augustine was, by general consent, the first great ‘realist’ in Western history.”²⁸ As we could see, Patterson and Joustra also highlighted the Augustinian tradition regarding foreign policy and theology as many other authors, including our previous paper entitled *Christian Realism – Current Debates and Origins*.²⁹ Augustine’s influence on Christian realists (especially Niebuhr) certainly deserves attention, but in this case, specific authors consider him not only an antecedent of Christian realism but an actual Christian realist. In this understanding, Christian realism is a broader phenomenon in the history of thought.

Surprisingly, the Wikipedia article on Christian realism is a prime example of this approach since it argues that “Christian realism is a political theology in the Christian tradition. It is built on three biblical presumptions: the sinfulness of humanity, the freedom of humanity, and the validity and seriousness of the Great Commandment.”³⁰ Before raising doubts about the seriousness of Wikipedia, it should be mentioned – as it is correctly indicated by the contributors – that it is a verbatim quote from Tsonchev’s book entitled *The Political Theology of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Reinhold Niebuhr – Essays in Political Theology and Christian Realism*. This argument and Tsonchev’s general approach indicate that Christian realism is a broader phenomenon in the history of thought. He does not only write broadly about a “Christian realist perspective” (and its attributes) and intends to present the views of the “undisputed

'Christian realists' Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr but hopes to "show in the next pages that Saint Thomas has a place among the 'realists'."³¹

As a concluding – and hopefully thought-provoking – question, it can be asked that if Thomas Aquinas can be treated as a Christian and a realist, does that mean he is a Christian realist? If yes, does it mean that others who are Christian and (political) realists are also Christian realists? Our classification is certainly narrower, but it is a question worth answering.

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Endnotes

¹ It might be a matter of a thought-provoking debate whether Niebuhr's words on Christian realism are generally on Christian realism or it is *his* Christian realism, so which class should include Niebuhr's description or which are directly related to Niebuhr (for instance Liang's arguments on Niebuhr's Christian realism), but, for the sake of simplicity, it is discussed in the first instance.

² Tsonchev, Tsoncho, *The Political Theology of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Essay in Political Theology and Christian Realism* (Montreal: The Montreal Review E-Publishing, 2018) 3.

³ One of the rare occasions was a letter to his wife, Ursula Niebuhr, on September 20 1949; he writes: „Most of the evening discussion was between Bohlen's diplomatic realism and my Christian realism...” see Niebuhr, Ursula M. (ed.) *Remembering Reinhold Niebuhr. Letter of Reinhold and Ursula M. Niebuhr* (Harper San Francisco, 1991). Ronald Stone notes that it was Robert M. Lovett who „used the term *Christian realist* to describe Niebuhr in a book review in 1934.” see Stone, Ronald, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr. A mentor to the twentieth century* (Louisville/Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992)

⁴ This article, especially the arguments that are formed in general about Niebuhr's scholarship, heavily draws on certain parts of my former dissertation; see Darabos, Ádám, “A Critical Student of Augustine” – *Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of Augustine* (Doctoral Dissertation - Corvinus University of Budapest, 2023).

⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953)

⁶ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*, 3.

⁷ Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*, 7.

⁸ Fox, Richard Wightman, *Reinhold Niebuhr. A biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 277.

⁹ Lovin, Robin W., *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁰ Liang, Chen, *From a Christian Socialist to a Christian Realist: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Soviet Union, 1930-1945* (Doctoral Dissertation – National University of Singapore, 2007), 120.

¹¹ Liang, *From a Christian Socialist*, 216.

¹² Liang, *From a Christian Socialist*, IV, 17.

¹³ Liang, *From a Christian Socialist*, 65, 95.

¹⁴ Liang, *From a Christian Socialist*, 168.

¹⁵ Liang, *From a Christian Socialist*, 216.

¹⁶ Rasmussen, Larry, 'Introduction', Larry Rasmussen (ed.) *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1-41.

¹⁷ Professor Macintosh was Niebuhr's academic advisor when Niebuhr was a university student at Yale. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 2.

¹⁸ Bennet, John C., *Christian Realism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941)

¹⁹ For a summary, see. Darabos, Ádám, “Theologians” on Modern Politics: John C. Bennett', Hungarian Conservative Online. <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/philosophy/theologians-on-modern-politics-john-c-bennett/>, accessed 28 March 2024.

²⁰ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 1.

²¹ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 28.

²² Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, 203.

²³ Patterson, Eric D. – Joustra, Robert J., *Power Politics and Moral Order. Three Generations of Christian Realism – A Reader* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022).

²⁴ Patterson, Eric D. – Joustra, Robert J., 'Power Politics and Moral Order: Three Generations of Christian Realism. Cornerstone Forum. A Conversation on Religious Freedom and its Social Implications.' *Religious Freedom Institute*, 2022, https://religiousfreedominstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CornerstoneForum_No.310_PattersonandJoustra_PowerPoliticsandMoralOrder.pdf, accessed 28 March 2024.

²⁵ See Shinn, Roger L., 'Theological Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect', Long, Edward LeRoy – Handy, Robert T. (eds.), *Theology and Church in Time of Change: Essays in Honor of John Coleman Bennett* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1982).

²⁶ Patterson, Eric D., 'Eight Principles for Christian Realism', *Providence*. September 23. 2020. <https://providencemag.com/2020/09/eight-principles-christian-realism-reinhold-niebuhr/>, accessed 26 March 2024.

²⁷ Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, 204.

²⁸ Niebuhr, Christian Realism, 120-121.

²⁹ Darabos, Ádám, 'Christian realism – current debates and origins', *Danube Institute*, January 31. 2020. <https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/christian-realism-current-debates-and-origins>. accessed 28 March 2024.

³⁰ Wikipedia contributors, 'Christian realism', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (2024, February 27) https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Christian_realism&oldid=1210697085, accessed 26 March 2024. It is also interesting that *Encyclopedia Britannica* does not have an independent article on Christian realism. Nevertheless, the biography of Reinhold Niebuhr (written originally by John C. Bennett) mentions Christian realism as something „Niebuhr is best known for” and „which emphasised the persistent roots of evil in human life, see Bennett, John C., 'Reinhold Niebuhr', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Jun. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Reinhold-Niebuhr>, accessed 26 March 2024.

³¹ Tsonchev, *The Political Theology*, 6-7.