

Applying Niebuhr's ideas tough chore for academics

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

What happens when the contested legacy of America's most famous 20th-century theologian meets the harsh political realities of the 21st? You end up with questions like whether Reinhold Niebuhr would support waterboarding.

It's impossible to know what Niebuhr—arguably the preeminent public intellectual and U.S. theologian from the 1940s to the 1960s—would have said about the practice of torture by the U.S. in post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan.

But such questions are hardly a surprise at a time when everyone from President Obama to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to *New York Times* columnist David Brooks sees themselves as Niebuhr's acolytes.

Nor

are they a surprise when academics come together, as they did recently at Princeton University, and debate the long-term legacy of a figure claimed by both the political left and right, by religious and nonreligious alike.

A man who died in 1971 but has been heralded in recent years as "the man of the hour" deserves his praise, speakers agreed, but also has his limits.

Shaun Casey, who advised Obama on religious outreach during the 2008 campaign, believes that the pragmatic Niebuhr who's become so popular since 9/11 is often viewed as a straightforward disciple of realpolitik rather than a Christian theologian who wrestled with questions of transcendence.

The richness of Niebuhr's worldview—one that acknowledges the tragedy and limits of humanity while embracing a call for social justice—has been lost in the contemporary world, said Casey, who is writing a book on those he calls "Niebuhr's children."

"Today, you're either Glenn Beck or Dennis Kucinich," said Casey, an ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary who spoke February 24 at the Princeton event.

Gary Dorrien, who teaches at New York's Union Theological Seminary, where Niebuhr held court for more than three decades, said the problem in interpreting Niebuhr is that he "seemed to revel in dispiriting proclamations, such as, 'The possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good.'"

What is often overlooked, Dorrien said, is that Niebuhr was "a passionate type who took his own Christ-following passion for justice for granted. For him, the love ethic was always the point, the motive and the end."

Niebuhr's contributions to modern Christian thought include a sense of "irony and paradox," Dorrien said, as well as a well-honed sense of the "complex ambiguities inherent in all human choices."

The trouble with Niebuhr's famed "Christian realism," however, is that "it dropped the ball on economic justice after World War II. It left progressive Christianity without enough to say or do in its own language, in its own way and for its own reasons," Dorrien said.

Given Obama's own professed embrace of Niebuhr, it was inevitable that the president's record would be viewed through several Niebuhrian lenses.

Though Princeton scholar Jeffrey Stout couldn't attend the conference, his paper delivered at the

event was sharply critical of Obama and the president's embrace of the politically pragmatic Niebuhr. Stout said Obama "isn't a principled opponent of anything.

"The current president came to national attention as a candidate enunciating principles of justice for the conduct of warfare, statecraft, the domestic economy and political change," Stout said in his paper. "As soon as he described himself to an interviewer as a Niebuhrian, we should have known that the principles were nothing more than mushy sentiments to be thrown overboard at the first sign of rough weather."

Stout later added that he has studied Niebuhr and voted for Obama, but it's more complex than that. "It's time to start thinking seriously," he said, "about what they leave out."

Cornel West, an African-American religious philosopher who teaches at Princeton, reveres Niebuhr but acknowledged the many ways that Niebuhr's thought has been used to undergird political and religious conformity.

West, who has been critical of Obama on a number of issues, said Stout was "expressing something that's being felt more and more. He's on to something." But West said while he has been disappointed in Obama, "I also know what he's up against. I want to protect him, respect him and correct him." —RNS