

James Comey read a lot of Reinhold Niebuhr. Did he learn anything?

## **For a Niebuhrian, the former FBI director doesn't seem to have much self-doubt.**

by [K. Healan Gaston](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue

James Comey's memoir *A Higher Loyalty* reflects the former FBI director's intense engagement with the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and only by following Comey's efforts to be a Niebuhrian can we fully understand the book and begin to untangle some of the enigmas in Comey's behavior.

Comey's well-documented preoccupation with Niebuhr began in college, where he first read Niebuhr and wrote a [senior thesis](#) on how Niebuhr and Jerry Falwell portrayed the Christian's role in politics. The Catholic-turned-Methodist has idolized Niebuhr ever since, even using Niebuhr's name on [Twitter and Instagram accounts](#). He was drawn to Niebuhr, perhaps, because of his anxieties about death and the experience of being bullied.

Comey poignantly discusses how being bullied in high school led him to bully a fellow undergraduate. His account echoes Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), with its stress on the amoral behavior of groups as compared with individuals. "I surrendered to the loud laughter and the camaraderie of the group," Comey writes, "and maybe to a feeling of relief that I wasn't the target."

Understanding Niebuhr likely helped him decipher President Trump's psychology. He grasps the psychology of bullies such as Trump, especially how Trump targets the shortcomings of others in order to deflect attention from his own. He understands that because bullies project onto others traits they most fear in themselves, they view self-reflection as a weakness.

At one point, Comey tries to sum up Niebuhr's thought with a line from a country song: "God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy." It's a clever line, but it ignores the fact that for Niebuhr, human "craziness" follows a distinct pattern, one expressed in the Christian view of human nature and characterized by sin, anxiety,

guilt, hubris, tragedy, blindness, power, pretension, rationalization, and, above all, irony.

Comey begins the book in what seems like Niebuhrian fashion by acknowledging his own lifelong tendency to be “stubborn, prideful, overconfident, and driven by ego.” He goes on to identify doubt as the essence of wisdom. Yet neither in this memoir nor in his interviews does Comey come across as the doubting type. There’s even a hint of pride in his confession of egotism.

Comey makes plain his devotion to justice and frames the book with Niebuhr’s observation, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Yet at the same time Comey seems a bit tone-deaf to one of Niebuhr’s greatest insights—namely, the tendency of our innate limitations to twist and thwart our noblest pursuits.

My own view of Niebuhr inclines me to read *A Higher Loyalty* as neither a convincing apology nor a successful audition for a bid for the presidency, but rather as a lesson in pathos. As some discerning pundits have written, not all honest people possess good judgment. Nor do all who admit egotism undertake the deep self-reflection associated with wisdom.

The way Comey trains his powers of observation on others in his memoir may obscure the fact that he seems to lack the capacity for deep introspection. He is better at describing the proverbial storm without than the stench within. Many critics, left and right, see raw egotism in Comey’s fateful July 2016 decision to break with FBI protocol and reveal the findings of the bureau’s investigation into Hillary Clinton’s handling of her email.

In the course of announcing that charges were not being sought against Clinton, Comey scolded Clinton for being “extremely careless.” This move, in his view, necessitated his intervention again in October, just ten days before the election, to announce that further emails of Clinton’s were being investigated. Comey says that he had much to lose personally for this decision and that Americans needed transparency in order to fully accept Clinton’s leadership if elected president. However, as [Ryan Lizza writes](#), if transparency was Comey’s main goal, then he should have revealed the bureau’s investigation into Trump’s Russia connection before November.

Comey displays a grandiose belief in his ability—indeed, obligation—to control dynamics [outside his reach](#)—a confidence many Christian realists will find suspicious. As for Comey’s statement that he acted because he assumed Clinton would win the election, a closer reading of Niebuhr might have sensitized him to history’s penchant for delivering ironic outcomes.

Niebuhrians can, and will, disagree on how much Comey’s actions reflect a deep engagement with Niebuhr’s thought. To my eye, *A Higher Loyalty* offers proof that a little Niebuhr can be a dangerous thing—even, or perhaps especially, in the hands of a moral man too certain of his own rectitude.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The irony of James Comey.”*