

AlbertMohler.com

Arthur Schlesinger, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Doctrine of Sin

Monday, September 19, 2005

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of the paladins of American liberalism, remembers the late Reinhold Niebuhr in Sunday's edition of *The New York Times*. Schlesinger and his generation were shaped by Niebuhr's "rediscovery" of the doctrine of sin in the middle years of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's conception of sin was concerned more with the sinfulness of social structures, than with the sinfulness of persons. After all, his most oft-quoted book title was *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932).

In any event, Niebuhr's influence was indeed vast, and Schlesinger's puzzlement as to why his influence has waned deserves careful thought.

Consider this passage from Schlesinger's article: *The notion of sinful man was uncomfortable for my generation. We had been brought up to believe in human innocence and even in human perfectibility. This was less a liberal delusion than an expression of an all-American DNA. Andrew Carnegie had articulated the national faith when, after proclaiming the rise of man from lower to higher forms, he declared: "Nor is there any conceivable end to his march to perfection." In 1939, Charles E. Merriam of the University of Chicago, the dean of American political scientists, wrote in "The New Democracy and the New Despotism": "There is a constant trend in human affairs toward the perfectibility of mankind. This was plainly stated at the time of the French Revolution and has been reasserted ever since that time, and with increasing plausibility." Human ignorance and unjust institutions remained the only obstacles to a more perfect world. If proper education of individuals and proper reform of institutions did their job, such obstacles would be removed. For the heart of man was O.K. The idea of original sin was a historical, indeed a hysterical, curiosity that should have evaporated with Jonathan Edwards's Calvinism.*

