# Reinhold Niebuhr Is Dead; Protestant Theologian, 78

#### By ALDEN WHITMAN

The Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr, the Protestant theologian who had wide influence in the worlds of religion and politics, died last evening at his summer home in Stockbridge, Mass., after a long illness. He was 78 years old.

Mr. Niebuhr had been under orders from his doctors in recent years to cut down on his sermons and lectures.

Throughout his long career he was a theologian who preached in the marketplace, a philosopher of ethics who applied his belief to everyday moral predicaments and a political liberal

The New York Times
Reinhold Niebuhr

who subscribed to a hard-boiled pragmatism.

Combining all these capacities, he was the architect of a complex philosophy based on the fallibility of man and the absurdity of human pretensions, as well as on the Biblical precepts that man should love God and his neighbor.

The Protestant theology that Mr. Niebuhr evolved over a lifetime was called neo-orthodoxy. It stressed original sin, which Mr. Niebuhr defined as pride, the "universality of self-regard in everybody's motives, whether they are idealists or realists or whether they are benevolent or not."

It rejected utopianism, the belief "that increasing reason, increasing education, increasing technical conquests of nature make for moral progress, that historical development means moral progress."

As influential as he was in the disputatious world of religion, it was in the arena of practical politics that the effects of his thought were most apparent to the general public. He was the mentor of scores of men, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who were the brain trust of the Democratic party in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. George F. Kennan, the diplomat and adviser to Presidents on Soviet affairs, called Mr. Niebuhr "the father of us all" in recognition of his role

Continued on Page 45, Column 1

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Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

in encouraging intellectuals to help shape national policies.

In addition to Mr. Kennan and Mr. Schlesinger, the "all" included such well-known intellectual movers and shakers as Paul H. Nitze, Dean Acheson, McGeorge Bundy, Louis J. Halle, Hans J. Morgenthau and James Reston.

"I suppose the thing Niebuhr has done for me more than anybody else," Mr. Reston once said, "is to articulate the irony of our condition as a country in the world today."

Mr. Niebuhr advocated "lib-In addition to Mr. Kennan

Mr. Niebuhr advocated "liberal realism."

"The finest task of achieving justice," he once wrote, "will be done neither by the Utopians who dream dreams of perfect brotherhood nor yet by the cynics who believe that the self-interest of nations cannot be overcome. It must be done by the realists who understand that nations are selfish and will be so till the end of history, but that none of us, no matter how selfish we may be, can be only selfish."

"The whole art of politics consists in directing rationally the irrationalities of men," Mr. Niebuhr said. He thought of intellectuals as a "collective leavantial special and appropriate society." en" in a democratic society, men and women who could apply their learning to the practical problems of power and social justice. To them Mr. Nie-

social justice. To them Mr. Nie-buhr often served as an adviser, as when he lectured to the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department. Mr. Niebuhr was himself ac-tive in politics, as a member first of the Socialist party, and then as vice chairman of the Liberal party in New York.

### Active in Ad Hoc Groups

He was an officer of Americans for Democratic Action and active in numerous committees established to deal with specific social, economic and politi-cal matters. He was a firm interventionist in the years before United States entry into World War II. He was equally world war II. He was equally firm in opposing Communist goals after the war, but at the same time he was against harassing American Communists.

Much of Mr. Niebuhr's political influence was subtle, embodied in a virtually continuous outpouring of articles on topics ranging from the moral basis

ranging from the moral basis of politics to race relations to or pointes to face relations to pacifism to trade unionism to foreign affairs. He did not offer pat solutions, but what he called "Christian realism," which emphasized the importance of arriving at approximate rather than absolute imate, rather than absolute, answers to public questions. Public morality, he argued, differed from private morals in

this respect.

Mr. Niebuhr had been associated with Union Theological Seminary, Broadway and 121st Street, since 1928. He was, successions and the professional series of the series of street, since 1925. He was, successively, associate professor of the philosophy of religion (1928-30); William E. Dodge Jr. Professor of Applied Christianity (1930-55); and Charles A. Briggs Graduate Professor of Ethics and Theology from 1955 to his death. He was vice president of the seminary after 1955.

dent of the seminary after 1955.

Hundreds of seminarians jammed lecture halls for his courses, and thousands of laymen heard him preach or lecture. He spoke at many colture. He spoke at many colleges across the country, preached at scores of churches, large and small, and appeared on innumerable public plat-forms. He was a sparkling talker, exerting a magnetism talker, exerting a magnetism that kept his listeners excited and alert through lengthy and profound expositions.

Mr. Niebuhr possessed a deep voice and large blue eyes. He used his arms as though he were an orchestra conductor.

Occasionally one hand would strike out, with a pointed finger at the end, to accent a trench-

ant sentence.

He talked rapidly and (because he disliked to wear spec tacles for his far-sightedness without notes; yet he was adroit in building logical climaxes and in communicating a sense of passionate involvement in what

Many who heard him lecture
on secular matters were incredulous when they found that
he was a clergyman, for he wore his erudition lightly and spoke in common accents. When he preached, one auditor re-called, "he always seemed the small-town parish minister, able to relate the Christian faith simply to contemporary prob-lems."

A high forehead and premature baldness, except for a ring of hair above his ears, made Mr. Niebuhr appear taller than his 6 feet 1 inch. His frame was large and his hands were big-knuckled.

## Office Filled With Books

He looked outsized in his snug office on the seventh floor snug office on the seventh floor of the seminary, which he occupied during his teaching years. Its walls were so hidden by books, mostly on sociology and economics, that there was space for only one picture, a wood engraving of Jonah inside the whale. On his desk, amid a wild miscellany of papers, was a framed photograph of his wife and children. When students dropped in, as they frequently did, he liked to rock back in his swivel chair, cross his legs, link his hands cross his legs, link his hands on top of his head and chat.

on top of his head and chat.

In those informal moments he was a gay and witty talker, tossing off ideas in virtually every sentence and drawing upon a seeminally inexhaustible store of quotations from books he had read. Some students were disquieted by his eyes.

"He didn't really look at you," one of them recalled "so much

one of them recalled, "so much as measure you."
Mr. Niebuhr had an easy way

about him, one that dispelled barriers of communication. He was "Reinie" to friends and

acquaintances; in public references he preferred "Mister" to the honorific "Doctor." His highest earned academic degree was Master of Arts, which he

was Master of Arts, which he received from Yale in 1915, but he collected 18 honorary doctorates, including a Doctor of Divinity from Oxford.

Mr. Niebuhr's diversions were few. He was fond of walking on Riverside Drive with his wife and his large black poodle, but the family conversation was mostly about religion. Mrs. Niebuhr was a lecturer on that mostly about religion. Mrs. Nie-buhr was a lecturer on that subject at Barnard College for a number of years. Otherwise Mr. Niebuhr worked from 7:30 A.M., when he had breakfast, until he retired at midnight. His writing appeared in the most diverse publications. For several years in the nineteen-thirties he edited and con-tributed to The World Tomor-

tributed to The World Tomorrow, a Socialist party organ; from the forties on he edited and wrote for Christianity and Crisis, a biweekly magazine devoted to religious matters. In an ecumenical spirit, he wrote for The Commonweal, a Roman Catholic magazine; for Advance and Christian Century, Protestant publications; and for Commontary, a Joveich publications. Commentary, a Jewish publica-

Because Mr. Niebuhr did not Because Mr. Niebuhr did not employ Biblical citations to support his political attitudes, some associates were skeptical of the depth of his faith.

"Don't tell me Reinie takes that God business seriously," a political co-worker once said. The remark got back to Mr.

The remark got back to Mr.
Niebuhr, who laughed and said:
"I know. Some of my friends
think I teach Christian ethics

mink I teach Christian ethics as a sort of front to make my politics respectable."

Troubled agnostics, Catholics, Protestants and Jews often came to him for spiritual guidance. Only half facetiously, one Jew confessed: "Reinie is my rabbi."

Men and medical results and results and

Men and women of other faiths felt equally close to him, for he did not seek to convert so much as to counsel. Frankfurter an Admirer

Among Mr. Niebuhr's admirers was Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. After listening to one sermon, the late Justice said:

"I liked what you said, Reinie, and I speak as a believing unbeliever."

and I speak as a believing unbeliever."

"I'm glad you did," the clergyman replied, "for I spoke as an unbelieving believer."

Although Mr. Niebuhr was acclaimed as a theologian, the closest he came to systematizing his views was in his two-volume "The Nature and Destiny of Man." published by Scribner's in 1943. He began an "intellectual biography" issued in 1956 by saying:

in 1956 by saying:
"I cannot and do not claim
to be a theologian. I have
taught Christian Social Ethics
for a quarter of a century and
have also dealt in the ancillary
field of apologetics. My avocational interest as a kind of cir-cuit rider in colleges and uni-versities has prompted an in-terest in the defense and jus-tification of the Christian faith in a secular age . . .
"I have never been very com-

petent in the nice points of pure theology; and I must confess that I have not been sufficiently interested heretofore to acquire the competence."

There was, nonetheless, a Niebuhr doctrine. In its essence it accepted God and contended that man brown the chief. that man knows Him chiefly through Christ, or what Mr. Niebuhr called "the Christ event." The doctrine, in its evolved form, suggested that man's condition was inherently inful and the his crisinal.

man's condition was inherently sinful, and that his original, and largely ineradicable, sin is his pride, or egotism.

"The tragedy of man," Mr. Niebuhr said, "is that he can conceive self-perfection but cannot achieve it."

He argued also that man de-luded himself most of the time; for example, he believed that a man who trumpeted his own tol-erance was likely to be full of concealed prejudices and bigot-

Mr. Niebuhr asserted that man should not passively ac-cept evil, but should strive for moral solutions to his problems. He urged man to take advantage of his finitude, to deal realistically with life as it is and to have Biblical faith

In the ceaseless battle be-tween good and evil, man must "recognize the heights," for there is "no sinful life in which there is not a point where God's grace may find lodgement."

"The Christian faith cannot

deny that our acts may be in-fluenced by heredity, environ-ment and the actions of others," he once wrote. "But it must deny that we can ever excuse our actions by attributing them to the fault of others, even though there has been a strong inclination to do this since Adam excused himself by the words, 'The woman gave me the apple.'"

Mr. Niebuhr also insisted that "when the Bible speaks of man being made in the image of God, it means that he is a free

spirit as well as a creature; and that as a spirit he is finally responsible to God."

In struggle for the good, institutional change is likely to be more effective than a change of heart. Mr. Niebubr. Suggest. of heart, Mr. Niebuhr suggested. He decried clergymen who offered salvation on what he considered simplistic terms.

Billy Graham, the evangelist, and the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the expositor of "the power of positive thinking".

cent Peale, the expositor of "the power of positive thinking," were among the clergymen Mr. Niebuhr contradicted. Their "wholly individualistic conceptions of sin," he said, were "almost completely irrelevant" to the collective problems of the muclear age.

muclear age.

Mr. Niebuhr objected especially to the notion that religious conversion could cure race prejudice, economic injustice or political chiconery. The remedy

he believed, lay in societal changes spurred by Christian realism. In this sense, man could be an agent in history by coming to terms with it and working to alter his environ-

ment.

Mr. Niebuhr's own life illustrated his beliefs. He was born June 21, 1892, in Wright City, Mo., the son of Gustav and Lydia Niebuhr. His father was pastor of the Evangelical Syntactory of the Company Lythog. od Church, a German Lutherod Church, a German Luther-an congregation, in that farm community. At the age of 10 Reinhold decided that he want-ed to be a minister because, as he told his father, "you're the most interesting man in town." At that point his father set about teaching him Greek. From high school Reinhold went, with his brother Richard, to Elmhurst College in Illinois, a small denominational school.

a small denominational school and from there, after four years, to Eden Theological Seminary near St. Louis. After the death of his father in 1913. Reinhold was asked to take his pulpit in Lincoln, Ill. He de-clined in order to enter Yale Divinity School on a scholar-ship. He received his Bachelor of Divinity degree there in 1914, and his Master of Arts a year later.

## Only Pastorate in Detroit

Upon his ordination by the Evangelical Synod of North America, he was sent to his first and only pastorate, the Bethel Evangelical Church of Detroit. He remained there 13 years nurturing the congregavears. nurturing the congrega tion from 20 members to 650 and becoming the center of swirling controversy for his support of labor, and later for his espousal of pacifism.
"I cut my eyeteeth fighting Ford," Mr. Niebuhr said in recollection of his Detroit years.

Whereas Henry Ford was usually praised in those days for his wage of \$5 a day and the low price of his automobiles, he was condemned by Mr. Nie buhr as ravaging his workers by the assembly line, the speedup, periodic layoffs for retooling and by summary dismissal

of men in middle age.
"What a civilization this is!" Mr. Niebuhr said. "Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands."

Mr. Niebuhr not only preached against what he regarded as Mr. Ford's callousness, but he also wrote stinging articles in The Christian Century that were read by Mr Ford, among others. Mr. Ford was neither amused nor converted. Mr. Niebuhr emerged as a public champion of social justice and as a Socialist.

# A Socialist Without Marx

Recalling this phase of his career in after years, the clergyman said:
"Mr. Ford typified for my rather immature social imagination all that was wrong with American capitalism. I became a Socialist in this reaction. I became a Socialist in theory long before I enrolled in the So-

read anything by Karl Mark.

"I became the prisoner of a very cute phrase which I invented, or it seemed to me at least to be cut. That phrase vented, or it seemed to me at least to be cute. That phrase was, 'When private property ceases to be private, it no longer ought to be private.'

"The phrase, which was prompted by the unprivate character of these great motor companies does not seem to be

companies, does not seem to be so astute in the light of subsequent history in which justice was achieved by balancing various types of collective power." power.

For a number of years Mr. Niebuhr preached what was termed "the social Gospel," a jeremiad against the abuse of laissez faire industrialism. He was a much-prized speaker at labor and liberal gatherings and on college campuses.

He castigated capitalists not only for their inhumanity to man but also for their spiritual

blindness. He called for labor brotherhood, and racial and religious brotherhood as well.

At the same time, he tolled the doom of capitalism. "Capitalism is dying and it ought to die," he said in 1933. He was then teaching at Union Theological Seminary and agitating for the Socialist party. He was a founder, in 1930, of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, whose membership included whose membership inclu Paul Tillich, the theologian. included

All during the thirties, however, Mr. Niebuhr was reassessing his ethical, social and political beliefs. He had never been a thoroughgoing Marxist, an advocate of class struggle and revolution; and now he turned from Socialism. He was pever a Communist; indeed he never a Communist; indeed, he was a vigorous critic of the Soviet Union for the "brutal-

Soviet Union for the "brutality" of its economic system.

Mr. Niebuhr's dispute with Socialism, and his ultimate break with it, was on religious and ethical grounds, and later on realistic grounds. It was idolatry, he thought, to suggest that human beings could blueprint and bring forth the Kingdom of God on earth. He also had mounting doubts about the inevitability of progress.

In 1939 Mr. Niebuhr was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University. This offered him a further opportunity to refine his views, which came more and more to he cartered on more systems.

which came more and more to be centered on man's preten-sions about himself.

"A Christian justice will be

ian justice will be "A Christian justice will be particularly critical of the claims of the self against the claims of the other, but it will not dismiss them out of hand," he said. "A simple Christian moralism counsels men to be unselfish. A profounder Christian faith must encourage men to create systems of justice to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness."

Although Wr. Niebuhr recanted his Socialism, he did not lessen his interest in social change. Instead, he saw it in a different light—as a continuous adjustment of tensions between power groups in society. Nor power groups in society. Nor did he diminish his concern for

the plight of minorities and the rights of labor. Their cause, he contended, was part of a grander social adjustment within the general framework of American capitalism.

At the outset of World War II Mr. Niebuhr favored American intervention.

"The halting of totalitarian aggression is a prerequisite to world peace and order," he deworld peace and order," he de-clared. He headed the Union for Democratic Action, a commit-tee formed in 1941 by lib-eral former pacifists to encour-age participation in the war. In the war period Mr. Niebuhr worked with the World Council of Churches' Commission on a Just and Durable Peace. He also ioined the Liberal party in

joined the Liberal party in 1944, and was an untiring spokesman for the anti-Commu-

spokesman for the anti-commu-nist left.

Mr. Niebuhr was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a group of 50 dis-tinguished Americans. He re-ceived the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

Mr. Niebuhr's principal writ-

of Freedom in 1964.

Mr. Niebunr's principal writings were "Does Civilization Need Religion?" (1927):
"Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Critic" (1929); "Moral Man and Immoral Society" (1932); "Reflections on the End of an Era" (1934); "An Interpretation of Christian Ethics" (1935); "Beyond Tragedy" (1937); "Christianity and Power Politics" (1940); "The Nature and Destiny of Man" (1941-43); "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness" (1944); "Discerning the Signs the Children of Darkness" (1944); "Discerning the Signs of the Times" (1946); "Faith and History" (1949); "The Irony of American History" (1952); "Christian Realism and Political Problems" (1953); "The Self and the Dramas of History" (1955); "Pious and Secular America" (1958); "The Structure of Nations and Empires" (1959); and "Man's Nature and His Communities" (1965).

ture and (1965).

He leaves his wife of 40 years, the former Ursula Keppel-Robert of Albany, and a daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Sifton of Brooklyn.