

Staat – Souveränität – Nation

Christoph Rohde *Editor*

# Religion and the Liberal State in Niebuhr's Christian Realism



Springer VS

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# **Staat – Souveränität – Nation**

Beiträge zur aktuellen Staatsdiskussion

**Series Editor**

Rüdiger Voigt, Netphen, Germany

Bis vor wenigen Jahren schien das Ende des souveränen Nationalstaates gekommen zu sein. An seine Stelle sollten supranationale Institutionen wie die Europäische Union und – auf längere Sicht – der kosmopolitische Weltstaat treten. Die Zustimmung der Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu weiterer Integration schwindet jedoch, viele Menschen sind der Ansicht, dass die supranationalen europäischen Institutionen zu viel Macht haben. Internet-Giganten, die Unmengen an privaten Daten speichern und vermarkten, aber auch multinationale Unternehmen und Milliardäre entziehen sich staatlicher Steuerung. Die demokratische Legitimation politischer Entscheidungen ist zum Gegenstand kontroverser Diskussionen geworden. Das unbedingte Vertrauen in die Politik scheint abzunehmen.

Die „Staatsabstinenz“ scheint sich jedoch auch in der Politikwissenschaft ihrem Ende zu nähern. Aber wie soll der Staat der Zukunft gestaltet sein? Dieser Thematik widmet sich die interdisziplinäre Reihe „Staat – Souveränität – Nation“, die Monografien und Sammelbände von Forscherinnen und Forschern aus unterschiedlichen Disziplinen einem interessierten Publikum vorstellen will. Das besondere Anliegen von Herausgeber und Wissenschaftlichem Beirat der Reihe ist es, einer neuen Generation von politisch interessierten Studierenden den Staat in allen seinen Facetten vorzustellen und sie zur Diskussion anzuregen.

Until a few years ago the end of the sovereign nation state seemed to have come. It was to be replaced by supranational institutions such as the European Union and—in the longer term—the cosmopolitan world state. However, public support for further integration is waning, and many people think that the supra national European institutions have too much power. Internet giants, which store and market vast amounts of private data, but also multinational companies and billionaires elude state control. The democratic legitimacy of political decisions has become the issue of controversial discussions. The unconditional confidence in politics seems to be declining.

However, the "abstinence of the state" seems to be nearing its end in political science as well. But how should the state of the future be structured? The interdisciplinary series "State – Sovereignty – Nation" is devoted to this topic and aims to present monographs and edited volumes by researchers from various disciplines to an interested audience. The special concern of the series' editor and the board of advisors is to present the state in all its facets to a new generation of politically interested students and to stimulate discussion.

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Editor

# Religion and the Liberal State in Niebuhr's Christian Realism

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*Editor*

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## Preface

The following anthology on Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of the state fills a lacuna in the vast body of literature that deals with the famous American theologian. The fact that it is published by the seminal German publishing house Springer and is integrated into the series *state—sovereignty—nation* of Rüdiger Voigt and Samuel Salzborn proves the importance of the project.

A quarter of a century ago, Christoph Rohde, the editor of the volume and my student, has published his excellent master's thesis *The Image of political man in Reinhold's Niebuhr's Christian Realism under consideration of International Politics*. I am glad that in his scholarship he has never lost interest in the significant work of Niebuhr (1892-1971). The theologian and social philosopher with German roots is not only considered as the "founding father" of the influential school of thought in international politics called political realism that encompasses high ranking diplomats such as Henry A. Kissinger, George F. Kennan or Paul Nitze. Niebuhr's students were eminent scholars like Kenneth W. Thompson, Robert E. Osgood and Kenneth Waltz. Niebuhr was one of the first critics of the so called "historical optimism" that believed in history as a process of continuing progress; both American style liberalism as well as Marxism were guilty of overestimating the rational and moral perfectibility of man.

For Niebuhr, rationality was always the servant of the constructive as well as the destructive potentialities of men; the individual self was free and unbound. His attempts to realize even his highest ideals in political affairs were always obfuscated by the corruptive power of self-interests. Man, who is successful in mastering nature severely fails to tame himself and, in his attempts, to design a sustainable peaceful social surrounding.

The fact of his finiteness left him in a state of existential insecurity that he tended to compensate with the help of the accumulation of power and prestige,

especially in the world of competing nation-states. In a world of unavoidable competition and a permanently working security dilemma the will-to-power tempted nation-states to pursue imperialistic strategies. With help of his approach Niebuhr could explain to a disillusioned American public why the Cold War was the result not of evil powers but of unavoidable balance-of-power dynamics.

But it is less well known that Niebuhr developed a sophisticated approach towards democracy as well. Therefore, the following book that convenes experts in the field of politics and religion from the United States, Israel, Italy, and Germany offers new insights into Niebuhr's understanding of the state. How did Niebuhr think about the newly founded state of Israel? How did he define the relationship between the individual and community? What reasons did he recognize for the breakdown of the young German democracy? How did he try to reconcile biblical and secular perspectives towards society? How did he personally engage to support resistance against totalitarian systems? The current Corona crisis confronts a technologically advanced, digitalized society with its vulnerabilities. Resilience is needed not only to defeat the dangerous virus, but also with respect to protect democratic freedoms. In these times such a compendium can contribute to inspire a self-reflective view on our society.

Christoph Rohde three years ago has published an important book concerning Niebuhr's Christian Realism in the German language with the title *Reinhold Niebuhr—the birth of Christian Realism out of the Spirit of Resistance*. It is my hope that his recent book will initiate a spirited discourse concerning the future of the nation-state and democracy in times of crisis.

15th May 2020

Prof. Dr. Dr. h c. Kindermann

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## Acknowledgements

This book would not have been made possible if my idea had not been confidently supported by the publishers of the influential series *State—Sovereignty—Nation*, Rüdiger Voigt and Samuel Salzborn. These experts have published numerous important books in the science of government (Staatswissenschaft). Both editors have the courage to extend the range of this subject into interdisciplinary spheres like public international law, theology, sociology, and philosophy. This has led to an enormous accumulation of wisdom in this field of inquiry.

Jodok Troy gave me some valuable advice concerning the field of political theology. Uwe Siemon-Netto supported me in the understanding of Martin Luther's quite complex teaching of the two kingdoms. Theologian Axel Toussaint provided me with insights into the German theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Political Scientist Alexander Reichwein gave me important information concerning the development of a European discipline of International Relations that more and more incorporates ideas of political theology.

First and foremost, I owe my gratitude to the authors of this book. They had a lot of patience with me, as I had to postpone the publication for a longer period because of a serious health problem in the year 2019. Luca Castellin supported me with important insights into the current Niebuhr reception. Ben Mollov and David True helped me to bring a better structure into my contributions.

My good friend Helmut Herrmann looked over some of my manuscripts and identified grammatical errors and the inappropriate use of language and showed a lot of patience with me. Martin Gerhold supported me by formatting the manuscript what he did already in my previous publications and was an important emotional support by finishing the manuscript. Ingmar Niemann was an important critic who brought my ideas into a "realistic" perspective. My parents supported me with a paycheck when it was necessary for an extraordinary expense. In many



respects, this book was not only an academic endeavor, but also an exercise in Christian solidarity and friendship.

The services of the *Bavarian State Library* during the difficult times of the pandemic were of great help. Also of help were the research services of the *Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History* in Munich and the extensive services of the employees of the *Library of Congress* in Washington D. C., who swiftly answered my requests and sent me original papers of the *Niebuhr Papers* that are stored there.

After much study, I can now fully understand the wise man, King Salomon, who in the Old Testament summarized it in this manner: *And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh* (Ecclesiastes 12: 12).

With regards to the content of the book, I take full responsibility for statements or words which might be judged as not adequate or incomplete.

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# Abbreviations

## Formalities

ROA—remark of author

Niebuhr Books (date of publication of 1<sup>st</sup> edition)

1929 Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic—**NTC**

1932 Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics—**MM**

1934 Reflections upon the End of an Era—**REE**

1935 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics—**ICE**

The Nature and Destiny of Man—**NDM** (two volumes)

1939 Vol. I Human Nature—**NDM I**

1941 Vol. II Human Destiny—**NDM II**

1944 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness—**CL**

1946 Discerning the signs of the times. Sermons for today and tomorrow—**DST**

1953 Christian realism and political problems—**CRPP**

1955 The Self and the Dramas of History—**SDH**

1959 The Structure of Nations and Empires—**NE**

1963 A Nation So Conceived—**NSC**

1965 Man's nature and his communities—**MNC**

Love and Justice. Edited by D. B. Robertson—**LaJ**

with Paul E. Sigmund: The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects—**DE**

## Journals

C&C—Christianity & Crisis

CC—Christian Century  
 WT—World Tomorrow

### **Publishing Houses**

CUP—Cambridge University Press  
 H & B—Harper & Brothers  
 OUP—Oxford University Press  
 PUP—Princeton University Press  
 R & L—Rowman & Littlefield  
 PUP—Princeton University Press  
 Scribner—Charles Scribner’s Sons  
 UCP—University of Chicago Press  
 VS—Springer Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft  
 WJK—Westminster John Knox Press  
 YUP—Yale University Press

### **Institutions**

ADA—Americans for Democratic Action  
 AFGF—American Friends of German Freedom  
 BLM—Black Lives Matter  
 CDG—Council for a Democratic Germany  
 ERC—Emergency Rescue Committee  
 NB—Neu Beginnen  
 GG—Grundgesetz (German constitution)  
 TKD—Two-Kingdoms Doctrine  
 USEM—U.S. Education Mission to Germany  
 UTS—Union Theological Seminary

Quotations from the Bible are cited after the following principle:

### **Books in the Old Testament**

Lev.—Leviticus

Letters in the New Testament:

Romans 7; 14-16—Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Chapter [Religion and Democracy in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism](#), Vers 14-16

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**Books of the Gospel**

John 8; 12—Gospel of John, Chapter [Reinhold Niebuhr: State Governance in Times of Crisis](#), Vers 12

Luke 4; 13—Book of Luke

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Spehr (Ed.), LUTHER G(E)DENKEN, Leipzig 2019, 155—176; Eine transatlantische Beziehung. Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Reinhold Niebuhr, in: DPfBl 120 (2020), 204-210.

Bonhoeffer und Reinhold Niebuhr, in: DPfBl 120 (2020), 204-210.

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# Introduction

Christoph Rohde

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## Abstract

In this introductory chapter, the scientific relevance of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and his Christian Realism is explained. The purpose of this book is to discuss Niebuhr's understanding of the state. Actually, Niebuhr received attention in the scientific community as an expert in political theology and social ethics. The contributors of this anthology show, why Niebuhr's thinking is important as a vindication of liberal democracy as well.

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## Keywords

Reinhold Niebuhr • Christian Realism • Crisis of liberal democracy • Democracy and power

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## 1 Introduction

*Goodness, armed with power, is corrupted; and pure love without power is destroyed.*

*Reinhold Niebuhr*

In the United States, the American theologian with German roots, Reinhold Niebuhr, belongs to the most important intellectual figures of the twenty-first century. In Germany, however, only fragments of his impressive work are known and

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the number of publications about Niebuhr is quite limited. This neglect can be explained. As the nation that has deeply fallen into the abyss of great power politics and failed imperialism and has witnessed the abuse of power, intellectual approaches that deal with the issue of the problem of power are avoided. This mentality is no less recognizable in the overly restrained German foreign policy which eschews military commitments as far as possible although the country is currently involved in several out-of-area missions. But these commitments are mostly vindicated in pacifist terms. Strategic reasoning is replaced by moralistic justifications in foreign policy decision-making (Rohde 2021, pp. 38–40). German historian Hans-Peter Schwarz described this mentality in a brilliant small polemic with the title *Die gezähmten Deutschen—Von der Machtbesessenheit zur Machtvergessenheit* what could be translated as “The Tamed Germans—from power obsession to power oblivion” (Schwarz 1985). German academia is driven by a one-sided preference for peace research, discursive approaches to international relations and civilian affairs as well. Therefore, the influential school of foreign policy realism is not popular at all. It is nearly impossible to build an academic career as a representative of political realism (Masala 2016, p. 17). Shortly after the Second World War, the situation was different. Since many influential German intellectuals knew Niebuhr’s writings and the facts about his support for the set-up of a democratic system in Germany after World War II, the theologian has been recited by important intellectuals like Theodor Heuss, Golo Mann, or Willy Brandt.

The emerging Cold War was another factor why strategic thinking remained relevant in the early 1950s in Germany. The times of the containment of the Soviet Union in Western Europe and the necessary rearmament of Germany as partner of the new NATO alliance required reflections about strategic questions like the nuclear guarantees of the United States and conventional defense capabilities. But soon after the consolidation of the spheres of influence in Europa, the Germans had transferred the international responsibilities to the United States and NATO. The public could retreat into the world of trade and normative designs. Subsequently, political realism has lost ground in the German community of the academic analysis of international politics.

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## 2 The Intellectual Focus of This Book

Therefore, this book intends to cover three tasks: firstly, a compact version of Niebuhr’s Christian realism shall be introduced to a wider German public; secondly,

Niebuhr's understanding of the state in general and of liberal democracy specifically that becomes apparent in his writings is analyzed in its intellectual development. This is an intellectual perspective that has not yet been explicitly examined. It can be shown that it is not justified to reduce Niebuhr either to his role as an influential Protestant theologian or as a prominent expert in international relations. His Christian Realism can be made fruitful to discuss the problems of and opportunities for democratic systems as well. It can be vindicated on the grounds of a sophisticated anthropology. And thirdly, the fruitful dialogue between politics and religion, that has proven a necessity by virtue of recent developments in global political affairs, is strengthened, as here scholars are gathered that dispose of an impressive history of expertise in this intellectual intersection. Furthermore, the fact that an international and interdisciplinary authorship contributes to this anthology can increase the originality of the collected ideas.

## **2.1 Niebuhr Interpretations Placed in a Current Political Context**

In times of crisis in which Western democracies find themselves, trust has become of short supply. But instead of developing the courage to find the real causes for this lack of confidence, elites in politics and media frequently blame these developments on single causes (Crouch 2004, pp. 2 ff.)—be they evil individuals like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or the Hungarian President Victor Orban who have turned the world upside down in an evil way or the so-called populists of right and reactionary movements; Islamic ideology or returning communist movements in some regions of the globe. Although these isolated causes explain some negative developments, they do not tell the whole story about a world in turmoil. These kinds of simple, emotionally attractive narratives would offer simple remedies in the fight against evil in the world but do not do justice to the complexities that have built up since the end of the Cold War; In the bipolar structure, the world could easily be perceived as a morally, intellectually, and strategically quite transparent scene. The post-cold war world, however, has become much more complex. Therefore, the classical nation-state although still the most important entity in world politics—and its functionality is challenged in several respects in the process of globalization (Voigt 2017, p. 44). The more complex the world develops, the simpler are the answers that find the way into the public discourse. The technical conditions of digital and social media allow the rapid spread not only of information and knowledge, but also of rumors, propaganda and targeted fake news that quickly generate destabilizing results that can threaten the integrity of

the institutions of nation-states. An open conflict between publics with passionate and untamed interests and elites who believe they have the right to educate this public has broken out (Gurri 2018).

What is both frightening and interesting is the fact that most Western democratic societies show divisions that approximate a 50:50 relationship between so called conservatives on one side and on the other side co-called progressive forces. This is not only reflected in the U.S. Elections of November 2020, in which Joe Biden has celebrated a narrow victory, and Congress was surprisingly taken over by the Democrats as well in the closest possible way. Divisive tendencies pervade the European political landscape as well. The covid-19 pandemic, however, has amplified these crisis tendencies in world politics. Democratic governments have to react to a health crisis of unprecedented dimension in times in which rule is based on modern administrative systems. On the one hand, the nation-state has regained power as this is frequently the case in states of emergency and what was theoretically justified by the German jurist, political theorist and Nazi apologist Carl Schmitt (Scheuerman 1999). Many citizens in Western countries fear that a clear distinction between a state of emergency will be sustained and the freedoms they are accustomed to are suspended in the long term. In the name of higher values, democratic procedures can be abolished. In Germany, some cities have declared a “climate emergency” in order to justify legislative action that would perhaps not be accepted by a wider public.

The constitutional principles even in mature Western democracies have come under enormous stress. In the U. S., the *Defense Production Act* was invoked by President Trump at the end of March 2020 to force companies to manufacture ventilators, personal protective equipment, and to execute further measures to contain the impact of the pandemic (vanden Brook 2020). For some people, Trump acted way too hesitantly, while for other observers this executive act was an attack on democratic freedoms. In liberal societies, the liberal claims and emergency necessities collide. Some people claim centralized measures in the battle against the pandemic (Kreitner 2020); other people stress the advantages of federalist solutions concerning adequate emergency standards. In Germany, local authorities have shown resilience in dealing with different crisis situations, be it severe corona outbreaks in huge slaughterhouses or in senior’s homes or asylum shelters. The infection protection law (Infektionsschutzgesetz) basically offers extended opportunities for the executive branch to restrict the freedom of citizens. Government agencies such as the *Federal Institute for Risk Assessment*, the medical advisory board *Robert-Koch-Institute* in Berlin, and the Government’s economic advisory board, as well as the *Ifo* (Institute for Economic Research) have offered guidance in order to cope with the medical, economic and social effects of the pandemic;

their results are made public by an extensive media coverage that is intended to offer transparent decision-making processes. Nevertheless, at the end of the year 2020, the mitigation measures provoke more and more resistance in the German population. Conspiracy theories are on the way, but the increase in demonstrations contains persons economically and socially directly affected by the emergency measures as well as political extremists from all sides that want to force their radical agenda; especially the right-wing opposition attempts to delegitimize the state interventions into basic legal rights.

Although in every single country there exist specifics that support these tendencies towards polarization and radicalization processes, the similarities are conspicuous. Social scientists basically agree on the assumption that these processes are the result of various side effects of globalization. The global effects of the pandemic clearly point to the costs of the high degree of interdependence. In this context it is important whether you define the term globalization as an active process of corporate, technological, and digital integration or as a process of unintended effects which cannot be ascribed to individual players. The technical conditions of digitalization, for instance, have made it relatively easy for single interest groups to gain influence at the expense of traditional and mainstream parties that basically represented the pluralistic structure of society altogether. Phenomena like shitstorms, flash mobs, social media groups, online petitions and other technically conditioned collective group effects that oftentimes are the result of digitally produced fake news show that spontaneous emotional outbursts can easily apply enormous pressure on institutional political processes; politics becomes more and more volatile. Global digital players like Amazon, Google, Facebook, Apple (Gallaway 2020), Huawei and many others increasingly play roles as political actors that become pace setters and agenda setters that decisively weaken the power of various nation-states. And all these technical developments take place in a context in which the globalization altogether is perceived by many people and domestic and transnational protesters as a project the elites benefit from one-sidedly; the underprivileged as well make use of the creative potential of globalization to challenge the social balance-of-power. Forms of spontaneous, emotion driven activism have replaced classical forms of political participation. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk used the term “lethargocracy” that describes a style of politics that is characterized by “the marriage of power instinct and indolence” (Williams 2015). The strategy to disguise or suppress conflicts or problems leads to an apathetic public that is more entertained than informed; irresponsible forms of polarizations and simplifications lead to the aforementioned phenomenon of divided societies. What is rational for the preservation of power of governments in the short term undermines the interests of the people in the long