



**The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's
"Irony of American History": "In the Battle and
Above It" (Oxford Theology and Religion
Monographs)**

Scott R. Erwin

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Reinhold Niebuhr remains at the center of a national conversation about America's role in the world, and commentators with divergent political and religious positions draw upon his 1951 work, *The Irony of American History*, in support of their views. In this study Scott R. Erwin argues that an appreciation of Niebuhr's theological vision is necessary for understanding the full measure of *Irony*. An appreciation of Niebuhr's theology is important because the majority of individuals reading *Irony* today fail to acknowledge the central role that his Christian beliefs played in its formulation. Niebuhr described his theological vision as being "in the battle and above it," and, in more extensive terms, explained it to be a "combination of moral resoluteness about the immediate issues with a religious awareness of another dimension of meaning and judgment." It was this perspective that led Niebuhr, in *Irony*, to assert that America must both take "morally hazardous action" in combating the aggression of the Soviet Union and engage in critical self-evaluation to prevent the country from assuming the most odious traits of its Cold War foe. Niebuhr developed this theological vision over the course of the 1930s and 1940s through engagement with Christian doctrine, as most readily seen in his academic works such as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and engagement with current history, as seen in his many journalistic writings during this period. By focusing primarily on Niebuhr's writings between 1931 and 1951, Erwin traces the development of his Christian interpretation of human nature and history, establishes how it informed his theological vision, and reveals how that theological vision underlay his writings on current affairs. Such excavation is necessary given the fact that Niebuhr became less explicit about the theological nature of his later writings. Indeed, rather than clearly advance his theological vision in *Irony*, Niebuhr chose to communicate it implicitly through the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln. In multiple writings over the course of his career, Niebuhr referred to the sixteenth president as both America's greatest statesman and theologian and ultimately portrayed him as the personification of his own religious beliefs. Erwin demonstrates that the study of both Niebuhr's theological vision and his application of this vision throughout his life is instructive as the contemporary generation engages with global problems.

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