



Doctoral School of
International Relations
and Political Science

THESIS SUMMARY

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**„A Critical Student of Augustine” – Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of
Augustine**

Ph. D. Dissertation

Supervisor:

Zoltán Balázs DSc, PhD

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Institute of Social and Political Sciences

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1. Background and relevance of the research

1.1. *Reinhold Niebuhr*

“Reinhold Niebuhr has influenced the whole climate of thinking about man, ethics, and especially political ethics. People are influenced by Niebuhr who don’t even realize it,” said American Protestant social ethicist John C. Bennett in 1967 (Bennett, 1967, p. 200). First, as a protestant pastor, then as a university professor and scholar, and finally, as a public intellectual, was Niebuhr a central figure of his times in the United States. Niebuhr’s political thought is frequently framed by the phrase Christian realism, which – like other terms – is, on the one hand, challenging to be defined while, on the other, has several definitions and conceptualizations given by the researchers. In short, Christian realism is generally treated as an approach, a perspective, or a way of thinking which focuses on human sinfulness/selfishness, political and social realities while it aims to achieve Christian social goal(s), usually justice.

In the past half-century, the American social sciences have been eager to research Reinhold Niebuhr’s ideas; the secondary literature could fill libraries on Niebuhr. Like Niebuhr’s interest, the literature on his thought is extensive. If the current trends of the literature are considered, at least three kinds of investigations can be distinguished. The first is “Niebuhr studies,” which analyze Niebuhr’s social ethics, theology, political thought, and intellectual legacy generally. The second is the relevance of Niebuhr and his Christian realism in the 21st century. The third is – since Barack Obama once said that “I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers” (Brooks, 2007) – to demonstrate the effects of Reinhold Niebuhr’s thoughts on Obama’s views, ideas, politics, and policies.

In short, most current works on Niebuhr deal with either what Niebuhr thought or its contemporary consequences. In other words, the content, relevance, and influence of Niebuhr’s thoughts are primarily investigated. This has distracted the attention from the “sources” of Niebuhr, namely, what kind of influences, especially theoretical influences, affected him while shaping his political thought. Which authors engaged Niebuhr? Which authors did he turn to for inspiration? How did he interpret them? How did these authors influence his theological, social, and political thinking?

1.2. *Niebuhr and Augustine*

The literature has begun to discuss the contemporary influences on Niebuhr focusing on the relationship between Niebuhr and his contemporaries, including John Dewey, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Joshua Heschel, and others (see Rice, 2013; Part II. of Lovin-Mauldin, 2021). Nevertheless, this did not occur (or at least not consistently) with those theoretical influences who were not contemporaries but whom Niebuhr read, interpreted, and inspired from: for instance – if Kroner’s (1961) account is taken into consideration – (Saint) Paul, (Saint) Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, and Søren Kierkegaard. The relation of these authors to Niebuhr appears only tangentially in the literature of the last two decades (probably even in general). Tangentially means that they are either not mentioned or the discussion is casual and unsystematic.

This objection is valid even in the case of (Saint) Augustine (354-430), who – based on the relevant literature (e.g., Kroner, 1961; Lemert, 2011; Tsonchev, 2018; Lovin-Mauldin, 2021), Niebuhr’s intellectual autobiography (Niebuhr, 1961 [1956]), and his wife’s, Ursula’s Niebuhr statements (Niebuhr, 1991), has had a significant influence on his thought. In a private letter, Niebuhr called himself a “critical student of Augustine” (Niebuhr, 1991, p, 379). In short, a gap concerning the theoretical influences that affected Niebuhr’s thought can be found, which is also valid in Augustine’s case. This dissertation aims to fill a theoretical gap through a systematic elaboration and evaluation of Niebuhr’s interpretation of Augustine.

Beyond the formerly mentioned theoretical relevance, Eric Gregory’s argument on how influential Niebuhr’s reading was to other authors or even politicians further affirms the necessity to investigate Niebuhr’s interpretation of Augustine seriously. He argues:

“Niebuhr’s influence in associating Augustine with political realism should not be underestimated. For many citizens, at least in American churches and universities, Niebuhr is the standard route into political Augustinianism. In fact, given the relative neglect of Augustinianism in twentieth century Catholic social thought, it is not too much to claim that Niebuhr’s Augustine has become the Augustine of both protestant and Catholic political imagination. The authority of Niebuhr’s Augustine continues to be invoked whenever policies appear to indulge in the illusions of utopianism” (Gregory, 2008, p. 82).

A practical relevance of this dissertation is that it might serve as an instrument to deliver Reinhold Niebuhr’s thoughts to the sphere of the Hungarian social sciences. Despite his vast legacy, Niebuhr’s thought in Hungary is relatively abandoned or unknown. A crucial question remains

unanswered: above the already mentioned theoretical relevance, why Augustine and Niebuhr? And why now? Both Niebuhr and Augustine were skeptical about the moral capabilities and perfectibility of individuals and human communities (such as nations). Their thought can be utilized against sentimentalism (an extreme form of idealism) and political utopias, which are irrelevant or ineffective in fostering political action. However, their political thought – which partly contained their theological and ethical ideas – did not turn into cynicism (an extreme form of realism), which either demoralizes or immobilizes political action. Moreover, despite their pessimism, they formulated normative expectations toward citizens on Christian ethical grounds. By understanding this kind of political thought, it is possible to participate in politics with the will to implement moral values (like love or justice) in society while not forgetting that people are fallible and politics is not just about morality but also order and power. This way of thinking is robust but does not lead to extremities, which, just as now, has always been the enemy of liberal democracies.

2. Methodology

In the literature, there is a consensus that Augustine had a vital role in Niebuhr's theological, social, and political thought. Still, the question is not elaborated systematically and profoundly. Even though the (assumed) similarities and differences are more or less present in the literature (which would also need a more thorough investigation), Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine almost entirely lacks. Focusing on this aspect can lead us to understand the relationship between Augustine and Niebuhr better. It is also helpful and necessary to formulate a complex account of the links between Niebuhr and Augustine. The theoretical fruitfulness of the other two approaches (i.e., finding similarities and influences) is not doubted. Furthermore, these are not entirely separable; if someone begins to delve into in one of the three aspects, the other two will infiltrate to a certain extent. Nonetheless, a guiding principle or route of analysis should be chosen, which is Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine here.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to fill a theoretical gap through a systematic elaboration and evaluation of Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine. Put into question; it is as follows: how did Niebuhr interpret Augustine?

The central chapter of the dissertation – by overviewing Niebuhr's scholarly work – presents how Niebuhr interpreted Augustine and his ideas. The focus was on the content and context of Niebuhr's thoughts on Augustine and his ideas, the different characteristics of Niebuhr's theoretical phases, the reasons for changes, and the overall picture. The main body of the research is based on primary sources from Niebuhr; nineteen books were processed, most of which are monographs or

compilations of essays and sermons. The arguments were supplemented with secondary sources and other selections from Niebuhr's shorter writings. Six theoretical phases constitute the structure of the central chapter. These phases mostly overlap with the general line of Niebuhr's life and scholarship, but minor changes due to the specific topic occurred.

It should also be observed that Niebuhr, based on his views or other authors' interpretations, might have misinterpreted Augustine. It could also happen for his use but unintentionally as well. Besides the leading ambition to understand Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine, the theoretical validity of certain vital parts of Niebuhr's interpretations of Augustine was investigated by shedding light on his possible misinterpretations and theoretical fallacies (and their reasons). These insights were shared when Niebuhr was the most critical of Augustine (phases 2 and 3).

Compared to other pieces of secondary literature, an added value of this dissertation might be that, above the references to Augustine, it also considers what Niebuhr has read or could have read about Augustine. If Niebuhr is read carefully, it is also visible that his interpretation of Augustine was influenced by other scholars' arguments, including historians, theologians, and philosophers. Ultimately, his interpretation of Augustine was original and creative based on a deep knowledge of Augustine; nevertheless, it was influenced by others.

Regarding the scope, it is crucial to underline that this dissertation mainly focuses on Niebuhr, not Augustine. Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine is understood primarily through Niebuhr's writings. Practically it will result in the fact that this dissertation will not investigate Augustine's thoughts as much as Niebuhr's.

3. Results

3.1. Political realism and Christian realism

- Political realism can be described in several ways. In the broadest sense, it is a tradition in the history of thought that "is focused on power and interest, suspicious of moralizing, and attentive to the limits of political action" (McQueen, 2018, pp. 6-7).
- Niebuhr was rightly considered a realist, but he is also related to the so-called classical realism, whose representatives are mid-twentieth century American authors who turned against the idealism of their era. Furthermore, Niebuhr's realism has many facets throughout his scholarship. Nevertheless, the crux of the matter at Niebuhr is as follows: realism is the

ability to understand reality properly. The phrase “searching honesty” is sufficiently used by Bennett to describe Niebuhr’s realism.

- Niebuhr’s attitude toward political and social questions can also be related to the concept of pragmatism, for which William James was a reference point.
- Niebuhr is treated as the most significant figure in Christian realism, but his contemporaries (including Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Walter Marshall Horton, Bennett, and H. Richard Niebuhr) and his followers should also be considered.
- Niebuhr’s Christian realism is defined differently by Richard Wightman Fox (as a negative approach), Roger Shinn (as a combination of the terms “Christian” and “realism”), and Robin Lovin’s (as a combination of political, theological, and moral realism. Still, it is ultimately about implementing social justice that requires an adequate understanding of human nature and political and social reality. The defects of Christian realism usually stem from the fact that one of its elements is overemphasized.

3.2. *Niebuhr and Augustine*

- The English-language secondary literature knows the existence of the relationship between Niebuhr and Augustine. Uncountable scientific books and articles mention the links between the two Christian scholars. Still, to a large extent, the arguments of these writings are either simplistic or echo the conclusions of other articles.
- Mainly two approaches are applied to explore the links between Augustine and Niebuhr. The first focuses on the continuation of Augustine’s thought in Niebuhr’s. It discusses Niebuhr in the tradition of Augustinianism; hence it can be referred to as Niebuhr’s Augustinianism. The second investigates Niebuhr and tries to find the role of Augustine in his thought.
- In the relevant works on Augustine’s role in Niebuhr’s theological and political thought (e.g., Kroner, 1961; Tsonchev, 2018; Paispais, 2016), several similarities and influences are considered. Still, none offers a comprehensive account of Niebuhr’s interpretation of Augustine.
- In the Augustinian tradition, Niebuhr is also discussed. While Gregory’s (2008) account is a substantial addition to understanding the relevance of Niebuhr’s interpretation of Augustine,

his normative political theory does not primarily focus on Niebuhr. Bruno's chapter (2014) on the political Augustinianism of Niebuhr – mainly due to the shortness and the lack of the chronological aspect – cannot provide a systematic elaboration.

- The theory of international relations probably pays the most attention to the links between Augustine and Niebuhr but without investigating the spine of Niebuhr's thought, theology.
- The fact that there is no authoritative source on the relationship between Augustine and Niebuhr further confirms the necessity of a systematic investigation.
- Niebuhr's attitude towards Augustine and his thought can be labeled contradictory; significant differences can be seen between the theoretical phases. Despite several overlaps in their interest, Christian background, and apologetic role, Niebuhr did not treat Augustine as a unique or instrumental author until his mid-forties.
- In short, the "paradoxes" of Niebuhr's view on Augustine include the facts that he began to study Augustine late, yet he studied him for a long time; he held specific arguments for decades on Augustine, yet his views changed a lot; he praised and learned from Augustine, yet he remained critical of him.
- It should always be kept in mind that Niebuhr was not an Augustine scholar. It means that Niebuhr did not intend to investigate or evaluate Augustine's whole thought systematically.

3.3. *First theoretical phase (1913-1928) – A young protestant pastor and an old Orthodox Catholic*

- The first theoretical phase included three writings, *Young Reinhold Niebuhr* (Niebuhr, 1977), the *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Niebuhr, 1957 [1929]), and *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (Niebuhr, 1927).
- Based on these three sources, it can be stated that Niebuhr almost entirely avoided writing about Augustine in his young period. In other words, in this theoretical phase, Augustine was not substantially present in Niebuhr's thought. Also, no severe similarities or influences from him can be detected.

- No matter how much Augustine influenced Niebuhr's mind later, his influence is limited in a way that he was not among the "primal movers" of Niebuhr's thought. Several patterns were already present when he met Augustine.
- The simple fact that Niebuhr did not treat Augustine as a helpful source derived from his immature understanding of Augustine (that was probably influenced by George Santayana) and the chasm between a young Protestant pastor from Detroit and an old Orthodox Catholic.
- Though Augustine occurs in the last book (*Does Civilization*), the reference is irrelevant. Nevertheless, this chapter allowed dealing with definitive aspects of Niebuhr's thought, his early idealism, the seeds of realism, the opposite stances of sentimentality and cynicism, the significance of the prophets, and his early experiences in Detroit.

3.4. *Second theoretical phase (1928-1934) – Too socialist to be Augustinian*

- Niebuhr's entry into the Union Theological Seminary brought new possibilities in involving himself in theology, but he turned toward socialism and politics.
- The seemingly irrelevant book, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* (Niebuhr, 1932), captures a moment of hesitation between Christianity and Marxism. This book is a typical example of the notion of treating Christian faith in some way identical to moral idealism from which Augustine will emancipate Niebuhr finally.
- *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Niebuhr, 2001 [1932]), which gained fame for Niebuhr, was a handbook for radical social action for Christians. Here Augustine occurred first with his realism, but the interpretation's message was defeatism and the problem that Orthodoxy is incapable of fostering (radical) social action. Even if Augustine slowly enters Niebuhr's intellectual horizon, severe conclusions should not be drawn on Niebuhr's Augustine interpretation here because he does not examine his thought in detail.
- *Reflections to an End of an Era* (Niebuhr, 1934), Niebuhr's allegedly most Marxist book, began to deal with Christian orthodoxy, but the generally negative opinion on it and one of their representatives, Augustine (since it accepted slavery and the "doctrine of the state as a divine ordinance" [Niebuhr, 1934, p. 220]) remained.

- Niebuhr’s early interpretation of Augustine partially relied on other authors (e.g., Charles Howard McIlwain and Alexander James Carlyle).
- Even though Ronald Stone argues that Niebuhr “had begun his study of Augustine in Detroit” (Stone, 1992, p. 67), the lack of underlying evidence presents that it is more likely – what Bingham (1961) and Dorrien (Dorrien in Niebuhr, 2011) stated – that Niebuhr began to deal with Augustine seriously in the mid-30s.
- The second theoretical phase did not drive Niebuhr substantially closer to Augustine. Though Augustine appears more often, he is not significantly present in Niebuhr’s thought, considering the references, similarities, or influences. It is a serious fact since Niebuhr already had relatively stable social and political thought. Augustine will be an indispensable figure in Niebuhr’s intellectual development. Still, his role in Niebuhr’s political thought, especially his political ethics, will remain limited due to the late discovery.

3.5. *Third theoretical phase (1935-1939) – Prophetism over Augustinianism*

- This phase was the most turbulent since Niebuhr, parallel to his theological and philosophical research, began to face Augustine. In addition to the criticisms he received from theologians for his secular writings, he was encouraged to do so based on at least three reasons. First, he was in personal relationships with many learned theologians (e.g., Tillich) at Union. Courses taught at the Union also contributed to his preparedness. Finally, he was invited to the Gifford Lectures in 1934, one of the most prestigious lecture series a theologian can hold. Niebuhr conducted deep theological and philosophical research until his lectures in 1939 in Edinburgh.
- *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Niebuhr, 1935) was Niebuhr’s first Christian theologically grounded social ethics. It dealt with the relationship between love and justice, and it brought rather a prophetic than an Augustinian tone. The general opinion on Augustine is devastating; this is Niebuhr’s most critical book of Augustine. Most of the objections are still attributed to Orthodox fallacies (e.g., the divine appointment of the wicked rulers, literalism), but Augustine is also accused of taking out the dynamism of prophetic religion by infusing sacramentalism.

- As a product of Anglican Augustinianism, the morning prayer of *The Book of the Common Prayer* was surprisingly apprehended by Niebuhr as the opposite of modern rationalism and idealism (Niebuhr, 1936). This kind of dialecticism was attractive to Niebuhr.
- *Beyond Tragedy* was the first book in which Augustine gave meaning to history; besides the several negative aspects of Augustine's thought, it was treated as a positive feature (Niebuhr, 1937). The themes Niebuhr touches upon (e.g., sin, original sin, pride) also drew closer to Augustine.
- Based on letters cited by Fox (1985), it is argued that H. Richard Niebuhr's (and Joseph Haroutunian's) criticism had an influence on Reinhold in moving toward theology and Augustine.
- Niebuhr's serious criticism of Augustine can mainly be attributed to his Protestant background, social activism, and the lack of deep knowledge of Augustine. His biased interpretations of Augustine – from which many will change later – manifest themselves in ungrounded arguments that need to be balanced by the secondary literature on Augustine.

3.6. *Fourth theoretical phase (1940-1952) – Augustine, the “first theologian”*

- The 1940s brought new waves into Niebuhr's life. He became a staunch anti-pacifist who intellectually fought against Nazism and, later, communism. It was also the peak of Niebuhr's scholarship.
- Though the references to Augustine are marginal, by the publication of *Christianity and Power Politics* (Niebuhr, 1940) and giving the Gifford Lectures, Niebuhr finally left the view that the Christian faith equals the moral idealism of the past century. Later, he attributed this shift to Augustine (Niebuhr, 1961 [1956]).
- *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Niebuhr, 1964) brought a breakthrough in Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine. The image of God in man, sin, original sin, grace, and Augustine's social ideas were not just interpreted, but most of them were given a new light. Augustine became a part of Niebuhr's theological thought, which remained until the end of his life.
- The factors that led Niebuhr to change his perspective include his immersion in Augustine's writings, the search for a theological tradition, the plausibility of Augustinian arguments on

the historic environment, his permissive approach toward Neo-Platonism, and the fact that Augustine seemed to be useful against modern rationalists and idealists. Nonetheless, based on *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Cochrane, 1940) and Niebuhr's review of the book, it is also clear that Niebuhr's ideas were influenced by the Canadian historian Charles Norris Cochrane.

- Though Niebuhr's magnum opus, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, dominated this phase, his books, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (Niebuhr, 1944), *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (1946), *Faith and History* (1959), and *The Irony of American History* (Niebuhr, 1952), were reviewed shortly focusing how these books can contribute to the understanding of Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine.
- From a simple representative of orthodox Christianity, Augustine became the "first theologian." Augustine was the first theologian who comprehended the full implications of the Christian doctrine of the image of God in man. Breaking with the classical understanding, he was the first who clearly framed history in relation to grace to sin. He reintroduced the Pauline notion of sin, which acknowledged that not finiteness but the pretension of finiteness; thus, pride is the essence of sin. Finally, he was the first theologian who had a sense of history.
- Furthermore, Augustine developed into an indispensable theologian for Niebuhr in another sense. For Augustine became one of the most influential theologians in Niebuhr's thought with his views on human nature, sin, original sin, and interpretation of history. Even those Niebuhrian books bear the marks of Augustine in which Augustine's name is absent.

3.7. *Fifth theoretical phase (1952-1958) – Augustine, the Christian realist*

- Niebuhr's merciless pace of work ended in 1952 as a series of small strokes led to severe physical and mental consequences. His left side was immobilized for a long time, and his weakness limited the possibilities of his intellectual work, especially holding as many public lectures as before. Niebuhr resumed his academic work at Union, but the physical trauma and the inability to continue his restless life caused lasting depression.
- The crown jewel of Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine is in this phase. In the introduction of *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (Niebuhr, 1953), Niebuhr offers

his Christian realism as an alternative to the scientific culture and anticipates the relevance of Augustine.

- The essay, *Augustine's Political Realism*, is the only place in Niebuhr's books where he writes a whole essay on Augustine, and it is only Augustine, as an author, on whom Niebuhr writes a separate essay. In all his books, no separate article, chapter, or essay is found on the thoughts of St. Paul, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Pascal, or Marx. This fact indicates that Augustine had a distinguished place in Niebuhr's thought. "Saint Augustine was probably his favorite," echoes Ursula's statement (Niebuhr, 1991, p. 3). Furthermore, the content of the essay also affirms this prominent role resulting in the zenith of Niebuhr's sympathy towards Augustine.
- Without getting into contradictions, Niebuhr could get out of Cochrane's shadow by introducing realism, Augustine's ethics of love, into his interpretation. The tremendous number of examples of the applicability of Augustine further strengthened the relevance of Augustine's ideas. In the end, Niebuhr argues that Augustine "proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker" (Niebuhr, 1953, p. 146).
- Though *Self and the Dramas of History* (Niebuhr, 1955) could not provide any severe additions, in this phase, Niebuhr made Augustine a founding father of Christian realism. Also, Augustine became a central figure in Niebuhr's political thought. Niebuhr wrote nineteen books, and *Augustine's Political Realism* is the only place where he systematically writes about the definition of realism and idealism. Niebuhr was not the first one to denote Augustine as a realist. Still, his interpretation was so convincing and grounded that, supported by his national reputation, Augustine became a reference point for the realists.

3.8. *Sixth theoretical phase (1958-1971) – Augustine, the rigorous Christian realist*

- Niebuhr retired from Union Theological Seminary in 1960, where he taught for over thirty years. His late writings, including *Pious and Secular America* (Niebuhr, 1958a), *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959), and *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965), bear the signs of the changes. For instance, he became less polemic, began to appreciate certain values of conservatism, and emphasized the richness of Jewish and Catholic social thought. Nevertheless, these were not radical changes; the new elements were partly the result of new events which attracted Niebuhr's attention, and the incorporation of novel arguments did not affect the core of Niebuhr's mature thought.

- Augustine remained a frequent reference point, but, for obvious reasons, no real novelty arrived in Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine. The only substantial change is that even if Augustine's concept of *civitas Dei* occurs more frequently, the negative consequences of Augustine's pessimism are more emphasized; that is how Augustine became a rigorous Christian realist.

3.9. Conclusion

- Jewish prophets, including their inclination for social justice and the prophet's role, entered Niebuhr's mind early, much earlier than Augustine. It was also presented that this influence remained in Niebuhr until the end of his life. This trend was emphasized because it belongs to Niebuhr's thought and could be used to balance the Augustinian opposite.
- Though this dissertation deliberately avoided the in-depth analysis of Christian realism, it is argued that Augustine – without influencing Niebuhr's idea of social justice – plays a role in having an adequate understanding of human nature and political and social reality.
- Niebuhr's interpretation of Augustine confirmed the general idea that Augustine was crucial for Niebuhr's thought. Though he discovered Augustine late, his theological thinking and political thought gained new impulses from Augustine, lasting until the end of his life. Therefore, it is safe to say that Niebuhr was a student of Augustine.
- One of the permanent features of Niebuhr's thought, representing itself from the first to the last book, is that he criticizes almost everyone. If he discusses any author or wave of thought in length (from the Greeks to his contemporaries), Niebuhr treats them as targets of criticism). Thus, it perfectly fits Niebuhr what Cochrane stated: "As the Christian (somewhat ungenerously) put it, the best approach to truth is through a study of error" (Cochrane, 1940, p. vii). Augustine, as presented, was not an exception. Therefore, Niebuhr was not only a student and a critique of Augustine but a "critical student of Augustine."

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