Politics after Babel: Reinhold Niebuhr, Michael Oakeshott, and the Theological Defense of Modernity

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Therefore is the name of the place called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of the earth…

Genesis 11: 9

What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say.

-- Augustine, Confessions

I. Introduction: The Prophet and the Philosopher

Merely juxtaposing basic descriptions of Reinhold Niebuhr and Michael Oakeshott – their biographies, temperaments, and writings – calls attention to their incongruities. The former was from the American Midwest, the son of German immigrants, a brooding pastor and theologian, a man of the left and prominent public figure; the latter was British, a cheerful romantic, an idiosyncratic conservative, and enough of a quiet academic that, during his funeral, the local priest officiating at the service forgot his name.¹ Niebuhr wrote with the urgency of the prophet, and even his most sustained and nuanced work retains a sense of impending disaster. When he appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1948, his portrait was set against a background of dark, swirling clouds, with a small, white cross barely visible over his left

shoulder – a visual summary of the abiding themes of his many writings. Oakeshott, on
the other hand, mainly wrote elusive, complicated philosophical essays that were
punctuated with strikingly beautiful evocations of our capacity for adventure and delight.
Niebuhr’s work never fully relinquishes the feel of a sermon, while Oakeshott,
unsurprisingly given his preferred metaphor for human activity and intercourse, seems to
draw us into a meandering conversation.

Despite these differences, I will argue that Niebuhr and Oakeshott can be read
together instructively, and, even more, compliment each other in essential ways. Both,
after all, were profoundly, if not always conventionally, Augustinian thinkers.\(^2\)
Ruminating on the political experiences of the twentieth century, they reminded us of our
limitations and frailty, excoriating “the children of light” and “rationalists” for their pride
and pretensions, betraying strikingly parallel modes of thought in the process. But even
more, and taken together, they provide the resources for what I will call a “theological
defense of modernity” – that is, an affirmation of modernity that does not just tolerate the
persistence of religion, but inextricably is bound up with certain theological ideas.\(^3\)
In
this, their respective projects were much more “positive” than typically is assumed; I

\(^2\) Niebuhr’s Augustinianism is perhaps more obvious than Oakeshott’s. See Niebuhr’s essay, “Augustine’s
Political Realism” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee
Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 123-141, for the classic statement of his reading
of Augustine. In addition, Charles T. Mathewes’ *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially ch. 3, “Sin as Perversion: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Augustinian
Psychology” and Eric Gregory’s *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic
Citizenship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), especially pp. 82-95, both ably place Niebuhr
in the long and varied tradition of Augustinian political and moral reflection. On Oakeshott’s
Augustinianism, Elizabeth Corey’s *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics* (Columbia,
Condition.”

\(^3\) Efraim Podoksik’s *In Defence of Modernity: Vision and Philosophy in Michael Oakeshott*
(Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2003) is a quite helpful portrait, as the title suggests, of Oakeshott
as a defender of modernity. My account differs from Podoksik’s chiefly in my attentiveness to Oakeshott’s
religious thought, especially in seeing it as integral to the defense of modernity. Where relevant, I will
indicate my indebtedness to Podoksik’s study in footnotes.
believe they were more concerned with inhabiting the world in a particular way and engaging life in a certain manner than they were with merely critiquing the purveyors of various twentieth century ideologies.\(^4\) Put differently, I want to support the claim that Niebuhr and Oakeshott were defenders of modernity and that this defense was in some measure dependent on their religious visions. I do not intend to articulate comprehensively either man’s ideas about politics or religion, but to dwell upon where, for each, they come together. By doing so, I hope to intitate more capacious ways of reading both men’s work while also adding complexity to our deliberations about religion’s place in the modern world.

II. After the Fall: Modernity and the Tower of Babel

My argument that Niebuhr and Oakeshott were defenders of modernity\(^5\) needs an initial explication. They especially were distinctive among those of their intellectual cohort who, at least in part, were responding to the wreckage of two world wars, the Holocaust, and the onset of the Cold War. Neither man used these calamities to issue narratives of declension or decline, to search for a moment where the trajectory of Western political thought and practice irretrievably went wrong. While Niebuhr and

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\(^4\) On this point, seeing the Augustinian tradition as having a much more positive component than typically is assumed, I have learned immensely from Charles Mathewes. See especially his *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 18-23, where he sketches the rudiments of an “Augustinian worldliness” that serves as the basis for “a theology of engagement.”

\(^5\) I use the term “modernity” well aware of its many possible meanings and even, perhaps, its overuse by political theorists. Still, it seems to me a useful enough term, and so thoroughly a part of the debates I am engaging, that these considerations outweigh the risk of obfuscation. See N.J. Rengger’s *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity: Beyond Enlightenment and Critique* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 37-76 for a helpful overview of a number of the way modernity has been conceptualized. I hope that what I mean by the term becomes less opaque as I elaborate Niebuhr and Oakeshott’s thoughts on the matter.
Oakeshott certainly criticize the naïve optimism of “modern man”\(^6\) and the communal longings and lack of existential fortitude in “mass man,”\(^7\) respectively, they evince almost no longing for the ancient polis, Medieval Christianity, or the pretensions of an aristocratic order. They in no way urge us to somehow return to or re-appropriate classical thought; neither sides with the ancients against the moderns. Nor do Niebuhr and Oakeshott advocate clinging to the old certainties of the natural law or otherwise returning political reflection to a search for foundations. Modernity is not a series of “waves” ending in nihilism; it can be traced back to no single philosopher, text, or event, and so both discuss it in the more restrained terms of various continuities and discontinuities rather than with the language of ruptures, breaks, or foundings.\(^8\) Niebuhr and Oakeshott resist the reactionary temptation and an impulse towards nostalgia or a form of political romanticism. Whatever their differences, the basic posture they have towards the modern world allows them to theorize its character and allude to its genealogy with a measure of complexity and nuance that make possible its defense, however qualified.

Perhaps the best, if an unlikely, entry point into considering in more detail Niebuhr and Oakeshott’s defense of modernity is their understanding of the great,


\(^7\) For Oakeshott’s pithy account of the rise of “mass man,” see especially “The Masses in Representative Democracy” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 363-383.

\(^8\) Here I am thinking particularly of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, though certainly they are not the only figures who could be named. For the former, the West’s wrong turn occurred with Joachim of Flora’s Trinitarian eschatology – the periodization of history into the ages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; for the latter, Machiavelli inaugurates a break with the ancients, the first “wave” of modernity that (perhaps inevitably) gives rise to its second and third waves, eventually leading to Nietzsche (and Heidegger). See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952), especially ch. 4, “Gnosticism: The Nature of Modernity,” and Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity” in *Six Essays in Political Philosophy: An Introduction to Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gilden, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbes-Merril, 1975) 81-98.
mythical account of human folly, the story of the Tower of Babel. That both men – and Oakeshott twice – published essays on the topic is not merely a happy coincidence. Each provides a creative interpretation that is more than a simple reminder about human limits. And because of its status as a religious tale, their insistence on its importance perhaps intimates their understanding of the continued relevance of the theological imagination for modernity – more obviously so for Niebuhr, of course, but also for Oakeshott. The most straightforward reading of the old myth, the easiest way to bring it to bear on contemporary history, would be to see modernity itself as a Tower of Babel, or to construe the various utopianisms of the twentieth century as manifestations of man’s nearly unlimited ambitions. And yet neither man does precisely, or only, that. Both Niebuhr and Oakeshott certainly see the Tower of Babel as a critique of human pretensions – their use of the story partakes of the traditional grasp of its meaning and import. But lurking in their interpretations, however, is a more subtle theme that I believe is intimately related to their conceptions of modernity.

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10 I am in part pushing against a reading of Augustinian political reflection that sees it primarily as a reminder of human limits, even if I occasionally slip into that language myself. Though I have learned immensely from Jean Bethke Elshtain’s Augustine and the Limits of Politics (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), I think the language of limits, while helpful and appropriate as far as it goes, at times actually obscures the full range of resources the Augustinian tradition provides for engaging modern political life. I believe Niebuhr and Oakeshott can help us recover elements of this tradition, even if a number of their own interpreters also add to this obfuscation.

11 I am in agreement, then, with Andrew Sullivan when he writes that “Religion, I hope to show, is not merely the subject of Oakeshott’s most luminescent and intense prose, it is a key to unlocking the core of his thinking as a whole. He is perhaps best understood, I shall argue, as a Christian thinker.” See Sullivan’s Intimations Pursued: The Voice of Practice in the Conversation of Michael Oakeshott (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2007), p. 178. I hope the reasons for my agreement become clearer as my argument unfolds.
The Tower of Babel is a myth about fragmentation: God scattered the human race across the face of the earth, and confounded our ability to communicate with one another by creating a multitude of languages. Whatever primordial unity had once existed was, after man’s attempt to reach up to the heavens, no longer extant. And it is precisely this prior unity, the sweet solidarity of a homogeneous community, which Niebuhr and Oakeshott seem to find one of the most important elements of the story. Niebuhr, as noted above, certainly uses his essay to warn about “human pride” and “the tragic self-destruction of civilizations and cultures.” The Tower of Babel signifies man’s “pretentious disregard” of his “limitations” – a disregard that, for him, is nearly always inescapable: he held that in some way “every civilization and every culture is thus a Tower of Babel.” But what is most important in Niebuhr’s rendering of the myth is the cause or source of this “disregard” for our limits. For him, “the peoples of the earth never had one language,” and so God’s confounding of our tongues is not a literally true historical narrative, but a way of drawing attention to the essential plurality of the human condition. Behind or prior to the expression of human pride is our failure to recognize the inevitable finiteness and fragmentation of our situation. The myth of the Tower of Babel, by dramatizing our descent into diversity, attempts to put the “contingencies of nature and history” at the center of our self-understanding.

Niebuhr, then, uses his essay on the Tower of Babel to describe man’s intellectual, political, and spiritual responses to such contingency and fragmentation – to sketch a philosophical anthropology for a world irrevocably post-Babel. It is the occasion for one of his most elegiac summarizations of what it means to be a human being: “Man

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12 Niebuhr, “The Tower of Babel” in Beyond Tragedy, pp. 29-30
13 Ibid., pp. 32, 28
14 Ibid., p. 42
is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin. Man is a creature of time and place, whose perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate circumstances. But man is not merely the prisoner of time and place. He touches the fringes of the eternal."¹⁵ For Niebuhr, we ceaselessly try to escape the contingency of our situation, to rise above the fragmentation of the world and seek a finally valid universal truth – a truth that simply is not ours to have. Put differently, we try to go behind Babel, to achieve the manner of unity and universality that supposedly existed prior to that great exertion of human pride and ambition. He writes that “man is constantly tempted to forget the finiteness of his cultures and civilization and to pretend a finality for them which they do not have.”¹⁶ Niebuhr holds that we can never truly rise above self-love or decisively move beyond the limitations of our own culture or tradition. We touch the fringes of the eternal – we have our reason to deploy and the capacity for self-awareness and self-criticism – and so seek an escape from our particularity, but such efforts inevitably partake of some form of delusion. As he puts it, “The truth man finds and speaks is, for all the efforts to transcend himself, still his truth. The ‘good’ which he discovers is, for all his efforts to disassociate it from his own interest and interests, still his ‘good.’”¹⁷ Niebuhr finds human history to be tragic, precisely because of man’s perpetual blindness to the “taint” of his unavoidable finiteness and “the illusion that the measure of his emancipation is greater than it really is.”¹⁸ The myth of the Tower of Babel, above all, is a firm injunction against the prospect of overcoming our contingency, partiality, and the fragmented character of living in the world. For Niebuhr, the Tower of

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 28-29
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 29
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 30
Babel is more than a story about pride; it is a delineation of the nature of our temptations.\(^{19}\)

Perhaps especially notable, given that I am putting Niebuhr and Oakeshott in conversation with one another, is the emphasis the former, in the last section of his essay on the Tower of Babel, puts on human languages as carriers of man’s contingency. Niebuhr writes that “the diversity of languages is a perpetual reminder to proud men that their most perfect temples of the spirit are touched by finiteness. Multiplicity of languages is the most vivid symbol of the fact that the highest pinnacles of the human spirit lie grounded in the contingencies of nature and history.”\(^{20}\) He finds the great works of European literature especially instructive on this matter: Shakespeare speaks beyond sixteenth century England; Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is not merely the vestige of a dying feudal order; and Goethe transcends German humanism and romanticism. And yet, for Niebuhr, the “universal notes” in these men’s writings are merely “overtones,” because the various European languages, however much their artistic use intimates experiences that transcend their particularity, still are reminders of certain times and places and as such “freighted with the long sad history of conflict” between the various “European tribes.”\(^{21}\) Languages point to the way man oscillates between universality and particularity, approaching the eternal without ever struggling free from the limitations of his finitude and contingency.

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\(^{19}\) I consider, in other words, Niebuhr’s understanding of the Tower of Babel akin to the way he tended to grasp the significance of the Fall: “The metaphysical connotations of the myth of the Fall are, however, less important for our purposes than the psychological and moral ones.” See his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), p. 46

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 42

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 43-44
In terms not dissimilar to those employed by Oakeshott, Niebuhr goes on to excoriate a “rationalism” that “is always impatient with these barriers of language and with the irrationality of their divergences. It dreams of a universal language and of a universal culture.”

And so, again, Niebuhr emphasizes our deep longing to escape from the essential diversity of the human condition, to impose on it a system that is rational, universal, and complete. The belief that we can arrive at principles, whether religious, moral, or political, that are finally valid, that are untouched by the particularity of our time and place and lack the distortion of self-love is, for him, “merely rationalism’s penchant for Towers of Babel…the sign of human reason’s failure to gauge its own limitations, of its proud and futile defiance of the finite necessities and contingencies which enter into even the proudest edifice of human spirituality.”

It is vital to note here that these limitations are not, for Niebuhr, fundamentally mitigated by divine revelation – indeed, “biblical religion” accentuates them. He does not close his essay on the Tower of Babel by chastising rationalism in the name of revelation. Instead, Niebuhr writes, “Every revelation of the divine is relativised by the finite mind which comprehends it…God, though revealed, remains veiled; his thoughts are not our thoughts nor his ways our ways.”

There is, then, no earthly release from our condition of contingency and finitude. Our tongues will remain confounded, and our awareness of the divine, of the One beyond the many, only should enhance our recognition of this. Man, Niebuhr believes, “faces an inescapable dilemma in the Tower of Babel, which gives the profoundest versions of the Christian religion a supramoral quality. It imparts a sense of contrition not only for moral derelictions but for the unconscious sins involved in the

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22 Ibid., p. 44
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
most perfect moral achievements.” Religions faith becomes, finally, not a way of overcoming our contingency, but the most profound inducement to live in the knowledge of its ineradicable existence.

These insights of Niebuhr’s, pithily expressed in “The Tower of Babel,” but not only there, provide the essential preconditions for his qualified defense of modernity. Most simply, they largely preclude the possibility of critiquing modernity in the name of a virtuous past or a prior body of thought exempt from severe deficiencies. He makes a point, in the hasty tour of Western history he provides in the essay, of showing how the Greeks, Romans, and medieval Christians were all engaged in the building of Towers of Babel. In The Nature and Destiny of Man, Niebuhr begins not just by lamenting the insufficiencies of various schools of contemporary thought – here, chiefly meaning the excesses of Enlightenment rationalism – but with sustained criticism of the classical view as well, particularly its lack of an understanding of human “individuality” and its articulation of a fateful “body-mind dualism.” Later in that volume, he goes on to describe the “inevitable” destruction of the “catholic synthesis” of the Middle Ages, especially Thomism, going so far as to write that “the full truth of the Gospel was never fully known, or at least never explicitly stated in the church” until the Reformation. The medieval edifice was, for Niebuhr, an “effort to achieve a perfection which stands beyond the contradictions of history” – fundamentally, a monument to human pride, the ignoring

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25 Ibid., p. 45
26 See “The Tower of Babel,” pp. 30-34
28 Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 148-49
of that element of the gospel “which negates and contradicts historical achievements…” ²⁹

There is, then, a type of negative affirmation ³⁰ of modernity at work in Niebuhr’s thought. His criticisms of the past are so fundamental that a certain openness to modernity is the theoretical and practical conclusion towards which he appears to be leading the reader.

I also believe, though, that there is a muted, but still real, line of thought in Niebuhr’s work that goes beyond the merely negative affirmation described above. Without fully delineating his understanding of the Reformation and Renaissance, they clearly are two movements that he believed to embody genuine insights into the human situation. Modernity, for Niebuhr, at least partly begins with them, and as such is not fundamentally faulty; the truths they expressed necessarily meant the old had been superseded. This does not mean that either movement constituted a decisive break with the past – both reworked certain Christian ideas and reinterpreted ancient texts – but taken together they do point towards the fading of the medieval order. Though often for different reasons, the Reformation and Renaissance protested against the Catholic synthesis in the name of human liberty. In perhaps his best summary of the matter, Niebuhr wrote in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* that “human history is indeed filled with endless possibilities; and the Renaissance saw this more clearly than either classicism, Catholicism, or the Reformation. But it did not recognize that history is filled

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 147-48
³⁰ This “negative” affirmation actually is rather typical of Niebuhr’s method. See Robin W. Lovin’s description in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3: “Niebuhr gives little time to definitions in his work. His aims are synthetic, linking related ideas into a complex whole, rather than strictly delimiting the individual elements. *His method dialectical, in the sense that concepts are clarified by stating what they exclude, and positions are explained by specifying what they reject.*” (emphasis mine)
with endless possibilities of good and evil.” All Niebuhr’s protestations against the search for a permanently valid unity of thought, for principles not touched with our contingency, find expression here. Man’s indeterminate freedom gives rise to history, the creative structuring of his environment elaborated in time. And, importantly for Niebuhr, there is a “growth” in this history: “history obviously moves towards more inclusive ends, towards more complex human relations, towards the technical enhancement of human powers and the cumulation of knowledge.” The understanding that human freedom and history’s growth intimately are connected was, for Niebuhr, the greatest achievement and deepest insight of the Renaissance. To deny this freedom would be to vitiate an essential element of what it meant to be human – to choose some contingent, historically conditioned principle of restraint over human creativity.

For this reason, Niebuhr argues for putting the thought of the Renaissance and Reformation in dialogue again. Both stood against the permanent validity of historic achievements, but the Reformation, with its sober vision of the post-lapsarian world, could mute the optimism of the Renaissance, an optimism that Niebuhr believed was modern man’s most characteristic mistake. If the Renaissance critiqued every historic achievement in the name of an openness to the new and the better, the Reformation did so on the basis of its understanding that every such achievement somehow was tinged with

31 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, Vol. 2, p. 155 (emphasis Niebuhr’s)
32 Ibid., p. 315
33 It should be noted that although Niebuhr typically is considered a realist or pessimist, he also has been criticized precisely for the reasons just noted – his openness to man’s creative possibilities in history, or rather, what is taken to be his progressivism or devotion to perfectionist liberalism. The best example of this reading of Niebuhr can be found in Wilson Carey McWilliams’ “Reinhold Niebuhr: New Orthodoxy for Old Liberalism” in American Political Science Review (December 1962), pp. 874-885. See also Patrick J. Deneen, Democratic Faith (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 246-260, who describes Niebuhr as ultimately giving in to a form of optimism. Though a full response to these criticisms cannot be undertaken here, I do wish to note that they curiously affirm my interpretation of Niebuhr as a defender of modernity. That is, in his concessions to liberalism and history’s “growth” he is taken to be too characteristically modern by McWilliams and Deneen.
sin, was more contingent than realized and marred by the narrowness of the finite vision that produced it. The Reformation, then, grasped “the tragic aspect of history.”\textsuperscript{34} In one of the least remarked upon, but most important statements in \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, Niebuhr stated that “the debate between Renaissance and Reformation must be reopened…the Renaissance was not as right and the Reformation not as wrong, as the outcome of the struggle between them would seem to indicate.”\textsuperscript{35} By this, Niebuhr meant that the most appropriate understanding of the human situation was that good and evil grow apace in history, that life is always getting better and worse at the same time.\textsuperscript{36} The Renaissance opens us to history’s growth and the endless possibilities of man’s creative freedom; the Reformation, especially in its more pessimistic moods, understood that, because “evil is negative and parasitic in origin,” history’s growth “does not solve the basic problems of human existence but reveals them on progressively new levels.”\textsuperscript{37}

Niebuhr’s defense of modernity amounts to a plea to soberly rest in this tension, to neither deny the full extent of human freedom nor believe that history’s “growth” brings with it the eradication of man’s problems. History is not simply progressive for Niebuhr. But he especially seems to be concerned that, as indicated in his essay on the Tower of Babel, we would evacuate this ambiguity by longing for the coherence of our primordial condition – in other words, he pushes against the impulse to give up on modernity, rather than engage its full possibilities by reopening the debate between the Renaissance and Reformation and living with the uncertainty that follows from accepting

\textsuperscript{34} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, Vol. 2, p. 155
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 159
\textsuperscript{36} See also Niebuhr’s comment in \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and A Critique of Its Traditional Defense} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), p. 186-87: “…all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as fulfillment…” I borrow the terminology of life “getting better and worse at the same time” from Peter Augustine Lawler.
\textsuperscript{37} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, Vol. 2, pp. 318, 320
man’s “endless possibilities.” As he puts it, “Because both Renaissance and Reformation have sharpened the insights into the meaning of the two sides of the Christian paradox, it is not possible to return to the old, that is, the medieval synthesis, though we may be sure that efforts to do so will undoubtedly be abundant.” 38 We cannot, in other words, escape from our post-Babel condition of fragmentation, plurality, and contingency. There can be no synthesis that brings together our confounded tongues in a permanently valid unity. As he wrote in *Faith and History*, we must not fall into “the error of claiming absolute and final significance for contingent, partial, and parochial moral, political and cultural insights.” 39 For Niebuhr, this was not just a concession to a fragmented world, but a theological principle – and as such, constituted a genuine openness to modernity itself.

Oakeshott’s defense of modernity, perhaps, needs less elaboration than Niebuhr’s. Whatever his criticisms of “rationalism” or the weaknesses of the individual *manqué,* he avoids simplifying narratives of modernity, instead pointing to the variety and complexity of both political ideas and human types that emerged from the passing of medieval Europe. Though known as some manner of conservative, he never reached behind modernity to chastise it the name of classical virtue or the solid, hierarchical communities of the Middle Ages – indeed, his political conservatism, as he described it, was “not at all unintelligible in a people disposed to be adventurous and enterprising, a people in love with change and apt to rationalize their affections in terms of ‘progress.’” 40 Oakeshott’s use of the term conservative, then, did not signify either nostalgia or an antiquated traditionalism – it was a conservatism intrinsically aware of the possibility of modernity’s

38 Ibid., p. 207
39 *Faith and History*, p. 196
defense, even if that defense was tentative or qualified.\textsuperscript{41} And, as with Niebuhr, I believe Oakeshott’s meditations on the meaning of the Tower of Babel are instructive points of departure for considering the nature of modernity.

Oakeshott, unlike Niebuhr, does not just analyze the myth of the Tower of Babel but, in his second essay of that title, actually retells the ancient story – updated, in a way, for the world he saw around him. The fullness of this retelling is not my concern here, though clearly it is a condemnation of a certain iteration of commercial society.\textsuperscript{42} Oakeshott pejoratively describes Babel as a “\textit{civitas cupiditatis},” and its inhabitants as “a people devoted to affluence” – the entire tale, in other words, could be taken to show how Babel is “the nemesis of greed,” a warning to societies obsessed with “getting and spending.”\textsuperscript{43} But what I am particularly interested in are the understated but persistent resonances with Niebuhr’s understanding of the myth, particularly the notion that Babel signifies, or draws attention to, the fragmented character of our world and the anxieties of our condition outside the Garden of Eden.

Oakeshott begins his essay by noting how the story of Babel has been expressed in a variety of cultures and civilizations – it can be found among the myths of “the Chinese, the Caldeans and the ancient Hebrews, and among the Arab and Slav peoples, and the Aztecs of Peru.”\textsuperscript{44} Its meaning has been interpreted in different ways and conveyed with varying emphases. But just before relaying his own version of the story, he notes a “deeper”\textsuperscript{45} meaning that it might be understood to have. He describes the myth

\textsuperscript{41} On this point, note Oakeshott’s ambivalence about Burke as a genuine conservative tutor. Ibid., p. 435.
\textsuperscript{42} For a full summary, as well as very helpful exegesis, see Corey, \textit{Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics}, pp. 127-54.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., pp. 179-80.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 189.
of Babel as pointing “back beyond Noah and the Flood to that first, almost inadvertent, excess and the loss it entailed. It is a deformed expression of that nostalgic longing to be delivered from postlapsarian exile and to return to the Lost Garden…”46 Here, the catastrophe of the Tower of Babel becomes a kind of second Fall, and one almost as decisive as the first. The destruction wrought by Adam and Eve’s impetuousness in Eden, which led inexorably to the Flood, was, in a way, mitigated by that great deluge. When Noah and his family emerge from the rain and the water, God makes a covenant with them. While perfection is not given to man after the Flood, there at least seems to be the possibility of a tolerable arrangement between God and Man, with the promise that Nature’s destructiveness never would be employed the same way again.47 Oakeshott writes that “Hegel, of course, goes back to the beginning. He recognizes the Hebrew story of the Flood as a rift between Man, God and Nature healed, only to be reopened in the tale of Nimrod.”48 The Tower of Babel, for Oakeshott, at least in part is a myth about longing for unity and cohesion, how the anxiety of our exile from Eden prompts a desire to find our way back there – as with Niebuhr, it describes certain permanent temptations of living in the world. It is an emblem of how not to respond to being outside the Garden.

It is striking that, as Oakeshott’s telling of the tale of Nimrod unfolds, it becomes a meditation on the type of community certain human beings long for, or at least always have a lurking dream to instantiate – a kind of political gloss on our exiled condition, of living in the world after Eden. The Babelians came to possess an “antinomian

46 Ibid.
47 See Genesis 8:20-22 (ESV): “Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.’”
48 Oakeshott, “Tower of Babel” in On History, p. 190 (emphasis mine)
enthusiasm” for “social purpose,” and “private convenience” was yielded to an amorphous “public good.” The “civil history” of Babel was “terminated” when the “utilitas publica” came to be sovereign. In a summary of the changes brought about in Babel, Oakeshott writes, “This City of Freedom was becoming a community and its inhabitants were in the process of acquiring a new communal identity in place of their former distinct individualities.”

The rift between God, Man, and Nature, and the pain of exile, provided the impetus for a servile solidarity exploited for an assault on Heaven. The desire for unity and wholeness – the urge to put together what had been torn asunder – was the Babelian’s undoing. It should be noted then, that, earlier in the essay, Oakeshott gives a description of an alternative to what happened in Babel. He mentions, briefly, “the land of Japhet” – Europe – whose inhabitants, while “not at all immune to relapse into antediluvian depravity, have reconciled themselves to their expulsion from the Garden and have come to regard their eternal salvation as God’s business, not theirs: the inventors of civil intercourse, a somewhat precarious peace among themselves….“

For the sons of Japhet, in place of anxiety or longing for unity is a reconciliation to exile; instead of social purpose is civil intercourse; and rather than build a tower to heaven, the inhabitants of Europe settle for a precarious peace. Oakeshott intimates, in other words, his preferred understanding of “the character of a modern European state” – “civil association” or a societas. He is showing, however obliquely, the possibility of a distinctly modern response to the conditions of modernity.

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49 Ibid., p. 197
50 Ibid., p. 182
51 Here I am of course referencing the last two essays in Oakeshott’s On Human Conduct (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), “On the Civil Condition” and “On the Character of a Modern European State.”
Though not necessarily directly commensurate with his understanding of the meaning of the Tower of Babel, Oakeshott’s more philosophical writings express, if in a different idiom, similar ideas as those found in his retelling of the old myth. In particular I have in mind a curious acquiescence to, or perhaps grudging recognition of the inevitability of, modality best indicated in the utter separation, for Oakeshott, between philosophy and the mode of practice as well as the notion that “it is not philosophy which will abolish” the modes of science and history, should their abolition ever come.\textsuperscript{52} Philosophy does not impose itself in the realm of practical life so as to resolve the inevitable dissatisfactions that occur there; there is no hierarchical connection, as there was with the classical tradition, between theoretical and practical wisdom.\textsuperscript{53} Oakeshott neither believes in philosopher kings nor philosophizes with a hammer. And so Oakeshott seems to acknowledge in a limited way different spheres of knowledge and understanding – and gives a skeptical critique of the practical possibility of any final escape from the plurality and fragmentation of our situation. In other words, if we accept that “modernity” should be “understood as fragmentation” and that the defender of modernity submits to the “notion of radical plurality,” then certainly Oakeshott evinces agreement with such notions, perhaps in varying forms, in his major works.\textsuperscript{54} The “dissolution of communal ties”\textsuperscript{55} that marked the passing of the medieval period was not just a political and social fact, but provoked a philosophical exploration of such conditions – modernity, both

\textsuperscript{52} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and Its Modes} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 350
\textsuperscript{53} This point is made by Andrew Sullivan in \textit{Intimations Pursued}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{54} See Efraim Podoksik, \textit{In Defence of Modernity}, p. 28. I should note that the entire first chapter of Podoksik’s book, “Oakeshott and Modernity,” is quite helpful and I agree, broadly, with its main points.
\textsuperscript{55} Oakeshott, “The Masses in Representative Democracy,” \textit{in Rationalism}, p. 371
practically and theoretically, is marked by the loss of a certain manner of coherence and unity.\textsuperscript{56}

Even in his early, ambitious study alluded to above, \textit{Experience and Its Modes}, while defending the conception of philosophy “as experience without reservation or arrest, experience which is critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial, or abstract”\textsuperscript{57} – that is, the pursuit of what is ultimately satisfactory in experience with reference to the concrete whole – Oakeshott grants a great deal to abstractions, the various modes of experience. History, science, and practice: these modes are well-established spheres of inquiry, self-contained and homogeneous, and possessing their own standards.\textsuperscript{58} In their autonomy, they point to the plurality of modernity, to a world of fragmented knowledge – or at least a world we tend to appropriate through the abstractions of modality. Despite the above definition of philosophy, and whatever the defectiveness or at least partiality of the modes of experience which he elucidates, it is notable that Oakeshott concedes that “the supersession of the abstract by what is concrete…cannot take place in any future world of present fact, but only in the world of logical fact.”\textsuperscript{59} And of course, he closes \textit{Experience and Its Modes} by pardoning those “who prefer the embraces of abstraction” which constitutes a “certain satisfaction while it

\textsuperscript{56} I take these characterizations to be consonant with the notion of “differentiation” described in Jose Casanova’s masterful \textit{Public Religions in the Modern World} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), especially pp. 21-25, in which it is taken to be the carving out of various autonomous, secular spheres, such as science and economics. See also p. 212, where he calls differentiation the “structural trend” of modernity. Though the implications of comparing Oakeshott’s “modes” to Casanova’s “differentiation” cannot be undertaken here, I think they both point us towards considering that any intelligent reflection on religion and modernity will distinguish between fragmentation and plurality and a simple narrative of secularization.

\textsuperscript{57} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and Its Modes}, p. 3

\textsuperscript{58} Here I am borrowing from Podoksik, \textit{In Defence}, p. 31

\textsuperscript{59} Oakeshott, \textit{Experience and Its Modes}, p. 82
lasts and one not to be despised.”60 There is a way of reading this first major effort of Oakeshott’s, despite the exhilarating discussion of philosophy found in it, as an understated warning against the believing we can achieve or possess the unity modernity would deny us.61 The whole can be pursued, but our reach always will exceed our grasp, and this seems to temper Oakeshott’s judgment of the various modalities. Philosophy, while showing the limits of each mode and exposing their unstated presuppositions, never is taken to be able to replace these modes. There is a difference, after all, between skepticism and utter suspicion. Oakeshott seems to take each mode for what its worth, but not more. He can concede much to a mode while still holding that it falls short of pursuing the concrete whole.

Much more could be noted about such matters, but it is possible to see Oakeshott’s recognition, or at least emphasis, on the plurality and diversity of the human condition deepening as his work proceeded. Perhaps most famously, the idiom of modality comes to be supplemented by the image of human intercourse as a “conversation” comprised of a variety of “voices.” In such a conversation, Oakeshott writes, “the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another…”62 The voices that comprise the conversation, importantly, are not ranked hierarchically nor judged in relation to a single

60 Ibid., p. 356
61 Put differently, I largely am agreeing with Podokskik’s assessment that, in Experience and Its Modes, “Oakeshott pursues an agenda of defending abstraction against philosophy, and not philosophy against abstraction.” See In Defence, p. 45. My only hesitation with regard to this formulation is that I do not see why these two projects have to be put in opposition to each other – Oakeshott could have been pursuing both of these tasks.
62 Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in Rationalism in Politics, p. 489
ideal, such as the *vita contemplativa*.\textsuperscript{63} There will be many voices, and their relevance will be determined by the course of the conversation itself, not because their utterances conform to some “external standard.”\textsuperscript{64} For Oakeshott, maintaining the plurality of the conversation, the variety of voices, means to resist the notion that all human utterances are in “one mode” – to push against bringing a unity and coherence to an activity fundamentally constituted otherwise. And in speaking of human intercourse in such terms, Oakeshott reminds us of the image of Babel: “Nevertheless, the view dies hard that Babel was the occasion of a curse being laid upon mankind from which it is the business of the philosophers to deliver us, and a disposition remains to impose a single character upon significant human speech.”\textsuperscript{65} As with Niebuhr, the ancient myth Oakeshott invokes becomes an invitation rest in the fragmentation of the world rather than overcome it, to live with the uncertainty and ambiguity that comes with one voice never coming to dominate the conversation.

III. The Graceful Response: Towards a Political Ethic for Modernity

When imagining the possibilities of a religious response to modernity, perhaps a critique of its fragmentation and loss of cohesion comes most readily to mind. That is, where there once was attempted unity, whether political and social or philosophical – a more robust form of community, whether real or imagined, and often informed by religion – there now is radical plurality; in place of hierarchy, we find a conversation of many voices; instead of a sturdy synthesis perceived to be finally valid, there is recognition of man’s capacity for endless variety and the concession that our finitude

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 493
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 494
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p. 488-89
mars every ideal. Against these shifts, religion could make its claims, offering to impose order on it all. Whether in the service of a political movement or simply for the sake of intellectual coherence, religion – taken to be some manner of politically authoritative foundation – could be understood as providing a better way forward than the meager offerings of modernity.

Niebuhr and Oakeshott, in different ways, avoid such a conclusion. Religion, especially certain elements of the Christian tradition, for them becomes not the source of a rejection of modernity but instead an indispensable supplement to be used in its defense. Their readings of the myth of the Tower of Babel – a story fraught with theological implications – provide warnings not just against human pride and pretensions, but an injunction against seeking to escape the contingency, finitude, and fragmentation of the world. They give a religious account of what essentially are the contours of modernity, an account that fundamentally acquiesces to such conditions and points to their probable permanence. Put differently, they write in a theological idiom in an attempt to stave off projects, whether secular or religious, that hope to fulfill the human longings for a particular form of community that approximates our primordial condition. But even more, I believe a particular religious stance – a certain disposition inextricably related to certain theological ideas – is for both Niebuhr and Oakeshott the necessary precondition for the type of politics each holds to be most appropriate for the conditions of modernity described above. What follows, then, is not a full delineation of either man’s political thought, but rather an outline of what I will term their “graceful” response to modernity.

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr’s first sustained reflection on political life, he set forth premises which he never fully abandoned, however much he
may have shifted emphasis across the decades of his work and writing. In one of the most concise explications of his basic assumptions about politics, Niebuhr wrote, “Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and the coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.”66 The necessity of coercion and the inevitability of force in politics are due at least in part to Niebuhr’s pessimism about finding universal standards of justice, of being able to consider the good apart from our own self-interest. The finitude and contingency of our various situations, the fact that we are bound to a particular time, place, and social position, means that divergent accounts of proper political action are inescapable. As he describes it, “The limitations of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interests sufficiently to envisage the interests of their fellowmen as clearly as they do their own makes force an inevitable part of the process of social cohesion.”67 Because difference, and thus coercion, are largely inevitable for Niebuhr, he never gives in to the rationalist temptation in politics – he never believes that simply bringing reason to bear on political and social problems could ever yield a truly enduring justice or lasting peace. Politics necessarily will involve conflict. Reason always is tainted, is bound to some contingency, and thus at best only glimpses something approaching a finally valid principle of justice. And, even more, reason “is bound to justify the egoism of the individual”68 – it is not just the instrument of man’s self-transcendence, but the tool for rationalizing his own interests and desires. This, really, is the translation into political terms of the various themes in his

67 Ibid., p. 6
68 Ibid., p. 40
essay on the Tower of Babel: the hope for a truly universal perspective, of being able to rise above the contingencies of nature and history, is a futile one.

Niebuhr also understood that this inevitability of conflict – that our tongues would remain confounded – would be particularly tragic given the aforementioned “growth” he saw in history. In Moral Man and Immoral Society, he notes that the “very extension of human sympathies has therefore resulted in the creation of larger units of conflict without abolishing conflict.” Niebuhr grasped the difficulties and dilemmas posed by the rapidly changing, ever globalizing patterns of modernity. He consistently affirmed that good and evil are intertwined in history, and so the scale, and profundity, of the problems confronting modern man would be tremendous, concomitant with the dazzling technological and material achievements that were evident in his day, and even more in our own. For better or worse, the preponderance of problems we now experience are somehow global problems; as Niebuhr wrote in The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, “all aspects of man’s historical problems appear upon that larger field in more vivid and discernible proportions.”

Part of the very structure of modernity, then, would be perils unimagined in previous ages. Our inevitable fallibility, combined with the “larger field” of some manner of world community, would mean that our mistakes would be severe. Nearly all of human experience, for Niebuhr, was heightened in the modern world – our triumphs would be more remarkable, and our tragedies more costly. Modern life would require a real acknowledgement that human freedom and restless change are deeply connected – that we cannot have one without the other – and so would necessitate creativity and

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69 Ibid., p. 49
70 Niebuhr, Children of Light and Children of Darkness, p. 187
responsibility in responding to this flux. As Niebuhr described the matter in *Faith and History*, “The rapidly shifting circumstances of a technical civilization require the constant exercise of this responsibility, not merely in order to achieve a more perfect justice but also to reconstitute and recreate older forms of justice and community which the advent of technics tends to destroy and disintegrate.”\(^71\) This task would require both an openness to, and acceptance of, the instability that follows from admitting the full scope of human possibilities, while never believing history’s growth would bring with it solutions to the new dilemmas that it poses.

Niebuhr grasped that the very source of this creative destruction, man’s indeterminate freedom and position as creator of history, contained within it the tragic paradox of our ultimate insufficiency to the world, and to each other. The final chapter of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* bears eloquent witness to this fact, perhaps as much as any other of his writings. As Niebuhr puts it,

> The task of building a world community is man’s final necessity and possibility, but also his final impossibility. It is a necessity and possibility because history is a process which extends the freedom of man over natural process to the point where universality is reached. It is an impossibility because man is, despite his increasing freedom, a finite creature, wedded to time and place and incapable of building any structure of culture or civilization which does not have its foundations in a particular and dated locus.

Only a few pages later he admonishes us to acknowledge that “the highest achievements of human life are infected with sinful corruption” and, as he closes the book, implores us to understand “the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements…”\(^72\)

This in part is what made possible his defense of modernity – he recognized the high and the low are curiously combined, and that our greatest possibilities and most frustrating

\(^71\) Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 200  
\(^72\) Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, pp. 189-90
impossibilities are of a piece with one another. The tribulations of the twentieth century, then, were not the inevitable dénouement of a decline begun centuries before, but the actualization of our always already there capacity for sin – and, even more, the dark side of our achievements.

Niebuhr really was arguing for a theory of human failure, a way of understanding our existence and striving as being defined by perpetual, intransigent problems, problems that could not be “solved” but at best mitigated. And in the context of modernity, these failures would take on new dimensions – the stakes would be higher, and so our awareness of the inevitability of sin, our pride and partiality, would become all the more vital. But Niebuhr, at his most profound, also argues for responding to these failures in a particular way. He does not leave us with mere analysis, but urges us to adopt a particular political ethic appropriate to his description of those problems attending history’s “growth” – a political ethic for modernity. If Niebuhr’s understanding of modernity, again, stresses our fragility and fallibility, then the more constructive elements of his thought calls on us, above all, to develop the capacity for forgiveness and charity. For Niebuhr, these were the supreme political virtues, and those most necessary in the conditions of modernity. In perhaps his most striking summary of what it means to gracefully respond to modernity – to rest in its ambiguities – he argues that

There are no simple congruities in life or history… It is possible to soften the incongruities of life endlessly by the scientific conquest of nature’s caprices, and the social and political triumph over historic injustice. But all such strategies cannot finally overcome the fragmentary character of human existence. The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing
we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. There we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.\textsuperscript{73}

That Niebuhr places the two parts of the above passage – our inevitable partiality and the hope for a “final form of love” – alongside each other should be taken to point to something essential. Any theory of guilt and sin, one that recognizes the inevitable conflict of various ideals arising from our finitude and contingency, finds its completion in a theory of forgiveness. It is no accident that Niebuhr dwells so much upon both charity and forgiveness, and that his political model was Abraham Lincoln, the figure looming over the conclusion to \textit{The Irony of American History} and who embodied Niebuhr’s ideal of charity. Searching American history, Niebuhr could find no better example of the political ethic he was urging than that expressed by Lincoln in his Second Inaugural.\textsuperscript{74} In \textit{Irony}, Niebuhr writes about the necessity of charity in this way:

\begin{quote}
The realm of mystery and meaning which encloses and finally makes sense out of the baffling configurations of history is not identical with any scheme of rational intelligibility. The faith which appropriates the meaning in the mystery inevitably involves an experience of repentance for the false meanings which the pride of nations and cultures introduces into the pattern. Such repentance is the true source of charity; and we are more desperately in need of genuine charity than of more technocratic skills.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Contrition, repentance, and forgiveness comprise the essence of Niebuhr’s political ethic for modernity. In an age where our inevitable mistakes are bound to be severe, the necessity for cultivating an ethic of forgiveness becomes all the more vital. This does not mean we forsake moral purpose; instead, it is to recognize the ultimate disjunction

\textsuperscript{74} My reading of Lincoln, with its emphasis on charity and forgiveness rather than his Lockean or liberal understanding of equality, owes much to the interpretation found in Deneen’s \textit{Democratic Faith}, especially the conclusion “A Model of Democratic Charity,” pp. 270-87.
\textsuperscript{75} Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{Irony}, p. 150
between God’s purposes and our own, and thus understand that our political striving
needs to be concomitant with charity and the capacity for self-criticism – in other words,
leavened with a form of grace. Politics, for Niebuhr, was not a sphere for moralists. The
children of light – those sure of their own righteousness – always seem to incur the
greater share of his displeasure. This should not be taken to mean he simply is arguing for
a “politics of limits.” For all his brooding, Niebuhr was not a pessimist in any
straightforward sense of the word – indeed, he closes his essay, “Augustine’s Political
Realism,” by declaring that we secular moderns read Augustine too cynically; he could
just as well have written the same about his own interpreters.76 And so, instead of
providing us with a too consistent realism, Niebuhr argues for inhabiting the world in a
particular way, for engaging political life with both love and justice in mind, fully aware
of the corruptions of power without abandoning the premise that it can be exercised
responsibly.

For Niebuhr, a particular form of religious faith was the prelude to such an ethic.
Rather than alternate between moods of sentimentality and despair, his theological
defense of modernity urged a particular form of humility, one that, in recognizing the
partiality and contingency of our understanding of justice, was open to the endless
possibilities inherent in “the gift” of human freedom while still being aware of the

76 This particularly is true of Augustine’s secular interpreters. Niebuhr writes, “As for secular thought, it
has difficulty in approaching Augustine’s realism without falling into cynicism, or in avoiding nihilism
without falling into sentimentality…Modern ‘realists’ know the power of collective self-interest as
Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness.” See Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” in
The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 140. These qualifications may very well mean that Niebuhr would
escape a number of the criticisms Oakeshott leveled against another famous “realist,” Hans Morgenthau, in
his review of Morgenthal’s Scientific Man Versus Power Politics. See Oakeshott’s “Scientific Politics” in
Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993),
pp. 97-110. I thank Paul Franco for bringing the essay on Morgenthal to my attention.
pretensions that cause its “corruption.” He tells us in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* that

Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all political ends are relative) is a threat to communal peace. But religious humility is no simple moral or political achievement. It springs only from the depth of a religion which confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties and values, and persuades him to confess: “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.”

The seeds of both religious and political wisdom, then, are one and the same. The core of Niebuhr’s political ethic was forgiveness; but this was only a possibility for those with contrite hearts. And all this was part of a posture of humility that he thought was more necessary than ever – a humility that follows from a deep awareness of the tragic and ambiguous elements always found in our attempts to instantiate what we believe to be justice.

Oakeshott’s response to modernity, his description of a preferred political ethic appropriate to it, is, not surprisingly, more opaque and elusive than Niebuhr’s. Never is there the prophetic insistence that all human striving is under judgment – humility, for Oakeshott, is less the product of contrition following from the recognition of sin than a form of bemused skepticism. Still, as with Niebuhr, there is a profound understanding of the ambiguities and incongruities that at least in part constitute modernity. Politics is not about the healing of the rift between God, Man and Nature, the imposition of a unified vision of the good life or the actualization of a finally valid, universal principle of justice. Instead, Oakeshott seems to give an account of what is necessary to acquiesce to the contingency and diversity of modernity, to accept the lack of coherence and communal

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77 Niebuhr, *Irony*, p. 158
78 Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, p. 151
purpose that attends such plurality. Put differently, Oakeshott’s graceful response to modernity could be understood, in parallel to his description of the inhabitants of the land of Japhet in “The Tower of Babel” that was noted above, as coming to be “reconciled” to our expulsion from the Garden and to regard our eternal salvation as “God’s business,” not our own.\(^9\)

Part of Oakeshott’s recognition of the ambiguities of modernity certainly is his grasp of the mixed theoretical and practical history of political life in Europe – that is, political life after Christendom.\(^0\) He describes “the politics of faith” and “the politics of scepticism” as not mere opponents, but also as partners – neither can stand alone, and to the extent they are in opposition to each other, it is an “oblique” opposition.\(^1\) And in “The Character of a Modern European State,” \(societas\) and \(universitas\) both are a part of the European consciousness: Europe has “a political imagination which is itself constituted in a tension between them.”\(^2\) Descriptively, Oakeshott never evacuates complexity for an easier and simpler account of the relevant political and intellectual history. This in part is what makes his defense of modernity conceivable; the variety of possibilities that are still extant in modern political life, and the multiplicity of lines of thought and practice that constitute modernity, mean that a \(simply\) negative account of its beginnings and nature is impossible. Oakeshott does not need to go behind, or beyond, modernity to find the resources he needs to articulate the political ethic he finds most

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\(^9\) Oakeshott, “The Tower of Babel,” in \(On History\), p. 182

\(^0\) I take Oakeshott’s distinction between “Christendom” and “Europe” actually to be an immensely important one. That he distinguishes between the two seems to indicate that he is rejecting the use of religious faith to provide the basis of an alternative to modernity. Religious faith may be immensely important, perhaps even necessary, for “Europe” – but never will it be the unifying element it was in “Christendom.”

\(^1\) Oakeshott, \(The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism\), ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 113

\(^2\) Oakeshott, “The Character of a Modern European State,” in \(On Human Conduct\), p. 320
appropriate for it. His task is not so much to correct or critique modernity, as to remind its inhabitants of what is most needful – to point out which tame birds already in the cage of the mind might be the most useful.

To do this Oakeshott evoked both a political ideal – civil association or *societas* – and a portrayed the type of character that could best inhabit, or perhaps endure, a state so constituted. I am less concerned with the former, the notion of civil association he provides, than with the latter, the disposition that makes such an ideal sustainable or possible. It is a disposition capable of understanding the state in non-purposive terms; of conceiving of political association *not* as a shared enterprise, an “undertaking,” or a therapeutic organization; it means distinguishing “ruling” from “managing;” and it requires embracing the idea of civil freedom “as the condition of being associated solely in terms of the recognition of the authority…of the adverbial conditions of conduct specified in *respublica*, distinguished from that of having chosen to be associated in terms of a common purpose…” While never ignoring the relevant alternatives, and without believing the ideal of civil association could simply be put into practice, it seems clear that Oakeshott was attempting to bring it to mind forcefully, articulate its continued relevance, and demonstrate his own preference for it. And when discussing the disposition or character related to civil association, it is remarkable how often he slips into theological language and draws on imagery of a religious nature.

Most importantly for Oakeshott, a certain manner of religious faith, or at least a posture that could be best described in the idiom of Augustinian theology, seems to be

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83 This in part is due to the more detailed accounts of “civil association” now available. See especially Kenneth B. McIntyre’s *The Limits of Political Theory: Oakeshott’s Philosophy of Civil Association* (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2004)

84 These descriptions are taken from “On the Civil Condition” in *On Human Conduct*, pp. 182-84

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related to the ability to face the contingency of our situation, the radical plurality of a fragmented and diverse world, and the forbearance to treat political life in the austere fashion required by civil association. It is notable how often, in *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Oakeshott calls the purveyors of the politics of faith “Pelagian.”

That is, the style of politics he disdains is likened to an ancient heresy, the belief that human beings could achieve their salvation through their own effort because original sin has not malformed our wills – “doing,” for the Pelagian, is not marred by the Augustinian awareness of our inevitable insufficiencies. And so “the politics of faith” amounts to the belief that “Perfection, or salvation, is something to be achieved in this world: man is redeemable in history.” Government, for the Pelagian, is tasked with being the chief agent of improvement, of controlling and organizing “human activity for the purpose of achieving human perfection.”

A misreading of the human condition, enabled by a misguided theology, is what Oakeshott finds so problematic; an Augustinian vision of limits, of doubt about the possibility of our ability to will our collective salvation, is the corrective. Oakeshott’s somewhat curious remark in “The Tower of Babel” about the descendants of Japheth regarding their salvation as God’s business, not their own, becomes less obscure when put alongside his pejorative mentions of Pelagianism. Augustinianism and Pelagianism represent not just two trajectories of Christian theology, but the fundamental alternatives to consider when assessing the possibilities, and nature, of man’s felicity in the world. The former lends itself to an acceptance of imperfection, the latter attempts to overcome it. And to believe that perfection or salvation is possible in this world is to believe in a *single* end for man, a

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85 See, for instance, Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, p. 23
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., p. 24
particular vision of the good life capable of being brought about on the earth. As such, the Pelagian necessarily finds the plurality of modernity, and the various foibles of man more generally, an affront. The unified vision towards which it hopes to move the world cannot help but be an evacuation of the conditions of modernity.

Oakeshott, however, does not just use a certain theological tradition to critique the excesses of the politics of faith and its basic equivalents, enterprise association or universitas. His use of Augustine is more than simply negative; it goes beyond reminding us of human limits. Instead, Augustine becomes a central figure in – perhaps even the progenitor of – the story of individuality, that disposition “to be ‘distinct,’”³⁸⁸ that only fully emerges out of the crumbling solidarities of the Middle Ages. In “On the Character of a Modern European State,” Oakeshott describes

>a disposition to be ‘self-employed’ in which a man recognizes himself and all others in terms of self-determination…in terms of wants rather than slippery satisfactions and of adventures rather than uncertain outcomes. This is a disposition to prefer the road to the inn, ambulatory conversation to deliberation about means for achieving ends, the rules of the road to directions about how to reach a destination…³⁸⁹

And then, immediately after this elaboration, he turns to theology. That is, part of this disposition is connected to a particular religious vision, an understanding of God and the world that corresponds to the self-employed conversationalist:

>And since men are apt to make gods whose characters reflect what they believe to be their own, the deity corresponding to this self-understanding is an Augustinian god of majestic imagination, who, when he might have devised an untroublesome universe, had the nerve to create one composed of self-employed adventurers of unpredictable fancy, to announce to them some rules of conduct, and thus to acquire convives capable of ‘answering back’ in civil tones with whom to pass eternity in conversation.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁸ Oakeshott, “On the Character of a Modern European State,” in On Human Conduct, p. 251
³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 324
³⁹⁰ Ibid.
There is, of course, a profound ambiguity in this passage. This Augustinian god simply appears to reflect the character of certain types of men – it is a construct, a fabrication, a god that we are led to believe could be imagined in a variety of other ways, or maybe not at all. It is possible to read this passage with the utmost skepticism, as a poetic peroration that uses a theological term with no real propriety. But it also may point to human longings which, if not universal, are so prevalent they must be engaged. Perhaps Oakeshott’s teaching here is that some vision of God is inevitable, that a theology of sorts will accompany almost every disposition and that all theories of politics have a corollary in a religious vision. Oakeshott, after all, once asserted the seemingly inescapable “link between politics and eternity” and described political philosophy as dealing with the “predicament” of human life and articulating “the contribution the political order” might bring “to the deliverance of mankind.” A contingent feature of European political reflection might be that it cannot be disaggregated completely from the utterances and images of the Christian imagination. Oakeshott’s recourse to an “Augustinian god” need not draw us into speculation, at least initially, about the “truth” of such sentiments and beliefs, but instead should point us to what he thought was necessary for “answering to his own understood situation.”

With this in mind, I believe we are led to Oakeshott’s most arresting passages on religion, those found in On Human Conduct, especially its first essay. Just before he begins this striking, brief interlude, Oakeshott remarks that “this unresolved plurality [of languages of moral intercourse] teases the monistic yearnings of the muddled theorist”

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91 Oakeshott, “Introduction to Leviathan,” in Hobbes on Civil Association (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1975), p. 6
92 Oakeshott, “On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct” in On Human Conduct, p. 81
and the “moralist with ecumenical leanings.” The language, here, approximates that of the Tower of Babel – the plurality here is not dissimilar from the confounding of our tongues that some consider a curse. We long to resolve the plurality of our condition and are “disconcerted” unless feeling to be “upheld by something more substantial than the emanations of [our] own contingent imaginations.” The deliverance we seek, then, is from the anxiety of these ambiguities, from confronting a world not made in our own image. It is this – our monistic yearning to escape from contingency and plurality – that religion gives man a certain ability to endure: “The gift of religious faith is that of reconciliation to the unavoidable dissonances of a human condition, a reconciliation which is neither a denial, nor a substitute for remedial effort, nor a theoretical understanding in which the mystery of their occurrence is abated or even dispelled, but a mode of acceptance, a ‘graceful’ response.” As Oakeshott goes on to describe religion further, there is a way in which he seems to be especially concerned with what it possibly could mean in modernity. Religion does not necessarily provide the sense of belonging that would be denied to us, politically, in civil association, nor is it simply a less nefarious form of therapeutic community than the Pelagian experiments in enterprise association. It seems to be addressed to the individual, that curious character of modernity, who is realizing the contingency of his situation and, possibly, becoming so dismayed by the plurality he observes that he begins to long for the satisfactions of a more unified world. And so while Oakeshott acknowledges that religious faith “may be

93 Ibid., p. 80
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., p. 81
96 That is, Oakeshott does not seem to think that it simply is the task of the “church” to provide what the “state” does not. Put differently, he does not conceptualize religious institutions simply as the places where our communal longings should be channeled in an effort to avert utopian politics.
recognized as a solace for misfortune and as a release from the fatality of wrong-doing” it is for, him, primarily concerned “with a less contingent dissonance in the human condition; namely, the hollowness, the futility of that condition, its character of being no more than ‘un voyage au bout de la nuit.’”.\footnote{Ibid., p. 83}

Oakeshott writes of religious faith, especially in these passages in *On Human Conduct*, as providing intimations of immortality, of giving man a certain grace, and allowing “encounters with eternity,” but not more.\footnote{Ibid., p. 85} The language is not one of “deliverance,” of procuring a solution to a problem, or giving a coherence or unity to what is contingent and fragmented. Religion does not put an end to the conversation, does not satisfy our monistic yearnings, does not give us a doctrine that resolves the ambiguities and perplexities of life. For Oakeshott, then, the Augustinian religious faith he invokes serves as the ally of civil association and is part of the genealogy of the individual capable of living within such an order.\footnote{Here I am following Andrew Sullivan: “[Religious faith] provided the nerve necessary for civil existence.” See *Intimations Pursued*, p. 208} And such a faith allows a graceful response to modernity itself – it becomes the source of “the serenity in conduct”.\footnote{Oakeshott, “On the Theoretical Understanding of Human Conduct,” in *On Human Conduct*, p. 81} so liable to be forsaken.

**IV. Conclusion: Redeeming Modernity**

The differences between Niebuhr and Oakeshott, for the most part, have been elided here. It should be apparent from the preceding that they wrote in distinct idioms, and proffered responses to modernity with different emphases, but fully exploring their various divergences has not been my primary concern. What I have taken as most
important is their parallel accounts of the contours of modernity, especially through their interpretations of the Tower of Babel, and their “graceful” responses to the fragmentation and contingency they described. For both men, religious faith, particularly a manner of Augustinian Christianity, was not the source of a critique of modernity but the essential resource for resting in its conditions – dwelling gracefully within a world lacking the unity or coherence of our primordial condition. This is not to say that Niebuhr and Oakeshott never leveled stinging indictments of certain elements found within modernity\textsuperscript{101} – but for neither man did religion fundamentally become the basis of an alternative to it. Religion does not save us from modernity but rather redeems it; we are not, to borrow Oakeshott’s language, “released”\textsuperscript{102} from the mortal condition of the fugitive adventures of human conduct, but rather see them subtly transformed by the intimations of “reconciliation”\textsuperscript{103} and the possibility of forgiveness\textsuperscript{104} that faith, however faltering, puts before us.

In this I hold that both Niebuhr and Oakeshott can be understood not just as describing and defending modernity, but also offering particular narratives of its origins.

\textsuperscript{101}See, for instance, Oakeshott’s scathing criticisms at the end of “A Place of Learning” in \textit{The Voice of Liberal Learning} (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), p. 33: “The world in which many children now grow up is crowded, not necessarily with occupants and not at all with memorable experiences, but with happenings; it is a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities which invoke neither reflection nor choice but instant participation. A child quickly becomes aware that he cannot too soon plunge into this flow or immerse himself in it too quickly; to pause is to be swept with the chilling fear of never having lived at all…He lurches from one modish conformity to the next, or from one fashionable guru to his successor, seeking to lose himself in a solidity composed of exact replicas of himself.” I should note that passages such as this make the distinction between modern and merely contemporaneous important to keep in mind. And it should be taken as significant that Oakeshott uses this passage to ultimately bemoan our inability to be genuine individuals – a distinctly, or almost distinctly, modern human type.

\textsuperscript{102}Oakeshott, “Theoretical Understanding,” in \textit{On Human Conduct}, p. 85

\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., p. 86

\textsuperscript{104}Niebuhr, \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, p. 137: “The crown of Christian Ethics is the doctrine of forgiveness. In it the whole genius of prophetic religion is expressed. Love as forgiveness is the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements. Yet it is a possibility if the impossibility of love is recognized and the sin in the self is acknowledged.”
and identity\textsuperscript{105} that were meant to shift our understanding of what modernity actually could mean – they consciously were attempting to enlarge the possibilities of what thoughts were thinkable. And so the subtitle of Niebuhr’s \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness}, “a vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense” might be taken to somehow capture the nature of both of their intellectual efforts. Rather than affirm modernity on the grounds of “progress” or the most facile belief in the sufficiency of Enlightenment rationalism, Niebuhr and Oakeshott, in different ways, provide alternative accounts of modernity that allow for its “vindication” while still making room for critiques of its most superficial and narrow defenders. As political theorists confront the “de-secularization”\textsuperscript{106} of the world, or rather recognize that the stilted concept of “secularization” obscured more than it revealed, such nuanced understandings of religion and modernity surely deserve our sustained attention.\textsuperscript{107} In an age of both religious fundamentalism and a noble but ultimately naïve understanding of liberalism, Niebuhr and Oakeshott offer us an all-too-rare complexity and depth that does justice to the genuine achievements of modernity and those human longings for


\textsuperscript{106} I am taking this term from \textit{The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics}, ed. Peter Berger, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999)

\textsuperscript{107} There are signs that political and social theorists are beginning to grapple with the real complexity of both modernity and liberalism’s relationship to religion. Obviously, there have always been voices that have handled questions of “religion and politics” or – better yet! – political thought and theology with admirable nuance. But in recent years, for obvious reasons, these reflections, I believe, have taken on new focus and importance. To note just a few examples, see Charles Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Michael Gillespie, \textit{The Theological Origins of Modernity} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Mark Lilla, \textit{The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), and Jean Bethke Elshtain, \textit{Sovereignty: God, State, and Self} (New York: Basic Books, 2008). Of course, the greatest indicator of these trends is that even certain Rawlsians are trying to engage this conversation in new ways, most notably through the publication of Rawls’ own undergraduate thesis, a work of Protestant theology. See John Rawls, \textit{A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith}, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
transcendence and eternity that, if not permanent, surely seem likely to remain with us for some time to come.

Niebuhr would have us revisit both Renaissance and Reformation – in a way, reaching behind, or at least downplaying, the Enlightenment – putting them in dialectical tension with each other as a way of grasping both the endless possibilities and inevitable tragedies that attend to the exercise of human freedom. Openness to history’s “growth” and, with it, a realization that the scope of man’s failures could possibly be greater than ever before, needed to be complimented by an ethic of humility and forgiveness. This posture, for Niebuhr, was part of a religious understanding of human fallibility, connected to that most unfashionable of Christian doctrines, original sin. Oakeshott, somewhat differently, especially seemed concerned to evoke descriptions of the modern “individual,” that human type that fully emerges in modernity but that would be vexed by the appearance of various other distinctly modern characters, especially the individual manqué. In doing so, Oakeshott dwelled particularly upon Augustine, who taught us not just about our imperfections, but about our ultimate insufficiency toward the task of overcoming them. Grace, perhaps, is what comes to those who find themselves released from the “deadliness of doing” and as such can rest in the satisfaction that their salvation is God’s business, not their own. Such an individual could live within the minimal order that Oakeshott termed “civil association,” content to view those around him as fellow adventurers rather than partners in a grand enterprise – as other flawed but fascinating individuals whom it was his task neither to instruct nor correct but, possibly, enjoy.

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108 Oakeshott, “Theoretical Understanding,” in On Human Conduct, p. 85
Determining which of these visions might be more satisfactory is another task entirely. Instead, for now, Niebuhr and Oakeshott simply should be taken as interesting allies in the theological defense of modernity, their similarities more important and instructive than their differences. It is worth noting, though, that eventually pursuing Niebuhr and Oakeshott’s divergences might only further affirm, if somewhat indirectly, the central concerns explored here: there may be a breadth of possibilities pertaining to the relationship between religion and modernity that only could be understood once such an inquiry is divested of the stale dichotomies and narrowness of vision that mar so much of our current deliberations. The differences between the two men considered here actually could help open the space necessary to allow such explorations to take place – their similarities, many noted above, allowing the conversation to begin, and their disagreements letting it take on a fuller and more penetrating character. And so if, as Oakeshott once put it, a man “is what he learns to become,”¹⁰⁹ then Niebuhr and Oakeshott surely should be considered as among those teachers from whom we most need guidance – those who can remind us of the perennial necessity of what Niebuhr described as that “fruit of grace” wherein “faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ See Timothy Fuller’s editorial note on p. 1 of “A Place of Learning” in The Voice of Liberal Learning.