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February 9, 2010: Politics is not theology

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Title: Politics is not theology

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2/9/2010—a CNN story by John Blake caught my eye (How Obama's favorite theologian shaped his first year in office). The story attempts to link President Obama's policies and rhetoric to the thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr. Obama had once called Niebuhr his "favorite philosopher" and Blake asked several fans of Niebuhr, including his great-nephew Gustav Niebuhr, who is director of the Religion and Society Program at Syracuse University to evaluate Obama's first year from that perspective. The verdict—"like his great-uncle, avoids moral absolutes in his speeches: The U.S. is not always right, and its enemies are not always evil." Sorry, this sort of thing does not work. First of all, once you call Niebuhr a philosopher, you have already missed the point. Wouldn't Niebuhr have thought of himself as a theologian? Also, while it is true that Niebuhr became more pragmatic sounding during WWII and afterward, from his earlier Christian socialism, he did not become a pragmatist. He remained a Christian thinker. He simply changed his mind to a certain extent about what the Christian message means. Do you see that politics is not like this and should not be like this? If Niebuhr had concluded that God required pacifism, he would have returned to it. He was faithful to God. That is indeed the criticism of any religious person. Politics is not the place for theology. Or philosophy either. Politics is the art of the possible. And that is even true of our greatest thinking President, Abraham Lincoln.