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ERRAND INTO THE PAST:
PERRY MILLER, REINHOLD NIEBUHR, AND THE
INTERPRETATION OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Taylor Reynolds

Mentor: Abram Van Engen

This work argues that Perry Miller coopted Reinhold Niebuhr's vision of American history and secularized it to fit his own projects and perspective. This process is the creation of his metahistorical faith, which I will define as an undergirding set of principles, guided by which the historian chooses facts, imposes narrative, and creates meaning from facts about the past. In contradiction to the majority of the professional field of history at the time, Niebuhr and Miller expressed explicitly their own versions of a metahistorical faith, seeing through history and attempts to discover unchanging features of human nature and unchanging patterns of human history. Their metahistorical faith was an impassioned, realist liberal philosophy of history that presented new answers to the objectivity question in ways that would prove influential across academic disciplines and into the public square. However, many of their students, especially Miller's, adopted their explanation of history without realizing the importance of understanding the undergirding principles of philosophy that guided their historical work. These same students went on to become influential figures in public and foreign policy. With this understanding of history unaccompanied by the necessity of a metahistorical faith to see history through (and see through history), they created all sorts of problems and misappropriations of the past.