

PROPHECY & PLURALISM

Fire and water are not more heterogeneous than the different colonies of North America.

--Andrew Burnaby, 1760

America has been a pluralist society from the beginning. The Founders recognized the pluralistic character of the new nation when they proposed *e pluribus unum*—Latin for “out of many, one”—as the national motto. And our nation has grown only more pluralistic since.

At its best, pluralism gives our society its dynamism: it provides us a rich variety of perspectives, experiences, and talents that we can bring to bear on any given challenge. Yet pluralism can also be paralyzing: getting people with such a broad array of values and objectives to find common ground can be extremely difficult.

Niebuhr stood out for his ability to articulate a social ethics that appealed to a wide array of voices, from union laborers and civil rights activists to foreign policy experts and presidents. In this section, we draw on Niebuhr as inspiration for helping us articulate an ethical vision for today.

Questions to consider:

How do we cultivate a voice of conscience that resonates in our cultural context?

How might we envision the American experiment in ways that are inclusive enough to appeal across lines of religion, race, class, and gender, yet substantive enough to help us distinguish good from evil and confront injustice?

What steps do we need to take as a society for the dream of racial justice to become reality?

-- Separation of Church & State --

Church/State separation is a bedrock principle of democratic pluralism. By prohibiting the government from endorsing a particular religion, it preserves freedom of worship, promotes vibrant religious communities, and upholds individual rights.

Yet in practice, church/state separation is routinely under threat. Political leaders are tempted to invest their agendas with religious authority, and church leaders are tempted by political power and influence. For Niebuhr, therefore, church/state separation is as fragile as it is vital. Preserving its boundaries requires vigilance and accountability.

Niebuhr’s commitment to church/state separation is especially clear in an op-ed entitled, “The King’s Chapel and the King’s Court.” In it, the ailing theologian excoriates the Nixon administration for the practice of holding religious services in the East Wing of the White House. Niebuhr is particularly biting in his criticism of Billy Graham, who was Nixon’s closest spiritual adviser, and J. Edgar Hoover, who he compared to a biblical villain: the high priest Amaziah.

Niebuhr’s op-ed struck a nerve. He received a torrent of hate mail following its publication, which “rather pleased him” according to his wife Ursula. In his view, incurring the wrath of the nation’s most powerful political and religious leaders was a small price to pay for enforcing the boundaries between church and state.

Questions to consider:

The principle of church/state separation is derived from the so-called “establishment clause” in the first amendment to the constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. “

What does this clause mean? Why is it so important?

Do you think this principle is upheld in contemporary American society? Why or why not?

Niebuhr Quotes:

Some bizarre aspects have developed from this new form of conformity in these weekly services [in the East Wing of the White House]. Most of this tamed religion seemed even more extravagantly appreciative of official policy than any historic establishment feared by our Founding Fathers. A Jewish rabbi, forgetting Amos, declared:

I hope it is not presumptuous for me, in the presence of the President of the United States, to pray that future historians, looking back on our generation, may say that in a period of great trial and tribulations, the finger of God pointed to Richard Milhous Nixon, giving him the vision and wisdom to save the world and civilization, and opening the way for our country to realize the good that the century offered mankind.

It is wonderful what a simple White House invitation will do to dull the critical faculties, thereby confirming the fears of the Founding Fathers. --KCKC, *Christianity and Crisis*, Aug 4, 1969, 211

The Nixon-Graham doctrine of the relation of religion to public morality and policy, as revealed in the White House services, has two defects:

(1) It regards all religion as virtuous in guaranteeing public justice. It seems indifferent to the radical distinction between conventional religion—which throws the aura of sanctity on contemporary public policy, whether morally inferior or outrageously unjust— and radical religious protest, which subjects all historical reality (including economic, social and radical injustice) to the “word of the Lord,” i.e., absolute standards of justice. It was this type of complacent conformity that the Founding Fathers feared and sought to eliminate in the First Amendment.

(2) The Nixon-Graham doctrine assumes that a religious change of heart, such as occurs in an individual conversion, would cure men of all sin. Billy Graham has a favorite text: “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.” Graham applies this Pauline hope about conversion to the race problem and assures us that “If you live in Christ, you be-come color blind.” The defect in this confidence in individual conversion is that it obscures the dual individual and social character of human selves and the individual and social character of their virtues and vices. --KCKC 212

Transcript for clip -- *“Prophecy & Pluralism: Separation of Church & State”*:

Massa: So people who say, “Religious impulses have no bearing on American public life,” don’t know what they’re talking about. Because from the very beginning, religious impulses and political impulses have been twined together so carefully that it’s impossible to take them apart. What we separated were the institutions of church and state, not the impulses of religion and politics. I think what Reinhold Niebuhr did is gave a very realistic reading of how those two impulses—religious and political—were entwined together and gave a very realistic way that the religious tradition that had founded the United States could be used for very secular political ends.

Stone: He went after Nixon particularly for the misuse of religion to bless his politics. Now politics is tough and religion has the potential of being tough and when you mix the two together you get a very explosive combination and Nixon was mixing them together and Niebuhr didn’t approve of either -- politics or the way religion was being used. Just a personal note -- I moved to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1969 and this essay of Niebuhr’s was published in late 68 or 69 and the local paper attacked in their lead editorial, the essay of Niebuhr’s, saying that’s “there’s obviously no misuse of religion -- isn’t religion a good thing?” And I defended Niebuhr in the letter to the editor -- and the issue was hot enough that that’s when I received my first death threat for anything I’d written and it stirred up quite a hornet’s nest, but Niebuhr told me when I saw him later that year, that he got a bushel of hate mail -- but it’s interesting then the FBI did turn over to the Nixon Administration the Federal Bureau Investigation of Niebuhr which had gone on since the 1930’s at different times with different emphasis -- but there are statements in there like the NY office reply to Hoover’s queries -- informal documents, yah, it’s true that Niebuhr belonged to several left wing organizations but there was no evidence that he was ever anything but a very loyal american of great intellectual stature. Hoover wrote back a note, “Keep investigating. Anyone who belonged to that many investigations must’ve been pro-communist” [23:54]

Gaston: Niebuhr was, at the end of the day, a really deeply committed pluralist. His curiosity about people different from himself made him an early proponent of this idea of America as a nation whose democracy was actually not just a Christian project purely, but a Judeo-Christian project, one that was expansive, that would include secularists that would have elements coming from Catholics, that would include a lot of different people and I think for him one of the dangers of Graham’s approach was this very strong kind of “Christian nation” message that was so central. A real desire to respond to that increasing diversity with a somewhat less open stance. And you know, I don’t know how fair that is at the end of the day. I think one of the things that’s clear about Graham and also a figure like Bill Buckley in this period is that they’re trying to, they’ve been known as people who’re trying to make a kind of more cosmopolitan conservatism, theological conservatism or political conservatism. And so there is a degree of diversity that you see in both of those camps. But Niebuhr was extremely concerned about the individualism, the degree to which that individualism linked into very uncritical attitudes about capitalism and really just a kind of lack of concern about power dynamics in the world.

-- Atheists for Niebuhr --

The self-described “Atheists for Niebuhr” were a group of secular mid-twentieth century intellectuals who admired and used Niebuhr’s work. Although they did not share his faith commitments, they regarded him as one America’s most compelling voices. Niebuhr, in turn, valued their ability to be simultaneously critical and appreciative of what religion had to offer. An exchange Niebuhr had after with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, a professed atheist, after finishing a sermon captures this dynamic. As he exited the church, Justice Frankfurter said to Niebuhr, “May a believing unbeliever thank you for your sermon?” to which Niebuhr replied, “May an unbelieving believer thank you for appreciating it?”

This spirit of mutual appreciation and collaboration between figures that disagreed on something as basic as the existence of God was remarkable. It bespoke an intellectual humility and willingness to listen on short supply in contemporary culture. May it inspire our attempts to find common ground with others in our own fragmented and polarized times.

Questions to consider:

Who are the people in your life that you disagree with most sharply?

What would a productive conversation with them look like?

What would have to change in how they approach you?

What would need to change in how you approach them?

Niebuhr Quotes:

No Christian church has a right to preach to a so-called secular age without a contrite recognition of the shortcomings of historic Christianity which tempted the modern age to disavow its Christian faith.
-“The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937 (MW 738)

We assume responsibility in this community with many citizens who do not share our faith. We assume them from the standpoint of a faith which discerns a mysterious divine sovereignty over the whole drama of human events, which ought not be surprised by any manifestations of evil [in] history but is not prepared to yield to any evil for motives...
-Theology and Political Thought in the Western World” (MW, 868)

Transcript for clip -- “Prophecy & Pluralism: Atheists for Niebuhr”:

Dorrien: Niebuhr was delighted that there was this whole group called Atheists for Niebuhr, who were wanting to take the political philosophy and just not dealing seriously at all, or think it's dispensable, that...that Reinhold Niebuhr who's someone on knees at night praying. And for whom giving testimony, being a witness to the saving acts of God in history defines his work. And he thinks it's terribly important to have what he calls a dialectical understanding of what Biblical religion is, and you don't, you just don't even have that without divine reality without a creator God who created the world and his focus tends to be on the self, right? So Niebuhr's...when he finally writes his systematic theology it's titled The Nature and Destiny of Man because it is a theological anthropology. So that's, that's unmistakable Niebuhr that he has this sort of great emphasis on human nature and destiny. So people get this idea of Well apparently God is dispensable in this theology. But none of it works at all without God.

Massa: Reinhold Niebuhr was the great public theologian of the 20th century. How so? He offered important, sophisticated, and compelling images and metaphors for understanding why the United States was a great nation, but because of that, why the...why the United States was always in danger of betraying its mission. And he did that using ancient symbols of Christian theology. Symbols like original sin, and grace, and redemption. And he did it in a way that secular intellectuals loved and listened to. Indeed, you could say his second biggest audience, or maybe his biggest audience after his seminary students, were all those secular, atheistic, political advisers around

presidents who read Reinhold Niebuhr for an understanding of the meaning of the Cold War. So to that extent I would say he fulfilled the absolutely essential role of a public theologian in the 20th century. Someone who explains the meaning of America in traditional and sometimes not so traditional religious terms.

Lovin: he wanted to make his thought accessible to people of various religious backgrounds, or no religious background, so I don't think he would have been bothered by the fact that some people just want to take the politics and leave the theology. But he was always very clear that his insights into the particular local situations grew out of this rich background he had in the history of Christian thought. I think he came to understand that more and more through the course of his career.... He's a person of deep personal faith. I think that's clear from his biography from the stories of his students and his family as they remember him. At the same time, he is very conscious of the pretentious to piety that affect religious people, especially religious people in America. And so he wants not to present himself as a particularly pious religious person. But if you read his sermons, read his prayers, you see someone who's deeply conscious of God as the ultimate power behind these historical forces that occupy his attention.

Elisabeth Sifton: It was in the course of that, and I was an impressionable young teenager at this point, I could also see that she believed and she believed that my father believed, that political types and secular friends were much more fun than clerical friends that would come and say, "Oh Reinhold, I'm praying for you" a tone my mother just couldn't stand -- that was a contrast that was there before but became more pronounced after his illness--quite amusing actually

-- World Community --

In the aftermath of two world wars, the future of human civilization hinged on whether the nations of the world, with their divergent cultures, religions, and political interests, could figure out how to coexist. It depended, in other words, on the formation of world community.

Niebuhr depicted world community as an "impossible possibility:" it is something that we will never achieve perfectly, but that we must strive toward anyway. He also called it the "perpetual problem as well as the fulfillment of human hopes." While he was critical of particular aspects of the world order that emerged following the war, he was unflinchingly supportive of attempts to build and strengthen connections between the nations and peoples of the world.

Questions to consider:

Why is world community so important?

What are examples of world community in our time? How has it succeeded?
In what ways has it failed?

How might being citizens of a pluralist society equip us to take on the task of building world community?

Niebuhr Quotes:

The world community, standing thus as the final possibility and impossibility of human life, will be in actuality the perpetual problem as well as constant fulfillment of human hopes.
-CLCD (MW 457)

No world community can ever be created if the full religious height of the individual's freedom over the community is not explored or defended. -CLCD (MW, 400)

Civilization must guard against the tendency of all communities to demand a too simple homogeneity, for if this is allowed complete expression, it results in Nazi tribal primitivism. The preservation of tolerance and cultural pluralism is necessary not only from the standpoint of justice to the Jews but from the standpoint of the quality of a civilization.
-"Jews After the War," Feb. 21, 1942 (MW 642)

Since all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as fulfillment, the task of building a world community requires a faith which is not too easily destroyed by frustration. Such a faith must understand the moral ambiguities of history and know them not merely as accidents or as the consequence of the malevolence of this or that nation; it must understand them as permanent characteristics of man's historic existence. Their manifestation in the field of international relations is more vivid than in any other field; because all aspects of man's historical problems appear upon that larger field in more vivid and discernible proportions.
-CLCD (MW 457)

The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind's final possibility and impossibility. The task of achieving [world community] must be interpreted from the standpoint of a faith which understands the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements and yet has confidence in their meaning because it knows their completion to be in the hands of a Divine Power, whose resources are greater than those of men, and whose suffering love can overcome the corruptions of man's achievements, without negating the significance of our striving. -CLCD (MW 458)

Transcript for clip -- "*Prophecy & Pluralism: World Community*":

Lovin: Niebuhr never did anything like that. Part of what's important to Niebuhr's legacy is the way he is now being read and used by people in other parts of the world who maybe are pretty disconnected from the traditions of Niebuhr's scholarship that are represented in the people you'll be interviewing. There's an active group of people, more political thinkers than theologians who read Niebuhr in Japan. There are people in Latin America who are following Niebuhr's legacy and thinking about in relation to their own political questions. In South Africa, Niebuhr's Christian realism has become an important part of the way that churches think about their role in society. Niebuhr himself, especially after 1952 never got too far off of Morningside drive, but his work has certainly got a global reach.

Gaston: I think one thing that is certainly true about Niebuhr is that he cared a great deal about the plight of the powerless and the question of the way that they thought about who God was and what their responsibilities might be in society. And also about the challenge that powerlessness in general put forward to Christians who themselves were not powerless. It's like this question of what do we do about injustice in the world? And I think that on that score he was really in the

process of trying to architect a kind of prophetic faith in the '30s that is very strongly influenced by a pretty sophisticated set of thoughts about workers, about black Americans, about Catholics, about Jews, about people who are different from himself. In that sense he is coming of age at this crucial moment at a time when there is a lot of discussion about brotherhood. The national organization, the major brotherhood movement organization in the '20s was the National Conference of Christians and Jews founded in 1929 and that spirit of brotherhood, that question of what brotherhood requires, like how we're going to live together in a pluralistic democracy. He cared very deeply about those things and he was thinking about them as he was pulling resources here and there, trying to cobble together his own understanding of what prophetic faith was, and how it might impact the nation's future.

Brooks: So I started with *The Irony of American History*, I was a Wall Street Journal correspondent in Europe in the middle of a lot of historic events—the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the creating of the Maastricht Treaty, to attempt to unify Europe, and so there was these big historic events. Some of them were tremendously idealistic and there was a sense that history was coming to an end, that there was going to be a reign of goodness and peace and unification...and somehow something struck me awry about that, that human history was probably not coming to an end, that human nature probably hadn't changed. And here was Niebuhr, a book that I just came across because I had seen reference to him, saying, you know, the nature of man is such that we can't expect an end to conflict, we can't expect an end to egotism and to pride. And some of these illusions that we can create a peaceful, unified Europe are nice illusions, but it may not work out that way. (*Interviewer: And that had impact for you; you began a process.*) Yeah. And the other thing about Niebuhr is that, you know, I work for a newspaper and so much of what we do is emphasize the economic and political basis for what happens in the world. But here was a man emphasizing the theological, the spiritual, the moral, and the deeper drivers of what actually moves history. And so he was seeing politics through a moral lens. And there was a lot more of that in the 1950s, and '40s, and '60s, than there is today. But I found that deeper and more profound lens much more explanatory of what's actually happening.

Lovin: He's deeply involved with the ecumenical relations between the US and Europe. He's helping American and European churches think about their role in a post war world. It's very interesting to think that the churches see this war coming before American society generally does. So that as early as the Oxford conference in 1937, American churches become aware that Europeans are expecting a second world war. Niebuhr is trying on one hand to get Americans society and churches understanding that reality, but he's also trying to join the Europeans in thinking about where are we going to be after this war? We failed dramatically to create a new world order after the First World War? Can we do better the second time around? That's a question that preoccupies Niebuhr and we see it in the writings during the war especially in "Children of Light, and Children of Darkness". And then it's really what he's actively doing after the war.

Further Readings

- "The King's Chapel and the King's Court," *Christianity and Crisis*, Aug.4, 1969
- "The Christian Church in a Secular Age," 1937 (MW, 730-743)
- *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (CLCD)
- Barth & Niebuhr's World Council of Churches Debate, 1948 (published in *Christian Century*)