

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 become 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.