

FAITH & SOCIAL ACTION

Nineteenth Century German philosopher and author of *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx, famously described religion as an “opiate” of the masses. For Reinhold Niebuhr, this was a fair assessment of socially disengaged religion. But Niebuhr also thought disengaged religion was “false” religion. True religion—the religion that spurred abolitionists to fight slavery and Civil Rights activists to resist oppression—is relentlessly dynamic. It exposes injustice and stirs the conscience. It unsettles the status quo and fills us with yearning for the Kingdom of God. True religion, in other words, translates personal faith into social action.

Yet practicing true religion is no simple task. For one, it is personally demanding. When we resist the status quo, we risk being ostracized. Living out true religion therefore requires courage. Furthermore, figuring out how to resist can be tricky. Human affairs are often complex and morally ambiguous. For instance: religions agree that murder is wrong. Yet when World War II broke out, many people of faith concluded that they had a moral obligation resist Nazism by any means necessary, even if that meant killing fellow human beings on the battlefield. For them, translating faith to social action meant going to war. Niebuhr had a keen sense of both the importance and the difficulty of translating faith into social action. His work offers guidance as we confront the challenges of our own day.

Questions to consider:

What do you consider to be the most morally challenging issues in contemporary life?

How can faith help us meet these challenges?

In what ways can/should people of faith get involved in advocating for greater justice?

Are there limits to faith-based social action? If so, what are they?

-- The Church --

Niebuhr Quotes:

The Christian gospel which transcends all particular and contemporary social situations can be preached with power only by a church which bears its share of the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved, burdens of establishing peace, of achieving justice, and of perfecting justice in the spirit of love. Thus the Kingdom of God which is not of this world is made relevant to every problem of the world.

– “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937 (MW 737).

If we preach repentance, it must be repentance for those who accept the Lord as well as for those who pretend to deny Him. If we preach the judgment of God upon a sinful world, it must be judgment upon us as well as those who do not acknowledge His judgments. If we preach the mercy of God, it must be with a humble recognition that we are in need of it as much as those who do not know God’s mercy in Christ. If we preach the obligation of the

love commandment, it must be the preacher who must know that he violates that commandment as well as those who do not consciously accept its obligation.

–“The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 1937, (MW 742)

The gospel cannot be preached with truth and power if it does not challenge the pretensions and pride, not only of individuals, but of nations, cultures, civilizations, economic and political systems. The good fortune of America and its power place it under the most grievous temptations to self-adulation. If there is no power and grace in the Christian church "to bring down every high thing which exalteth itself against the knowledge of God," the church becomes not merely useless but dangerous.

--“The Idolatry of America,” C&S, Spring 1950 (LJ 97)

The church is much like Noah’s ark. One could not bear the stench within if not for the storm without. (Attributed to Niebuhr by various sources. Biographer June Bingham depicts it as Niebuhr recasting the saying of an unspecified medieval cleric).

Transcript for clip -- “*Faith & Social Action: The Church*” :

Robin Lovin:

To set it in context, another theologian who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine was Karl Barth. These two people represented really opposing ways of thinking about Christianity and the relationship to democracy and society. Barth, because he was worried about the way that Christianity and Germany had been taken over by the Nazi movement, always wanted to distinguish the church from society. Niebuhr's realism led him to be worried about the way the church was embedded in the life of society and to think about how we could use that for purposes of achieving a greater justice. One result was that Niebuhr and Barth had regular confrontations after the Second World War, notably at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. They were verbal sparring partners at various international meetings leading up to that. At one of those meetings, a woman from Japan named Kiyoko (Name?), who'd been a student of Niebuhr's at Union before the second world war, sort of dressed both of them down and took them into a room by themselves and told them to work this out so that they could together provide better leadership for the future. I am not sure how successful she was in achieving reconciliation between Niebuhrian and Barthian theology at that point, but she represents a real Niebuhrian approach to the conflict between these two gigantic figures of 20th century theology.

Stanley Hauerwas:

What is missing in Niebuhr is any account of the church. Then Christian account of the way things are is always going to rely on the fact that there is an alternative to the way things are, called the church. Niebuhr had no account of that. You can read Niebuhr in some ways as trying to provide something like Augustan’s “Two Cities” in the *City of God*. But there was just one city and that’s the world in which Christianity provides an interpretation for why it is you’re going to participate in the direction of history. But there’s no alternative to that, called church.

– Does society and church anywhere overlap? – No. Niebuhr, my way of expressing it, Niebuhr was a Constantinian. He assumed that Christianity and the progressive forces of history were in alliance. So you expected from political leaders a kind of commitment that wouldn’t necessarily be explicitly Christian but was what Christianity made possible as part of the progressive forces. That’s a kind of Constantinian view that I am in dissent from.

Gary Dorrien:

He (Reinhold Niebuhr) came up and through The Social Gospel in its hay-day. So The Social Gospel is this tremendous movement in mostly mainline American Protestantism, although there is a Catholic version of it that develops a bit later, which says that the Christian church has an ethical responsibility to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice. Now you can't have either part of that sentence before about the 1880s because first you have to have the idea that there is such a thing as social structure, that then would be transformed by something else as social justice, so none of these terms even existed before the Gilded Age, and the rise of sociology as a discipline, and at the same time the rise of social ethics as a field, which Niebuhr is. I mean he...Niebuhr ends up, when he comes to Union, he's teaching in a field, Social Ethics, that has no history and no basis whatsoever, apart from the social gospel. And he takes all of that for granted. The idea that the church has needs...If the church is going to be true to itself and to the ethical witness of the gospels then the church needs to be involved in indeed, in social justice, whatever that means in a given time. And that's the work even, of Social Ethics as a field. I mean, the idea...of it, of this is the field which you shouldn't have to steer through Jeremiah, or get the Cappadocian father straight, or whatever else is going on in a seminary curriculum, before you finally get to these issues about what we should be saying about a progressive income tax or getting involved in the First World War, or Temperance or the like, that there should be a field where you just go straight for the social/ethical, social/justice questions. So Niebuhr cut his teeth on that, you know, as it were. That's what he is in his young, in his career as a pastor. Uh, so all of that he takes for granted. And people who don't get that in Niebuhr, don't get him. Because there are misreadings of Niebuhr whereby you don't even see this Social Gospel passion that is in him till the end of his days.