

# 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?

## -- 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 unflinching 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:** 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*)