

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story

A film by Martin Doblmeier

Running Time:
Language: English
Official Web Site:

Press Contact:
CaraMar, Inc.
Mary Lugo, lugo@negia.net, 770-623-8190
Cara White, cara.white@mac.com, 843-881-1480

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story

MARTIN DOBLMEIER	Director/Writer/Narrator
NATHAN DEWILD JEN QUINTANA ANDREW FINSTUEN	Producers
HAL HOLBROOK	Voice of Reinhold Niebuhr
NATHAN DEWILD	Director of Photography
CECEILE KAY RICHTER	Historical Research/Rights Clearance
NATHAN DEWILD	Editor
ANTHONY BELLISSIMO	On-Line Editor/Graphics
DANIEL COOPER	Original Music
BRIAN MCPHERSON	Sound Design
NATHAN DEWILD ANTHONY BELLISSIMO	Camera
JOEY DIAZ FRANCISCO SANTIAGO	Sound

For Maryland Public Television

DONNA R. HUNT	Coordinating Producer
PHILLIP GUTHRIE	National Distribution & Marketing
STUART C. KAZANOW	Client Services Manager
LAUREN STEVENS	Production Associate
JAY P. PARIKH	VP Content
STEVEN J. SCHUPAK	Chief Operating Officer

Produced by Journey Films, Inc
A Presentation of Maryland Public Television
Major funding provided by: Lilly Endowment
Additional funding: Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the
E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story

“Reinhold Niebuhr makes me shake and tremble when I think of the depth of his courage.” – Cornel West

*“Niebuhr had audacity. He wrote with audacity. He wrote big books on big subjects. He took big public stands.” – David Brooks, *The New York Times**

“Niebuhr was always present in my mind when I was President and facing the constant threat of nuclear war.” – Jimmy Carter

“Whenever there was a conversation about power, Niebuhr came up. Niebuhr kept us from being naïve about the evil structures of society.” – Andrew Young

Although he may be best remembered today as the author of the famed “Serenity Prayer,” Reinhold Niebuhr — an outspoken American-born pastor, writer, and political activist — remains one of the most influential public theologians of our time. Presidents from Barack Obama to Jimmy Carter have credited his impact on their thinking, as well as John McCain, countless historians, theologians, political thinkers, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who cited Niebuhr in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,”

Niebuhr’s career spanned some of the most tumultuous decades in American history, from World War I through Vietnam, from the Great Depression through the Civil Rights

Movement. An early pacifist and socialist, he was closely monitored by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI throughout his life, but would later serve as a consultant to the State Department during the Cold War.

Niebuhr rose from a small Midwest church pulpit to become the nation's moral voice — an American conscience — during some of the most defining moments in recent history. His books, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941–43) and *The Irony of American History* (1952), continue to influence theological and political thinking. An American original, his unique insights into human nature and its relationship to political movements and social justice propelled him to speak openly, and often critically, to an America consumed by moral certainty. For Niebuhr the priority was always justice, his guiding principle was hope in a redeemer God, and his weapon was an extraordinary gift for clarity of thought that made him a leading voice of conscience for his time.

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story is directed, written and narrated by Martin Doblmeier, the creator of dozens of provocative, award-winning films on faith including *Chaplains* and *Bonhoeffer*. Rich in archival material, the documentary features interviews with former President Jimmy Carter, Cornel West, Andrew Young, David Brooks, Susannah Heschel and a host of internationally recognized historians and theologians.

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story is produced by Journey Films, Inc., and is a presentation of Maryland Public Television. Major funding provided by the Lilly Endowment. Additional funding provided by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

SHORT DESCRIPTION

Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" remains one of the most quoted writings in American literature. Yet Niebuhr's impact was far greater, as presidents and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. often turned to Niebuhr's writings for guidance and inspiration on the most volatile political and social issues of the 20th Century. Niebuhr rose from a small Midwest church pulpit to become the nation's moral voice — an American conscience — during some of the most defining moments in American history.

Rich in archival material, the documentary includes interviews with former President Jimmy Carter, Civil Rights leader Andrew Young, *New York Times* writer David Brooks, author Susannah Heschel and a host of internationally recognized historians and theologians.

LOGLINE

Explore the life and impact of the author of the "Serenity Prayer," who rose from a small Midwest church pulpit to become the nation's moral voice — an American conscience — whose writings provided guidance and inspiration for presidents, politicians, theologians and others.

About the Participants, in Alphabetical Order

Andrew J. Bacevich is Professor Emeritus of International Relations and History at Boston University. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he received his PhD in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University. Before joining the faculty of Boston University, he taught at West Point and Johns Hopkins. He is the author of *American's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (Random House, 2016).

David Brooks is an author, cultural critic and commentator. A *New York Times* columnist, he appears regularly on *PBS NewsHour*, NPR's *All Things Considered*, and NBC's *Meet the Press*. He teaches at Yale University and is the author of the critically acclaimed *The Road to Character* (Random House, 2015).

Jimmy Carter is the 39th President of the United States and founder of the Carter Center. Following his presidency, Carter established himself as one of the world's premiere humanitarians. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. An Episcopal priest, he was previously the Parfet Distinguished Professor at Kalamazoo College. His book, *Kantian Reason the Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) won the Association of American Publishers' PROSE Award in 2013.

Andrew Finstuen is the dean of the Honors College at Boise State, Associate Professor in the Department of History, and a producer of *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. He co-directed the *Worlds of Billy Graham* project and is the author of the award-winning book *Original Sins and Everyday Protestants* (University of North Carolina, 2009).

K. Healan Gaston is a lecturer on American Religious History at Harvard Divinity School and served as a consultant on *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. The president of the Niebuhr Society, she is the author of "'A Bad Kind of Magic': The Niebuhr Brothers on 'Utilitarian Christianity' and the Defense of Democracy" (*Harvard Theological Review*, January 2014) and is currently writing a book on the "prophetic pluralism" of the Niebuhr brothers.

Stanley Hauerwas is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law at Duke University Divinity School. Widely recognized as one of the most influential thinkers in theological ethics, Hauerwas delivered the Gifford Lectures in 2000 and was named "America's Best Theologian" by *Time Magazine* in 2001. Hauerwas is the author of *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Brazos Press, 2003).

Susannah Heschel is the Eli Black Professor and chair of the Jewish Studies Program at Dartmouth College. Her scholarship focuses on Jewish and Christian thought in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries. She is the author of *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (University of Chicago, 1998) and *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, 2010). She is currently a Guggenheim Fellow and writing a book on the history of European Jewish scholarship on Islam.

William Hudnut III was mayor of Indianapolis from 1976 to 1992. He earned a Master's Degree in Theology from the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Robin Lovin is the William H. Scheide Senior Fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, and Cary Maguire University Professor of Ethics Emeritus at Southern Methodist University. An expert on Niebuhr's life and thought, Dr. Lovin is the author of *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Fr. Mark S. Massa, S.J. was educated at the University of Detroit, the University of Chicago and Harvard. Fr. Massa has taught at Fordham University, served as Dean of Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, and currently directs the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. His award-winning book, *Catholics and American Culture* (Crossroad, 2005), used Niebuhr's concept of irony as a lens through which to examine 20th century American Catholicism.

Elisabeth Sifton is a writer and retired book publisher. The daughter of Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, she is the author of *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (W. W. Norton, 2003); co-author with her late husband, Fritz Stern, of *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi, Resisters Against Hitler in Church and State* (New York Review Books, 2013), and editor of the Library of America's *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics* (2015).

Ronald H. Stone is the John Witherspoon Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. During his studies at Union Theological Seminary, Dr. Stone had the distinction of serving as Niebuhr's final graduate assistant. He is the author of *Faith and Politics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary in New York* (Mercer University Press, 2012).

Cornel West is Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at Union Theological Seminary and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. He has also taught at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Paris. In addition to his acclaimed scholarship, Dr. West is a tireless activist who has contributed to numerous social movements. His many books include *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 2001) and *Democracy Matters* (2004).

Andrew Young is a former congressman, mayor of Atlanta, and Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient. After graduating from Howard University and Hartford Theological Seminary, Young worked alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement and helped draft both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. He is the author of *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Harper Collins, 1996).

An Interview with Martin Doblmeier

Why a film about Reinhold Niebuhr?

Reinhold Niebuhr has been a hero of mine for decades. Over the years, as I continue to revisit and draw on his writings, my admiration only grows. That does not mean I agree with everything Niebuhr wrote. At times, Niebuhr would even disagree with himself. But he is the kind of figure who should be included in any meaningful conversation about ethics — especially Christian ethics — and power, justice and responsibility.

Throughout much of the 20th century, millions of Americans turned to Niebuhr as a voice they trusted — a moral conscience — who spoke with insight and eloquence on the most critical issues of the day. Presidents took counsel from his observations and policy makers found comfort in his balance of hope and realism.

Making a film about Niebuhr afforded me an opportunity to explore mid-20th century America — a defining time for our country — through the lens of a brilliant theologian. The first thing you appreciate is how Niebuhr's time may be different from our own, yet human nature and the way people and nations relate to each other seems little changed.

What was Niebuhr's connection to the Civil Rights Movement?

I think viewers of the film who often associate Gandhi with the movement will be surprised to learn how much it was profoundly influenced by the writings and perspectives of Reinhold Niebuhr. When Niebuhr wrote his 1932 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he was not thinking specifically about what we would later call the Civil Rights Movement. Yet his writings helped inspire the movement's leaders to see non-violence not only as a political strategy but a power that could be highly effective. He understood that the powerful seldom relinquish power without being met by some form of strength. In identifying non-violent resistance as a source of power and strength, Niebuhr provided the movement with a critical tool. Yet he also made clear that one needs an awareness of the fact that there is genuine evil in the world that needs to be confronted.

It's interesting that such a diverse cross-section of people were influenced by Niebuhr.

Jimmy Carter says that one of his favorite Niebuhr quotes is: "It is the sad duty of politics to establish justice in a sinful world." In many ways, that sums up Niebuhr's thought: his commitment to use the system to affect change while accepting the realities of our human condition and our inclinations toward injustice.

Senator John McCain is known to quote Niebuhr about the presence of evil in our world and that overcoming evil may require force. But it is President Barack Obama who is often credited with the recent Niebuhrian revival, calling Niebuhr his "favorite philosopher" and quoting at length from Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*. Obama however, emphasizes Niebuhr's call for humility in national affairs, and the acceptance that as a nation America cannot overlook its own share of responsibility.

All this only contributes to the mystique around Niebuhr that seems to cross generations. Today, writers like E.J. Dionne of *The Washington Post* and David Brooks of *The New York*

Times continue to keep Niebuhr present in the headlines by infusing his writings into the issues of our own day.

The idea of a “public theologian” read by millions seems surprising in this day and age.

When I initially began to think about the arc of the film, I kept coming back to the idea of how Niebuhr emerged as a moral conscience — an American conscience — for people of his era wrestling with enormous challenges. What is remarkable is that Niebuhr was both a theologian *and* a public intellectual, versed in history, political science, philosophy as well as theology. The media often sought Niebuhr’s opinion on some of the most vexing issues like whether to intervene in Europe when World War II began, how to handle the escalating tensions of the Cold War, and the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation. They turned not only to Niebuhr, but to Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other religious voices that could elevate the conversation and perhaps transcend political rancor.

Today many believe the days of a ‘public theologian’ are over. Yet in pushing the religious and theological perspective to the sidelines, we may have lost a vital perspective in our national conversation. There are insightful, moral voices with strong intellectual foundations present in our own times — people like Cornel West, Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, Tim Keller, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs and others.

Unfortunately, the media today is more often inclined toward conversations that are partisan, political charged and combative rather than broadly insightful and universal. The public theologian who seeks that higher ground no longer has a place to pitch their tent. America can only benefit from acknowledging that the great dilemmas we face today deserve more than only political and economic perspectives.

It was interesting to see how Niebuhr’s thinking evolved over the decades,

In his early 20s, Niebuhr visited post-World War I Europe and was devastated by what he witnessed as the horrors of war. He returned home vowing never to use his pulpit to champion war again. But within a generation Niebuhr was facing the possibility of another World War, prompted by an evil the likes of which the world had never seen. Niebuhr experienced a change of heart and became convinced that while war was an evil, it is better than ignoring the responsibility a great nation like the United States has in the face of Nazism. It was a shifting of priorities but one with which Niebuhr could live.

What do you hope viewers in 2017 will take away from this new look at Niebuhr’s life and work?

In his own day Reinhold Niebuhr rose to near celebrity status, offering a corrective voice for what he identified as the volatile rhetoric of American Exceptionalism. Instead, he called for a greater sense of humility, acceptance of our individual and social responsibilities, and a willingness to forego self-interest for the sake of justice. It is always risky to imagine what any character from the past, including Reinhold Niebuhr, would think of our own issues and times. Yet in Niebuhr’s case I can’t imagine him being silent in the face of our current realities.

Selected Quotes From Reinhold Niebuhr:

“Man’s inclination to justice makes democracy possible. Man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

“Nothing worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in our immediate context of history, therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore we are saved by love.”

"The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world."

“Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own ... capable on occasion of preferring the advantage of others to their own. But all these achievements are more difficult — if not impossible — for human societies and social groups.”

“The tendency to claim God as an ally for our partisan values and ends is the source of all religious fanaticism.”

“We find it almost as difficult as the Communists to believe anyone could think ill of us, since we are as persuaded as they that our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of our actions.”

“Forgiveness is the final form of love.”

About Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri in 1892, the son of German immigrants; his father was a pastor with the German Evangelical Synod. He graduated from Elmhurst College, later attending Eden Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School. After graduation, he became pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, where he publicly supported auto workers in their struggle for better conditions and spoke out against racism and the KKK.

In 1928, he joined Union Theological Seminary in New York City where he would teach for more than 30 years. Soon after arriving at Union, Niebuhr married Ursula Keppel-Compton, a student from Oxford, England. In addition to his Union lectures, Niebuhr was much in demand as a speaker and wrote numerous articles for *The Christian Century* and *World Tomorrow*. In 1930, he ran for state office on the socialist ticket but was soundly defeated.

In 1932, he published the acclaimed *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in which he distinguished himself as a voice for what became known as “Christian realism,” “neo-orthodoxy,” or neo-liberalism, the hallmarks of which are an awareness of the presence of sin in individual and collective life. Because of the sinful inclinations of humanity, Niebuhr stressed contrition and humility before a God of judgment and mercy who alone inspires Christians toward loving action in the world.

Niebuhr was criticized for raising early warnings about the rise of fascism in Japan and Germany but proved instrumental before and after World War II in the efforts to form the World Council of Churches. He contributed analysis to the State Department on foreign affairs, working closely with George Kennan's Policy Planning Staff. With Eleanor Roosevelt and others, he formed Americans for Democratic Action, and became an advisor to Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers.

Along with his other accomplishments, Niebuhr may be best known as the author of the famous Serenity Prayer that continues to be used worldwide by Alcoholics Anonymous. His position as a public theologian for America was secured when he was selected by *Time Magazine* for the cover of its 1948 twenty-fifth anniversary issue.

Throughout his career, Niebuhr was closely watched by the F.B.I., initially for his participation in socialist politics, but later during the Cold War, when he argued that the U.S. was hardly innocent in the fight against communism and that its own propaganda and threats of aggression too often mirrored the excesses of the Soviets.

On racial segregation, Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* offered strategies for African American resistance. Martin Luther King, Jr. studied Niebuhr's writings as a part of his pastoral training and later incorporated them into the Civil Rights Movement. King would later refer to Niebuhr in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson awarded Niebuhr the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given an American citizen.

Niebuhr was also one of the most prolific writers in recent history. He published over twenty books, nearly 2,500 articles and founded two magazines, *Radical Religion* and *Christianity and Crisis*. Of these many titles, three join *Moral Man* as enduring classics: his two volume *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943) stands as his most thorough statement of Christian theology, and he applied this analysis to the international scene and the role of democracy most powerfully in *The Children of the Light and the Children of the Darkness* (1944) and *The Irony of American History* (1952).

Reinhold Niebuhr died at his home in Stockbridge, MA in 1971. His writings continue to impact at the highest levels across both conservative and liberal ranks. Presidents Obama and Carter consider Niebuhr a significant figure in their own political thought, while staff members of the George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan administrations also recognized Niebuhr's thinking as an inspiration.

About the Filmmaker

Martin Doblmeier (Writer/Director) is the founder and president of Journey Films in Alexandria, Virginia, an independent television and film production company that produces award-winning films that explore religion, spirituality, history and social issues. Doblmeier's work has appeared on most major television networks including PBS, ABC, NBC and The History Channel and others, have won countless awards, and screened at festivals, universities and symposia in the U.S. and abroad. Doblmeier holds a degree in Religious Studies, a Master's Degree in Broadcast Journalism and two honorary doctorates.

Doblmeier's films include the recent *Chaplains* (2015), which profiled chaplains from different faith traditions who work in both traditional and unexpected settings; *The ADVENTISTS Trilogy* (2014), a collection of three films that explore the faith and life of Seventh-day Adventists; *Washington National Cathedral: A New Century, A New Calling*, about America's "national house of prayer;" *The Power Of Forgiveness*, a documentary that explores how the various faith traditions and health sciences are convening around the topic of forgiveness; *Albert Schweitzer: Called To Africa*, a docudrama on the Nobel Laureate; and *Bonhoeffer*, about the German theologian and Nazi resister who joined the plots to kill Adolf Hitler that played theatrically and was broadcast on PBS.

About Journey Films

Founded in 1983 by Martin Doblmeier, Journey Films is a television and film production company specializing in religion, faith and spirituality. Journey has produced more than 30 documentary films that have aired on PBS, ABC, NBC, the BBC and on broadcast outlets around the world. Journey's films have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

The early films introduced the American audience to the faith communities of Taize and L'Arche. Biographical documentaries followed with profiles on Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago, the celebrated German theologian and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the architect of the Catholic Church's Vatican II – Cardinal Suenens.

The Power of Forgiveness won many top awards and inspired a companion book. A profile of the Washington National Cathedral won a regional Emmy and *The ADVENTISTS* films became a popular series on PBS stations and a best-selling DVD on Amazon. In all, Journey's films have won six Gabriel Awards for the nation's best film on a topic of religion, three awards at the US International Film and Television Festival, the Sun Valley Film Festival and many others.

More information is available at <http://www.journeyfilms.com/>