

An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story

A relevant documentary for theological schools and beyond

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

Earlier this year, Martin Doblmeier of Journey Films premiered his latest PBS film, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*. Already, the film has been enthusiastically received by members of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the general public. In a recent interview with ATS, Doblmeier spoke to why Niebuhr remains relevant to theological schools and how theology remains relevant to the public.



Martin Doblmeier (left) interviews former president Jimmy Carter on the set of Doblmeier's PBS film, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*.

The film looks at Niebuhr's role as America's conscience and a public theologian, roles that connected with both religious and secular audiences. As our member schools seek to find relevance in an increasingly secular world, how can the film help them do that?

To borrow from Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr lived his life with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Niebuhr had a brilliant mind, versed in the Scriptures, history, and the ancient texts. And he had what has proven over time to be profound insights about our common human nature.

What was so remarkable is how he could bring all of that into tension with the great social and political issues of his day, with all of their deep moral implications, through

an informed moral lens. And he did it in a style and with language that spoke to everyone across the spectrum—religious or not. He was able to rise above the partisanship that was as rampant in his day as it is in our own. In

so doing, he left a legacy that policy makers on both sides of the aisle, from Obama to McCain,

could draw on and claim for their own. In many ways, he was a reflection of how the best of theological education intersects with the real world.

In the film, historian Andrew Bacevich calls Niebuhr's book *The Irony of American History* "the most important book ever written about US foreign policy." It is an unprecedented achievement for a theologian. But it is evidence that a person can be theologically trained to tackle important issues with a perspective very different from that of a political theorist or economist.

And looking at the public positions he took on so many varied issues, what is remarkable is how often he can be found on the right side of history.

Niebuhr became the most recognized and celebrated public theologian of his time, and the question he raises for all of us is—where are the public theologians for our times?

Part of what I hope the film can do is raise awareness that today we hunger to hear thoughtful, informed voices of reason who can speak through a moral lens—and with urgency—about our own vexing realities. Between Charlottesville, the rise of nationalism, global tensions with nuclear consequences, economic injustices, and the like, our culture seems to be calling out for those prophetic voices who can help guide us through some very treacherous waters. I think it will be exciting to see who will emerge to become public theologians for *our* times. My hope is we will be able to recognize them and honor their gifts.

What has been the public response to the film?

It is particularly challenging today to take what is essentially theological content and bring it to a wider public audience through television. The television audience today is not only increasingly secular but often highly suspicious of anything religious. One advantage we have is that we are able to release our films on PBS, where the audience tends to be well-read and open to programming with thoughtful religious and spiritual content.

The first public screening for the film was at the 2016 American Academy of Religion (AAR). I knew AAR would be a critical test because Niebuhr was known and

admired in that world and their initial support would be invaluable. The response was more than I could have imagined, and it proved a great launching pad for the film.

The next hurdle was at the PBS executives' meeting, where most had little awareness of Reinhold Niebuhr and an anxiousness about anything religious. Yet here we received a surprisingly warm reception as well, and that assured us a wide broadcast. The film premiered on PBS stations April 1 and will continue being shown for at least the next two years. We will hear shortly about a premiere on the PBS WORLD Channel as well.

Tell us more about taking the film on tour to ATS member schools. What was the make-up of the

audiences? What kinds of conversations have you seen occur after these viewings, and what themes emerged? Have any of them surprised you?



(l to r) Martin Doblmeier, Cornel West, Gary Dorrien, and Andrew Finstuen serve as a panel during a post-screening conversation of the film at Union Theological Seminary.

This winter/

spring I crossed the country for 30 screening events with the film, including events at Union Theological Seminary, Boston College, Harvard University Divinity School, Notre Dame University, Loyola University, Butler University, Fuller Theological Seminary, and others. It was exhausting—but an extraordinary experience.

I studied Niebuhr in college but, of course, became much more fluent during the making of the film. For every event, I encouraged the host to extend invitations beyond the school to area churches, pastors, and educators. Many of the events were filled to overflowing, and people always stayed for the post-screening conversation. Often, I was joined by a panel of Niebuhr scholars and theologians who were able to highlight content beyond what the film could do.

After the first few screenings, a pattern began to emerge. Despite campus-wide promotion to students, the audiences tended to be an over-50 crowd, people for whom Niebuhr often had a profound personal impact. The younger audiences, however, were not coming out on their own.

So we decided to take a different approach to get students to attend. Schools started offering extra credit for coming to the screenings. One school even offered free pizza. Sure enough, students started coming. What was particularly gratifying was to see them stay after the film to participate in the discussion. Niebuhr is an historical character, but the issues of his day—nuclear arms, race relations, use and abuse of power, etc.—are still with us today, and students quickly saw his relevance for our own times.

One of the surprises for me was how many people came to the screening events and told me how they preferred H. Richard Niebuhr to his more famous brother, Reinhold. I wish I had another hour of film time to explore more about H. Richard, the interaction between the two brothers, and even their sister, Hulda. As I try to bring out in the film, Reinhold was the more famous of the brothers, but H. Richard was considered the “finer thinker” within the Niebuhr Family.

What should a school do to schedule a viewing?

I have screenings scheduled for this fall including Boston University, Old South Church in Boston, Whitworth University in Spokane, Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, and others. Now we are working with schools to facilitate screening events on their own. People can get more information by contacting me directly at: martin@journeyfilms.com

Are there support resources available for follow-up discussions, readings, retreats, etc.?

We are particularly delighted with the response to the extensive educational materials we created to facilitate the use of the film in classrooms and congregations.

Tim Shapiro from the Center for Congregations authored the companion materials for use in congregations, and they have been invaluable. Pastors who studied Niebuhr in seminary and now want to share those themes with their congregants can show the film and engage people on the local level with the congregation materials. Together, I think they assure Niebuhr will remain in the conversation on different levels for many years to come.

The classroom materials were designed by Niebuhr scholars Jeremy Sabella and Andrew Finstuen around key topics like *faith and social action, power and inequality, race and justice, etc.* It is a well-designed template to bring the major themes of the film and Niebuhr to bear on contemporary issues. Sabella also wrote the companion book to the film: *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, published by Eerdmans.

Niebuhr asked tough questions of America. If you can, based on your immersion in the world of the man and his ideas, imagine the questions he might ask of theological educators today.

I think Niebuhr might ask theological educators today how they are preparing the next generation of pastors and ministers to accept the realities of both sin and grace in our own lives and the wider culture.

Reinhold was different from his brother, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. Where H. Richard spoke more of grace, Reinhold more often spoke of sin. Some would say Reinhold may be guilty of being “too dark,” too focused on sin. But to his credit, Reinhold could never be accused of being naive or overly optimistic about the potentials and pitfalls inherent in our human nature. Reinhold’s “Christian realism” can be a very honest and insightful template for guiding our approach to so many of our social, political, and justice systems.

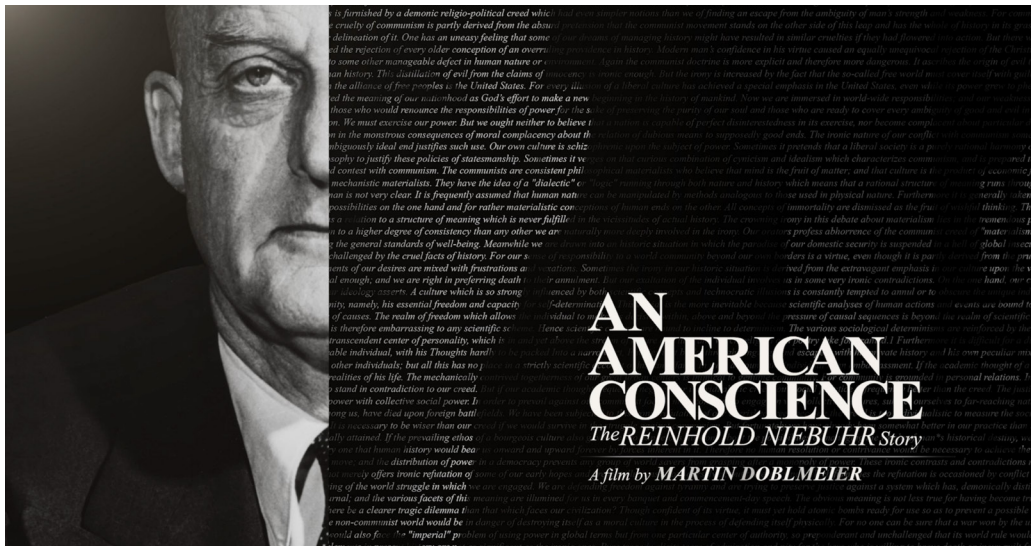
What will be your next project? How do you choose?

Of the more than 30 films I have made, a number are biographical documentaries on significant religious figures, including Bonhoeffer and the extraordinary Catholic

But whatever awaits, I will continue to make films that speak to the issues and concerns of our times through a theological lens.



Eliza Smith Brown is Director, Communications and External Relations at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



The film, the companion book, and the educational materials are all available at www.journeyfilms.com