



AN AMERICAN CONSCIENCE: THE REINHOLD NIEBUHR STORY is a First Quarter 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below you will find Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

10 of a possible 20 points

****1/2 of a possible *******

**United States 2017 color 60 minutes live action feature television
documentary Maryland Public Television / Journey Films, Inc.**

Producers: Martin Doblmeier, Andrew Finstuen, Nathan DeWild, Jen Quintana

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 1 Direction: Martin Doblmeier**
- 1 Editing: Nathan DeWild**
- 1 Cinematography: Nathan DeWild, Anthony Bellissimo**
- 0 Lighting Colorist: Anthony Bellissimo**
Motion Graphics: Anthony Bellissimo
- 2 Interviews: Jimmy Carter, Andrew Young, New York Times writer
David Brooks, author Susannah Heschel, Dr. Cornel West,
Elisabeth Sifton (Niebuhr biographer), Stanley Hauerwas,
Mark Massa, Healan Gaston, Robin Lovin, Gary Dorrien,
Ron Stone (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary),
Andrew Bacevich (war historian), Andrew Finstuen
(documentary film producer)**
- 1 Original Music: Daniel Cooper**

- 2 Historical Research: Ceceile Kay Richter
- 1 Sound: Joey Diaz, Francisco Santiago Sound Design: Brian McPherson
- Narrator: Martin Doblmeier
- Voice of Reinhold Niebuhr: Hal Holbrook
- 0 Creativity
- 1 Insightfulness
- 10 total points

A First Run Features dvd release, the documentary **AN AMERICAN CONSCIENCE: THE REINHOLD NIEBUHR STORY** provides insight into the life of American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Born at Wright City, Missouri in 1892, he was a child of German immigrants to America and brother to Helmut Richard. The Niebuhr family moved to Illinois in 1902 when Reinhold's minister dad received appointment to a church at Lincoln. Thus the Niebuhr brothers grew up in the corn belt of the Midwest, living in a strict German Evangelical household.

Note the gap in chronology here and minimal background about Niebuhr's childhood experiences.

Reinhold began his college career at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, graduating from there in 1910. He then enrolled in Eden Theological Seminary in Webster Groves, Missouri, an enclave of social privilege. Perhaps his contacts there would shape later views about inequality and justice issues in America.

From Eden he moved eastward to Yale Divinity School, earning a Bachelor of Divinity degree there in 1914 and, from the same institution, a Master of Arts degree the following year. Temporarily departing academia, Reinhold accepted a position as minister of a Detroit German congregation in 1915, remaining in that church until 1928. During that period, his parishioners increased in number from sixty-six to seven hundred, probably because of his activism in rallying behind unionization of auto workers and speaking out against an insurgent Ku Klux Klan in 1926.

Persuaded about benefits derivable from Marxist economic policies, Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr helped inaugurate a Fellowship of Socialist Christians in the following decade, the kind of action generating a personal FBI dossier and continuing observation by J. Edgar's bureau. Theologian Paul Tillich also participated in that blatantly liberal organization's activities. Niebuhr was busy,

too, in the formation of the IRA, an International Relief Association aiding anti-Nazi Germans to escape their country, not to be confused with the Irish Republican Army.

In 1932, Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he posited that individuals motivated by ethical beliefs pursue goodness. Organizations frustrate that impulse, being more intent on self-justification than virtue. Stridently vocal, extroverted leaders assume authority in them, often not representative of members' concerns or values. Those in power become preoccupied with retention and enlargement of that power, fulfilling Lord Acton's axiom about its corrupting influence.

Social philosopher John Dewey took issue with that view. It ran counter to his notion individuals find self-fulfillment in cooperative action by a larger circle. Personal values only hold merit if they accord with those of other people operating in the same environment. Individualism becomes subject to collective validation, each person defined by his or her status within a larger group.

Critical of John Dewey's assumptions, Niebuhr rejected pragmatism and the preeminence it granted social adaptation. Not for him the idea environment shapes human behavior more than personal thinking does.

He nonetheless found Dewey's 1934 book *A Common Faith* impressive. With an opening chapter titled *Religion versus The Religious*, that publication vigorously assaulted ecclesiastical hypocrisy and all supernatural claims made by various faiths.

Niebuhr supported the author's crusade against double standards of many churches, but parted company with him over denial of the transcendent nature and reality of miracles. There are elements of reality that no one can empirically observe, ranging from atoms to thought processes. These are by no means inferior to others or non-existent. Dewey eliminated God from human relationships except as a convenient term for expressing religious impulses. Niebuhr put him back into those as an active being and authority.

World War II undermined the man's pacifist inclinations. He ardently favored military intervention to defeat and dismantle Nazism, a soul-destroying, genocidal political philosophy masquerading as progressive social overhaul. With infiltration of Communist ideology into postwar China and eastern Europe, Niebuhr countered what he saw as unmitigated evil by formulating a containment strategy. It led, unfortunately, to debacles in Vietnam, Greece, and

Chile later, bringing Fascists back into power to replace Marxists and Communists. The former being no better governors than the latter.

Niebuhr's researches into development of an American faith in "manifest destiny" led him to produce a volume titled *The Irony of American History* in 1952. There he warned of dangerous self-righteousness influencing his country's contemporary political activity around the world. America should not be playing King of the Mountain or a modern variation of the Gunboat Diplomacy game. If vanity was man's primal sin, it should be equally toxic when recast as political arrogance.

Gone was the duality of 1944's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, replaced with a mutual need to battle imminent extermination through nuclear bombs. Democracy triumphant was no final solution to the world's problems. It could turn itself into a self-devouring monster attentive to external opponents while neglecting internal ones. Beware of not casting out the log within one's own eye first. Something Americans rarely do well, if at all.

Arguing on behalf of a Social Gospel in the early 1940s, Niebuhr produced this powerful defense of democracy against invasive foreign ideologies. Yet he left the Constitution's basic principles unchallenged. These warranted investigation. That Niebuhr attempted to do from a Christian standpoint in the postwar years. However, if atomic bombing of Hiroshima was morally wrong, how could his anti-Communist public support of nuclear weapon development be morally justified in the 1950s? Do changing times require changing views? What happens then to the notion of ethical universals, one upheld by Christian and Jewish theologians since the laws of Moses?

Niebuhr eventually found himself on the reactionary side of a social divide over such issues as Zionism and racial integration. Favoring gradualism at home and mandatory expulsion of non-Christians from homelands abroad, he was trapped in contradictions no amount of rhetoric about democracy could resolve.

Similarly, he had to abandon the failed philosophy of international containment in the face of what seemed unending conflict overseas, particularly that in Vietnam. Forcing democracy on people who either don't understand or don't desire it is no highway to peace and international cooperation. This bailout detached Niebuhr from America's political leadership, which preferred agreeable counseling by evangelicals such as Billy Graham.

Linking politics with religion could be a recipe for national disaster as Niebuhr belatedly realized. His brother was ultimately right to stress individual relationships with the divine rather than joint undertakings of church and state as prerequisite for positive reforms. A better world would derive from better people. It could not create them through safer environments alone.

Doblmeier's film addresses most of these quandaries, though it relies too much on interviews by scholars and politicians motivated strongly by Niebuhr's writings, only offering oblique insight about the man responsible for them. Whether his neo-conservative propensities would have remained popular in the latter half of the century when liberation theology, feminism, and moral turpitude within the most powerful institution of the Christian world rose to confront complacency and tradition is debatable.

Like its subject in his waning years, the documentary follows a talking heads format, invariably causing interview subjects to assume greater interest and significance than the person they are discussing. Niebuhr's writings get scant notice, his childhood being almost entirely missing. Impressions made on him by his parents get only superficially addressed. While keeping the pace brisk by frequent change of speaker, Doblmeier hints and tantalizes instead of probing and immersing. Less is not more in this instance.

That might be the rationale for twenty-nine minutes of additional interviews appended as a bonus feature, along with three more minutes from a Mike Wallace interview of Niebuhr and a three-minute featurette called "Sitting Down with Martin Doblmeier" explaining the director's interest in one of the best-known Christian proponents of direct social action. Are his conclusions currently relevant? Yes, a partisan filmmaker answers. Thus depriving audiences of opportunity to judge that for themselves.

Overly diffused lighting, indifferently recorded sound, and unimaginative cinematography force evaluation of this film to revolve around its adequacy in bringing Niebuhr's personality and thoughts back into the public eye. As introductory appetizer, it succeeds mainly through carefully formulated comments of such polished speakers as Andrew Young, New York Times columnist David Brooks, and theologian Gary Dorrien.

This intriguing, though narrow, portrait of a conflicted, restless mind addressing humanity's core problems is thoughtful and by no means overridingly hagiographic. Should the documentary lead to more intensive

studies of Niebuhr's life and works, it will validate Doblmeier's decision to publicize this key figure in twentieth-century America's political history.

Suitable for viewing by mature teens and adults, An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story is a particularly useful and relevant addition to church libraries.

The reviewer is heavily indebted to Wikipedia's Reinhold Niebuhr biographical page for information cited above.