

Church and State
John Wilkinson The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
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The Niebuhrs were a prominent family in American religious life in the 20th century. Four children, born to a German-born pastor in what is now part of the United Church of Christ tradition.

Three of the children attained high profiles in the American religious world.

- **Hulda Niebuhr** was a pioneer in religious education and was the first woman to receive tenure at McCormick Theological Seminary.
- **Reinhold Niebuhr** was perhaps the most well-known of the Niebuhrs. He served as the pastor of a church in Detroit and then taught for 30 years at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, spoke on campuses across the country, advised presidents. He has been listed as an influencer by politicians of all types.
- **H. Richard Niebuhr** was often called the theologian's theologian of the twentieth century. After a brief college presidency, he taught at Yale Divinity School for his entire career, and wrote some of the most important books of the century. He was an ethicist, primarily, who considered how religious values played themselves out in the world.

This is not a history lecture, I promise! You should know just a very little about the Niebuhr family, if anything at all. But you should know more than a little about their ideas. They were Calvinists, members of a branch that shares the same roots as we Presbyterians. Both Reinhold and Richard wrote of the sovereignty of God, of God's active presence in the world, of the human tendency to fall short, of Jesus' relevance to contemporary life, of the Spirit's working not only within the sacred walls of the church, but in the messy and complex corners of the world.

H. Richard Niebuhr died the year I was born and his notable works were written several decades before that. Still, he is as relevant as this morning's headlines, however we receive them.

Not to turn this conversation into a book club, but allow me to tell you about H. Richard Niebuhr's most well-known work, and why I think that it matters for where we find ourselves now. The work is called *Christ and Culture*.

In *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr helps us understand what we inherently know – that in this nation, at least, people of faith have a diverse variety of responses to the world. Ethnicity, social status, country of origin, all play into it. But at the same time, there are responses, approaches that cut across all of that. "Christ and culture," Niebuhr called it.

Three basic responses.

1. People of faith, Christians, can *embrace* culture and bless it for what it is.

2. They can *reject* culture, also for what it is, and what it isn't, and distant themselves from it.
3. Or they can live somewhere in the middle, seeking to transform it – lifting up what is good, working to change what needs changing.

These are typologies, models, of course. It's more complex and nuanced than that, and it is made all the more complex, I would add, as the United States becomes ever more religiously diverse. The very title of Niebuhr's work, *Christ and Culture*, presumes a lot, and did not envision so much the presence of Judaism in the U.S., or a growing Muslim population, or a growing population of those with no religious affiliation at all.

We remember the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Separation of church and state. The argument cuts both ways – to protect the people from government-imposed religion but also to protect the government from citizen-imposed faith. Those who now insist that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation need to look at their history a bit deeper, that while many of the founders – but not all – were Christians of varying types, a Christian nation was not their intent. This dynamic tension works pretty well, though we have to be vigilant, both as citizens and people of faith.

We Presbyterians have often found ourselves in the middle of it all. It was a Presbyterian minister, John Witherspoon, who signed the Declaration of Independence, Christ transforming culture. Presbyterians were in the middle of the abolition battle, in the civil rights battle, though not in the forefront as much as we should have been.

I have been thinking of Richard Niebuhr and *Christ and Culture* a lot these days. Today's conversation is not about civility and respect, which I certainly agree is lacking. It's a deeper question.

A whole range of issues before the body politic in this moment have faith implications. People of good will and deep faith can, and do, take different perspectives on issues. Gun violence. Choice. Marriage. Immigration. The environment. Racial justice. Education. The economy. Presbyterians, in fact, have policy statements of many of these issues, consensus statements by thoughtful people, though we are in no way required to agree with them.

Which is kind of the point. If we are to be a "Christ transforming culture" tradition, or, in biblical terms, a prophetic tradition, we can't simply throw up our hands or shrug our shoulders, surrender the ethical and moral ground because we are too shy, or risk averse, or we think our voices can't make a difference. *How* we do this does matter; *that* we do it shouldn't be up for discussion.

I watched some of the Supreme Court confirmation hearings this week – perhaps you did as well. There was a fine line to be walked when the committee was considering Judge Barrett’s “Catholicism.” As a person of faith – as people of faith -- we do want our theological perspectives to help shape our approach to politics, to the public life, to controversial matters. What we don’t want is any kind of anti-religious critique of a politician’s faith practices – whether liberal Catholic or evangelical Catholic or Muslim or Jewish or Mormon or even Presbyterian. At the same time, we don’t want a public figure, or any of us, to assert that our culture follow any one path because to is a product of a faith perspective, or that a public figure, a politician or a judge or whoever, says that they have come to a position because their faith instructs them to, or that one perspective from a religious tradition is the only possibility.

The breadth of our national history in some ways has been a dance around these matters – the role of faith in our politics, for good and for ill, and how religion is practiced in an increasingly diverse world that includes practitioners of many faiths and no faith.

It seems as if we will continue to travel this road, and that is OK. The nature of “Christ transforming culture” is seldom clear or straightforward. But to believe that as followers of Christ we are called to transform culture means that God is God of all of life, sanctuary, playground, board room, court room. We – as followers of Jesus – are not to impose our religious views on the political reality, but we are also not to check them at the door the minute we leave this place (or exit our website!).

That is difficult, as our forebears knew, as we all know. But if we believe that the Jesus we follow and the Jesus who names us and claims us also calls us into the world, then we can’t hide and we can’t reject. We engage, even when it is messy and complex, even when it gets us into trouble.

Because we are children of God, created and called by God, and that we belong to God – not just when we are at prayer or singing hymns or attending a church committee meeting but at all times – then we are called to live as children of God and God’s very own at all times, in all circumstances, each moment of each day.

Even when that is complex and messy, it is better than the alternatives, better than compromising, better than rationalizing, better than ignoring or pretending.

That complexity is confirmed in Matthew’s gospel as religious leaders seek to trick Jesus with a question about money, which serves as one of the key texts when we consider matters of church and state, Christ and culture. The tricksters sought to entrap Jesus by asking him to elevate the emperor before the primacy of God. Jesus will have none of it. He puts paying taxes, living as a citizen, in context. It matters, yes, but not ultimately.

There are contexts in which we live, and there are times when they exist distinctly, and there are times when they come into contact, and there are times when they come into tension. We are to be wise and discerning – remembering our primary identity and our primary affinity, who we are and whose we are – we are to be wise and discerning as we navigate our way in the world. Our faith values help us determine what matters and what doesn't, and how we will respond to any given issue of culture or politics.

Charles Cousar writes that this passage, the render to Caesar and render to God passage, "lays itself open to a variety of interpretations and to sometimes radically different doctrines of church and state...it hardly provides a basis for a precise definition of Christians' obligation in the political arena." (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, page 532)

That is as it should be. The Bible is not a rulebook and we do not want easy answers. But we do want foundations and guidance, and we get that when God reminds us that we are God's, always and everywhere, and when Jesus demonstrates to us that we have been given the gifts, the powers of discernment and responsiveness, to live faithfully in the world, not in spite of its messiness and complexity, but because of it. I don't know about you, but I need that reminder nearly every day, when so much seems so unsettled.

So we neither reject absolutely nor embrace fully. We engage, because God engages us, and calls us to do the same. Christ came to transform culture, and we are partners in that calling. We are transformed as we engage in the good and complex work of transformation, so that we, and the world God loves so much, will never be the same. Amen.