

“An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story” Film Screening and Panel Discussion

with filmmaker Martin Doblmeier, Prof. Healan Gaston, and Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw;
moderated by Center Director Marie Griffith
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Marie Griffith, Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Good evening. Good evening to this packed out house, both in this auditorium and two overflow rooms that we have, welcome to all of you there too, I'm sorry we didn't have a space large enough to accommodate this wonderful crowd. It's been very exciting for us to see how many people have wanted to come and see this wonderful film that we're going to watch tonight. I would like to thank David Greenhaw, president of Eden Theological Seminary, this is a partnership with Eden, and David had a lovely lunch today, at which he—well, I'll mention that in a moment, we had a nice ceremony there at lunch pertaining to the film. I'm not going to speak for long, I just want to go through the logistics. So, we'll watch the film, which is one hour, and as soon as the film is over, the panelists and I will come on stage and I will introduce two of our panelists at that time, David and Healan Gaston. But, it's my pleasure now to introduce you to the filmmaker of “An American Conscience.” Martin Doblmeier is the founder and president of Journey Films in Alexandria, Virginia. This is an independent television and film production company that's produced award-winning films that explore religion, spirituality, history, and social issues. He's produced a number of wonderful films in the past, including the one probably best known to many of you, his wonderful film on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So, Martin's going to say a couple of words here—oh, and I'll just say the fun thing we did at Eden today was that David was able to present Martin with the Reinhold Niebuhr award, which is very meaningful, so... So, Martin will speak and then we'll start the film and have our panel. Once again, welcome to you all. Martin?

Martin Doblmeier

Thank you, thank you. Thank you, Marie. I want to thank everybody from the Center, the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, and for everyone at Eden Seminary for all the work, the hard work, that goes into organizing this, these kinds of events and when I looked ahead, back in October and November we decided we would be here for this evening, I was really excited and thrilled to be here, because I know about the good work that happens at the Danforth Center and what you folks do and what you're all about. I want to tell you, too, that I can't think of a more challenging thing than to merge religion and politics together, right? And when I first—I remember clearly when I first told my folks, I said ‘you know, I think I want to do this like religion thing, I just am feeling this, I want to do something.’ And I remember my father saying ‘well, whatever you do, don't mix religion and politics,’ that's the thing. So, here we go, and we've got an evening for you tonight that does nothing but mix religion and politics. Reinhold Niebuhr is the consummate example of trying to see the social and the political world around him, but to see it through a theological lens. That's what I—was the presentation that I gave to public television. I went into public television to tell them I wanted to do a film on Reinhold Niebuhr, and I have to tell you they were all—they didn't have a clue. If there's anybody from public television here tonight, I apologize. I love public television, but they really didn't have a clue, and we were able to make a presentation, they sort of got on board, I've told this story a couple of times—one of the people at the initial meeting, when I went to propose the

idea for this film on Reinhold Niebuhr, actually went out and got—and printed out sheets from Wikipedia and handed them out to the people in the meeting, so at least they have some kind of reference to who Reinhold Niebuhr was. But, we were able to do the film, and when they looked at the film in November, when it was finally finished, we brought it to public television, they said ‘no, we need to bring this out, I think America needs to see this story of this man and who he is and what he stood for and what he believed in and what he felt was right and true.’ If you consider yourself to be a political conservative, I think you’ll probably think of Reinhold Niebuhr—probably—reluctantly, as a liberal. If you’re a liberal, I think you’ll probably think of him as the worst nightmare that you’ve heard for a long time. But, this is a man who saw the world, the social and political world, through this theological lens and while I presented that to public television, they said ‘we don’t often like to do programs on religion, but let’s take a chance on this one.’ So, I hope that you’ll enjoy what you’ll see tonight, we worked really hard to find the finest voices, some of those people you’ll see here this evening are a part of this film, and it’s been one of the joys of my career to be able to have a chance to tell this man’s story and to engage with these people that you’ll see in this film tonight. So, I’m thrilled that you’re here, and that we’ll have a wonderful panel afterwards, but thank you all for coming.

Marie Griffith

That was a very, very powerful film and I’m so thankful that we have time now to discuss it. We have two panelists, two experts with us here, I’ve already mentioned David Greenhaw, who’s the president of Eden Theological Seminary and the co-sponsor of this event and is a scholar of preaching and homiletics and may have something to say about rhetoric. He’s also got wonderful stories about Reinhold Niebuhr’s time at Eden Theological Seminary. I’m just planting questions there for you to ask. And then we’re very, very pleased to have Healan Gaston, who you saw in the film as one of our experts. Healan is a historian, intellectual historian, doing very important work of her own on Cold War America and theological—what’s the name of your book, Healan, I meant to ask?

Professor Healan Gaston

America’s Judeo-Christian Moment.

Marie Griffith

America’s Judeo-Christian Moment, yes, and so she can talk some more about that as well. And then we’re so thankful to be able to speak with the filmmaker, Martin Doblmeier, about more of these things here too. So, without further ado, each of them will speak for five minutes or so, respond to one another, and then we will open it up to questions from you. Thank you.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Thank you, Marie, and thank you all for being here. As the president of Eden Seminary, it’s great to have Reinhold Niebuhr as one of your graduates. I’m often saying—they say ‘Eden where?’ and I go ‘Reinhold Niebuhr’ ‘oh.’ It’s—I’ve been trying to think of how to encapsulate, in just a few minutes, the importance of Niebuhr and I think of a couple of early experiences I had in my reading and encounter with Niebuhr as a theological student. You know, I was a young, idealistic student, I wanted so much to be for the good guys, I really wanted to be one of the good guys, I really wanted to engage and do good things and reading Niebuhr, and some of the experiences

that I had, made it clear to me that wanting to be one of the good guys was harder to do because it's hard to know who they are. That is, it's easy to know who they are, they're the people like me, but this was one of the grand insights of Niebuhr, when Cornel West, in the film, talks about the courage of Niebuhr, I think, in many ways, it's the courage to be profoundly honest about our horribly mixed motives, the things we want to do, the good we want to do, we're sure that if we just work hard enough, things will just turn around and just be right, that is, the good liberal spirit. And liberal, not in a conservative/liberal universe, but liberal in the sense of if we could just set ourselves free from all these horrible constraints, if we just enlighten our minds and give people space free from shackles of external authority, then grand things will happen. And yet, grand things do happen at the same time that horrible, awful, miserable, terrible things happen. Healan and I talked a little earlier today about the role that being a German made for Niebuhr and the proximity he had to the suffering that was going on in Germany. He was able to read German and understand German and have contacts with Germans. He wasn't at all naïve about what was happening to millions and millions of human beings, actually literally being put in gas chambers, baked in ovens, while good things are going on and you're trying to be for the good people, the problems of the world just keep going on. This haunts Niebuhr and makes a difference to him, and I think that's an important insight from him. Whenever I'm tempted to overestimate my own capacity or the capacity of all my friends, we all work together, 'let's go out and make it a better place.' It's not that we shouldn't do that, it's that we should have some humility about the capacity we have to accomplish it. This, to me, is one of the grand insights of Niebuhr. One more thing, I became a pastor after I finished seminary, not unlike Niebuhr, I went out to serve a church, not unlike Niebuhr, that was relatively small. He writes, later in life, he goes back and creates a kind of diary of his early church period, it's a book called *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. I tell you, it's the best book I own. I read it every year, I assign it to my students all the time and he has a great number of these little quips, but if you'll bear with me I want to read just two paragraphs from it. This is written in 1915, from Detroit:

I am glad there are only eighteen families in this church. I have been visiting the members for six weeks and haven't seen all of them yet. Usually I walk past a house two or three times before I summon the courage to go in. I am always very courteously received, so I don't know exactly why I should not be able to overcome this curious timidity. I don't know that very much comes of my visits except that I really get acquainted with the people.

Usually after I have made a call I find some good excuse to quit for the afternoon. I used to do that in the days gone by when I was a book agent. But there was reason for it then. I needed the afternoon to regain my self-respect. Now it seems to be pure laziness and fear. The people are a little discouraged. Some of them seem to doubt whether the church will survive. But there are a few who are the salt of the earth, and if I make a go of this they will be more responsible than they will ever know.

As a young pastor, to read of another young pastor who had to muster the courage to go call on people, and then go home and take a nap, Niebuhr has always been a joy to me.

Professor Healan Gaston

Well, let me start by saying what a tremendous pleasure it is to be here and to see so many of you in this audience. I am actually the current president of the Niebuhr society and, in that capacity, it gives me great joy to see this amount of interest in this film. It also gives me joy in another way, which is more of a personal way, and I want to tell you a little bit about that. My own interest in Niebuhr started at a very young age, which makes me, I guess, a sort of anomalist character, although it turns out that Andrew Finstuen, who also was the project director here and really spearheaded this entire effort, was also someone who encountered Niebuhr relatively early on in his life through a parent. But, I had the good fortune of being the daughter of someone who had been a student of theology in his early years before deciding to become a lawyer and had read Niebuhr and so, at 15, 16 I started hearing about all of the different theological thinkers and ethicists that my father had encountered in his pre-ministerial work at Duke, and I remember, at about 15, thinking that this was a fascinating character, like Niebuhr just stood out for me among the crown of thinkers that I was being introduced to and I also had the good fortune of having a really wonderful pastor in my UCC church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who happens to be here tonight, David Beebe and so... So, I tell you this, in part, because there are many, many people in this audience who have similar stories about their personal connections to Niebuhr. There is an axis between Union and Eden that really brings out, I think, some of the folks who have been most moved by the legacy of the Niebuhr family, in particular this thinker, and so, I know there are others in the audience that would have similar stories to tell. The Niebuhr society itself has been an incredibly nurturing environment for those of us with a deep engagement with Niebuhr, and on that score, we have Robin Lovin, who's here in the audience next to David to thank for that, he's... Thank you, Robin. [Applause] This is a moment that has taken a lot of nurturing, as you can see, on the part of a lot of very generous senior scholars and caring parents and caring pastors, and for those of you out there who are dealing with small children in your congregations and in your families, I want you to know about this because, you know, as you say David [gestures to Greenhaw], there are—there's some really tremendously important interactions happening in a lot of the spaces that we live and move in every day, and sometimes it's not easy to see that, but, in fact, it is true.

So, what I wanted to do with this time is just say a couple of things about my own thinking about this film project and a little bit about what it's like—what it's been like for me to teach a course on the Niebuhr brothers, on Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr at Harvard Divinity School. One of the things that I've been able to do in teaching that particular course is to invite my students to make the Niebuhr brothers their conversation partners and I've found that they—these tend to be thinkers that really stick with students, they have a way of sort of taking what we think we know about ourselves and our world and sort of turning it into a kaleidoscopic enterprise, with lots of twists and turns and strange interiors that we didn't necessarily see before, and that's part of the reason why these thinkers tend to have such a profound impact on the people who read them and come across them. What I think is particularly interesting about this film is just the way that it takes something that many of you probably would say, you know, is the core message that most of us would know if asked, you know: 'what word would you choose if you had to pick one word to talk about Niebuhr?' As David Brooks says, for most people, that word would be sin, and I think that at this incredibly important political moment, the thing that this film does that I find so challenging and so fascinating is that it suggests to us that perhaps the word 'sin' doesn't totally

capture what's going on with Niebuhr, but that, in fact, there's something about the way that Niebuhr brings sin back into the equation that attunes us to the dynamics of power. Right, and so, the extent that this film really reorients that conversation toward the relationship between awareness of sin and the sort of sense of how structures of power work in the world. I think that's a particularly valuable combination, or contribution. We see it especially in the contributions of Andrew Young to this film because he gives us such an acute and deep and new understanding of exactly how important Niebuhr was to [Martin Luther] King [Jr.].

And then the final thing I just wanted to mention to this group is that at the AAR, at the American Academy of Religion, where the film was premiered, it was really fascinating to be sitting in a room of largely Niebuhr scholars, many of whom have connections to Niebuhr, as I know many of you in this audience do, and to suggest that one of the most powerful dimensions of our experience and the process of making this film is the fact that even those of us closest to the project who sat in a room at Union for two days and hashed out the script, and worked very closely with Martin throughout all of this, when we sat down and saw the film, it was breathtaking. It was bigger than us, it was bigger than any individual in this process, it was something that we couldn't have imagined, and it was also something that had the ability to deepen our own understanding of thinkers that we've—many of us, lived with throughout the better part of our lives, and so, something about the power of images and the work that Martin has done with this film, and the collective effort, made it possible to bring something together that is really bigger than any of us, and, I guess, the question I would have for each of you, is those of you who know Niebuhr already, like, in what ways does this film attune you to certain things about this individual, their thought, their life, that you weren't necessarily aware of before? I think that's just a fascinating kind of question to ask ourselves, and one that we can talk about some in the question and answer. But, thank you so much for being here, it's really just an honor and a privilege to see you all here tonight.

Martin Doblmeier

I would say that—I have to say I've done 33 films, and every time I start a new project, I'm just so enthusiastic. I'm just over the wall enthusiastic about what's going to happen, and then somewhere along the line, and especially with a film like this, I become overcome with a sense of 'this is bigger than me' and I'm humbled by what I have to handle, and I'm entrusted with. Niebuhr wrote 24 books, 2500 articles, the volume of material is just extraordinary, the people that brought me into the universe to meet and to engage with and to do the interviews with, every day was an engagement for me, and it's just a humbling experience to be able to do that and to get involved with it, and one of the things that I'm always trying to think about is, because that's the question that television people want to know, well, what does Niebuhr have to say, what's going on today, what does this dead theologian have to say to us in the 21st century? A couple of things that have continued to resonate for me is this, and I'm not sure if they're all good things, frankly. Reinhold Niebuhr, he's—we're here today because he was a famous public theologian. That's just the truth of it, he was a famous public theologian, and think about the difference between his time and ours today. In the late—you know, the 1940s and 1950s when I would say Reinhold Niebuhr was at the pinnacle of his fame, mainstream Protestantism was the religion of America. And so, the media was looking for people who could speak with that kind of language and understood those kinds of symbols and could use that in speaking and explaining what kind of situation America, the social and political situation was in America, and it's a very different

landscape for religion in America today, isn't it? No longer, in the same way, mainstream Protestant dominates like it had in the past. It's a multi-faith kind of world, and who do you look to now, who's a public theologian that you look to? And, the other thing that I find is really interesting too is it's in some ways an indictment of the media. The media is an easy target these days, it's—Donald Trump did that, for sure, but, back in Reinhold Niebuhr's day, especially 1940s and 50s when he's so popular, the media was a pretty simple pathway. There were a handful of television networks and radio shows and publications. He's on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1948 for their 25th anniversary edition because he's the person they wanted to celebrate. There were only a handful of publications that if you got on those—into those publications, or on that television show, or on that radio show, you had made it, and if you were one of their people, you were the darling. It's a very different landscape today in the media. More often than not, there's just such an incredible proliferation of media, that how does a speaker on religion even get out there, and theology gets sort of [inaudible] with, because most of us listen and follow the kind of media that affirms the things that we already believe, right? So, how do you have a broader sense of what's going on, how do you have that critical voice, and that's what Niebuhr was so good at, saying “you think you understand, but wait, have you thought about this? Have you thought about it through this particular lens, from this perspective?” And so, now that's a different landscape. And the third thing is, too, I think in terms, especially for the media, religious literacy is really at an all-time low. The ability to understand the kind of language that Niebuhr would have used backed in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s is not there in the same way in the media anymore. So, it's really a different opportunity.

I've traveled around the country now, we're doing events all across the country, and I've been asking people, I'd love to hear from you folks this evening, about what you would consider the public theologians of our time. Cornel West, maybe? I would think he'd certainly be a candidate. There are other people out there, but how do you even, how does a public theologian even really get a platform in America today, to say something that's insightful, that somehow transcends the political rancor that's going on in this country today, and that's the kind of thing I'm looking for to hear from you folks today, where are the public theologians of our time right now?

Marie Griffith

Well, thank you all so much, we're going to open it up to you all in just one moment, but before we do that completely, I did want to ask if you all want to respond in any way to each other or shall we just open it up?

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

I just have one observation that Healan made about seeing the film brings in new insights, and even though you may have read many things, and part of it, Martin and I just want to say, is the incredible force of the context. These images of the first World War, the second World War, the atomic bomb, the civil rights movement, that is, this isn't language and discussion that's happening in the abstract, this is an ongoing discussion where his mind is changing and he's involved, because there's a context, and as a reader, you read the theology and you remember and imagine the contexts, as a filmmaker, you make that context so fresh and powerful, and I'm very grateful to you for that, so...

Professor Healan Gaston

Absolutely.

Marie Griffith

We should say, lest we forget, that the film is going to air on PBS, the launch date is April 1st, I think you said... Is that right?

Martin Doblmeier

April 1st, yes, nationwide.

Marie Griffith

So, people will be able to find it in our local PBS station many times over that month.

Martin Doblmeier

And there's a DVD outside too.

Marie Griffith

Yes, that's right. He's hawking copies, so we've got them. So, if you would like your own copy...

Martin Doblmeier

Actually, one of the struggles, and I don't mean to pitch it, but seriously one of struggles is public television says "well, if you want to do it, you get one hour." How do you tell the story of this man and his life in a single hour? And so, what we decided to do was we had a wonderful body of material with some wonderful people in the film, Healan and Robin Lovin and people like that, and so, the film, in addition to the entire film that you saw, the DVD, we have about another hour's worth of material on it because the interviews were so good, the people were so good, weren't they great? Don't you think? [Applause] I mean...

Marie Griffith

Alright, we're going to open it up. I would actually like to invite Robin Lovin to speak first, if you wouldn't mind saying just a few words. As Healan mentioned, we're very fortunate that Robin Lovin, who's written a great book on Reinhold Niebuhr and is featured in the film, is also with us today. So, welcome and if you'd say a few words, too before we open up.

Robin Lovin

Well, thank you. I'm just delighted to be here and share this experience with all of you because, like Healan and like others have said, to see this man's life come together for us in this way was such a great experience and what I'm hoping we'll see as, you know, people who have never heard of Reinhold Niebuhr flip on their television during April and happen across this film, you know, that people who are kind of adrift in our public life today and who, as Martin just said, are not really hearing anybody that they don't already agree with, might hear a voice from another experience and another part of our history that would open up the kind of dialogue that Niebuhr himself was so good at starting. And I'm heartened by seeing everybody here because my guess is you could make those things happen in communities that you're a part of.

Marie Griffith

Thank you.

Martin Doblmeier

Thanks, Robin. [Applause]

Marie Griffith

Now we'll really open it up, you'll notice that we have two of our postdoctoral fellows here, Gene Zubovich and Christine Croxall, and if you will raise your hand, I will be glad to recognize you. Yes?

Audience Question #1

My name is Jon Diefenthaler and I'm a conversation partner with the other Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr. True, I want to just thank you for making this film at this time. We live in a different time, to be sure, but I believe that both of the Niebuhrs, Reinhold Niebuhr especially, is relevant to us today. In this time, when American democratic institutions and principles are clearly being tested, I'm wondering if the panelists would comment on what helpful insights Reinhold Niebuhr might bring to us in this day and time.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Well, I'll take a first stab. Alright, thanks Jon, this is another ringer here, John has written an extraordinary two books on H. Richard, so I appreciate your question and your shout out for the Niebuhrs. I think, for me, maybe the most important thing is how difficult it is to do the right thing, and, in fact, you can't, and so, the question is if you do something that you wish that you didn't have to do, what do you do? And, for me, I think Niebuhr's biggest insight is not that it is wrong to compromise on your principles, you have to. You can never be as pure as you'd like, but the issue is don't forget that you made a compromise. Hold on to a transcendent expectation that's beyond the reality you have to do. So, going to war is a horrible thing and doesn't promote peace, but it may be necessary from time to time and if it becomes ordinary for us, this is a problem. I think one of the biggest dangers we have right now is we have entered casually into almost a perpetual state of war, and we're forgetful about how important peace is. We need to be reminded that we've made compromises, and I think this idea that making a compromise isn't bad, forgetting that you made the compromise is dangerous.

Professor Healan Gaston

Yeah, I think, following up on that, there's just a degree of like interspection and sort of intentionality in our thinking about political questions, it becomes possible with the aid of Niebuhr and that's very helpful at a time like this when we don't always see that happening in our leaders. I do think that one of the things that my students, at least, gravitate the most toward in the Niebuhr brothers is the recognition that history is complicated and views of human nature can almost become certain kinds of political strategy, if you think about this question of, you know, how... like what sort of views of human nature is going to help me deal with this particular situation or that particular situation. One of the things that's most fascinating about the Niebuhr brothers is the extent to which they are challenging a kind of protestant liberalism and yet still partaking of a protestant liberalism. And so there's some really subtle things going on there about sort of shifting context, right, and thinking about the moment where you might need to have a more sanguine view of human nature or the moment where you might need to really

look very hard for God's grace in the world. I think that is a big part of what Niebuhr has to offer us, I do tend to think of it, though, as very much a conversation between the Niebuhr brothers to the extent that H. Richard was more focused on some of the more purely theological questions, Reinhold was more concerned about those sorts of questions of ethics, what should we do, whereas H. Richard thought very much about this question of where's God in the world and, you know, what are the dangers of idolatry lurking around every corner if we allow democracy to become religionized or even religion itself to become idolized in some way. So, he's really working on that problem in a way that I think speaks to the kind of religious nationalism and secular nationalism that we see on display these days.

Martin Doblmeier

I think in some ways the answer to your question begins with which Reinhold Niebuhr do you draw on, which one do you focus on, which is the great irony, as Niebuhr would say, because that's why it's possible for a George Bush and an Obama, everybody to sort of draw something out of Reinhold Niebuhr in some ways he's like the Bible, if I can say that, you can probably find something to justify your already-formed political and social opinion, and that's the real problem, I think, in some ways. Last night I was in Colorado, we presented in Colorado and they wanted to talk very much about Islamophobia and their concern about that, and, of course, Reinhold Niebuhr didn't write anything about that, and here tonight I'm struck by the fact that just a couple of weeks ago, the whole nation was wrapped in the fact that there had been desecration to the Jewish monuments and the memorials in the city. The other day in Denver, we were there also, in addition to Islamophobia they're rounding up immigrants and people that are preparing them for deportation, and I kept thinking that are these really as different...are they not all coming from the same place? Isn't there some connection between all of that somewhere in how we perceive each other and the fear that we have of each other? Isn't there some commonality? I guess if there was one Reinhold Niebuhr line that sort of resonates, or I've been sort of thinking about how it plays out and he is the kind of writer who gives you that bumper sticker that sort of works on your mind for a long time, it's the notion that we have to accept the fact that so many times... that the evil and the foe is the evil in the self and that's a line that I've been working on a lot and just somehow it keeps holding up very well for me.

Marie Griffith

That's a beautiful line. I do want to mention, since you mentioned the cemetery desecration, that we are sponsoring a panel on Wednesday night, two nights from now, featuring Andrew Rehfeld of the Jewish Federation, and the head of the Muslim charity that helped raise so much money to repair the cemetery headstones, so it will be a very Niebuhrian conversation, I think, in that way. We have fliers here if you're interested. Okay, yes?

Audience Question #2

Hi, my name's Jason [unintelligible], I'm a 1916 graduate of Eden and I'm one of those...

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Wait, I signed your diploma, it was 2016.

Marie Griffith

I thought he looked awfully good, didn't you?

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

All of a sudden, I got really old.

Audience Question #2

I haven't learned to speak in front of a crowd yet, and I was one of those teenagers who was smitten by Reinhold Niebuhr because of the interests of one of my parents. I'm a bit perplexed as to why the third Niebuhr theologian was not mentioned, the sister of Helmut Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr, Hulda Niebuhr, who was not encouraged by her family to go forward with her education, but who did and earned a bachelor's and a master's and did complete her PhD, except for her dissertation and did become a professor at what is not McCormick Theological Seminary and wrote many books and many articles. I'm curious as to why she was not mentioned, and I'm also curious as to what you think the interplay would have been between her and her two brothers.

Martin Doblmeier

Well, I'm the filmmaker, I'll take full responsibility, so... I'd say I just had the wrong consultants, that's all I can say [laughter]. No, I take full responsibility, although I could not imagine what would be the...I'll sort of lead you to the question about the conversation that would happen between the three of them.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Well, I don't know all that much, I do know Hulda's works some though, and her focus and attention to religious education and involvement there. I don't actually know about how the relations went, you know, the famous conflict between Richard and Reinhold is so prominent because Reinhold really thought that it was time to go to war and they disagreed, and so... But I don't know, myself... Healan, do you know?

Professor Healan Gaston

You know, it's interesting. I have been trying, over the years, to get students to dig in here. I know that there's at least a couple of books that have been written on the topic, there's one dissertation that just was sent to me, that I don't think was ever published, and a couple of other maybe article length treatments. The thing that is happening right now which is very helpful in the scholarship is a turn to recognizing really the incredible achievements of several of the Niebuhr women, including Ursula Niebuhr. Bekah Miles has done some pretty interesting work, including a recent article in the *Christian Century* on the question of whether or not Ursula Niebuhr ought to be considered a co-writer for Reinhold, particularly in those years after his stroke, a coauthor, because she was playing such a tremendous role in helping to edit his work and to really formulate it, like later on in his life. So, that's one sort of area of growing interest and where there's new research being done. My understanding is that within the Niebuhr family especially that Gustav had very traditional ideas about the roles of women and that, as a result, his wife was very much into the religious education side of their joint enterprises and that their daughter followed in those footsteps to a point, but then did, herself, have an amazing theological mind and managed to, as you say, get her degree, write books, and really make a name for herself. So, I think more needs to be written. I think that's definitely an agenda, something I've tried over the years, as I say, to get my students more interested in, but one of the things about

the Niebuhr scholarship is that you get used to being in a very source-rich environment. Reinhold churned out a tremendous amount of stuff, there's been a lot written about both of the brothers, and so, students who are starting to do original research of their own frequently balk when they can't find things as easily as they expect to. So, I have yet to come across one that's really ready to dig in on this because it will take some digging.

Martin Doblmeier

I'm just going to add one last, quick thing to this. When I did the interview with Elisabeth Sifton, Reinhold Niebuhr's daughter and Ursula's daughter, she was... Elisabeth was very quick to say, you know, Ursula was there and really with him even going back as early as *Moral Man*, and so her imprint is on all of this work throughout the arc of his career, clearly more, as Healan said, after the stroke, and very little credit is given, really. I think that's a real misstep and maybe in one of my missteps is not having brought that out. I had an hour to do the film, but that was it... But your point about Hulda going to McCormick, I just, the other day, got an invitation to come and present the film at McCormick in Chicago, so I'm going to have to be ready for that, what's going to happen [laughter].

Marie Griffith

Robin, you had something you wished to say? Yes, mike's coming right there.

Robin Lovin

Yeah, I just wanted to add another story because there's so much richness in Niebuhr's connections and we all know the story of his relationship with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the way in which Bonhoeffer was brought to Union and then returned to Germany right before the war began, but there was a young Japanese woman who was a student of Reinhold Niebuhr's in that same period of time who made a similar decision at the beginning of the second world war, that she needed to return to her home. Her name is Kiyoko Takeda. She went on to write primarily in the area of politics and political science and has some fifteen books in Japanese, and that's the reason why Reinhold Niebuhr is known by lots of people in Japanese politics today, even if they don't know anything about his theology. So, I just wanted to add that so you see something of the richness of his influence and I think also the way in which he did encourage women in theology in a time when it was harder to do that. I noticed incidentally in the pictures from Union that there's a young Asian woman in the front row in one of Niebuhr's classes, I don't know whether that's the person, but it might well be.

Marie Griffith

Thank you.

Audience Question #3

Yes, my name is Paul Mac from Augusta, Missouri and I have a question about, in your research for the film, did you come across anything about Myles Horton and the Highlander School? He was another person who was a student of Reinhold's, in fact, at one point in one of his books, he talked about how they went outside for a break and he said 'Reiny, I can't handle this, I need to leave. These people are all too bright for me' and Niebuhr said "no, you need to stay because you're grounding us." But, I'm wondering if you had anything with the Highlander School and Myles Horton.

Martin Doblmeier

The Highlander School is quite a place, we did not have time to put that in the film. That's where Rosa Parks went, to the Highlander School, was she not trained in civil rights and justice in the Highlander School?

Professor Healan Gaston

Just a note on the Highlander School and Myles Horton, I mean, one of the things that is, I think, especially helpful about Cornel's really brilliant remarks about moral men in a moral society in this film, is just to point out that while it is true what Gary Dorrien says about Niebuhr himself not having a structural critique of racism, he certainly has...he certainly finds... King finds later, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* the sort of roots of a structural critique. Right, so that's a way of saying it's kind of one step removed, but that was certainly true for Myles Horton also. Right, they're perfect examples of people who find in that book and in other of Niebuhr's writings.

Martin Doblmeier

He was also... Niebuhr was also involved in the delta farming project, which is a big project that was happening with...blacks and whites were coming together on farming and he had a board member role, I think, if I'm not mistaken in that too, so that was something that he was trying to do from New York City, traveling down to the delta region to sort of energize that, not only from his theological point of view but just on a practical ground level.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Just...Because you said board member, I make a plug here because Niebuhr actually shaped Eden, not only as a graduate, but served on the board from 1929 until 1955. So, I have a few of my board members... Think if your term was that long [laughter]. I want to go back just briefly to a question that was asked earlier, though, about what he might have to offer in this particular moment we're in. In 1943, he gathered 50 leading religious and political and intellectuals in American to sign an open letter requesting that the President and the Congress open the immigration policy of the United States more broadly, to make it possible for Jews to come into the United States who were fleeing Nazism. And he did it, not by making a big theological argument, but by making a particular practical argument that it was within our existing laws, we had to interpret them more liberally, and we had to reach out to people who were in difficult situations and circumstance. I think this is especially important to us right now as we are having conversations about immigration and to reflect on the evil within ourselves when fear is our number one motive, instead of compassion, and I think it was important and I thought, in the film, for me again, the powerful testimony of Abraham Heschel's daughter in this, Suzanna, and the way Niebuhr reached out and bridged this century-long anti-Semitic character of Christian faith, to understand the way in which Christianity has done so much damage, not by self-conscious intent always, but by trying to be for the good guys, and ended up being on the wrong side. And I think his work in that regard is important and instructive, both about our own anti-Semitism or our Islamophobia but also on matters of race and gender as we keep working and trying to heal our common life.

Marie Griffith

Thank you.

Martin Doblmeier

I was just going to say that I'm sure, David, that you took note of the fact that they formed this friendship, Niebuhr and Heschel formed this friendship because, as Elisabeth Sifton said, they weren't getting such support or love within their own communities.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Yeah, well...

Marie Griffith

Yes?

Audience Question #4

Yes, I have a question for Mr. Doblemeier. I was curious about how you felt and what insights you might have gained from having done the Bonhoeffer film and then doing this film and what kinds of dynamics you might have detected between them or any insights you might have had about them, doing the film.

Martin Doblmeier

That's a great question. Quickly, because I guess we're getting short on time. Two things, I think that Niebuhr took full advantage of living in America, we have freedom of speech and he's able to go on radio and television, and, in his mind, tell it like it is, speak truth to power. Bonhoeffer couldn't do that. I mean, Bonhoeffer did most of his work in a clandestine way, quietly, and then works, later on, become public knowledge to all of us, and that Reinhold Niebuhr, even though he lives until 78 and could've lived longer had the stroke not taken such a devastating effect on him, there is a body of work that he is able to leave us that we can mine for centuries to come. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, essentially his writings end at about 1938 in the prisons, the last two books *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* were really put together by Eberhard Bethge, out of fragments of material that we're actually able to do. So, what a tragedy that this man, Bonhoeffer meaning, was such a brilliant thinker and such a good friend to so many of the people that I had the chance to spend time with, only got to write until his late 30s. God knows what he would've been able to create if he had been able to live longer, so those are the two things... So the notion of being able to speak freely and use your theology to sort of put your words out there, where Bonhoeffer couldn't do that and the arc of his life, for Bonhoeffer, was terribly cut short.

Marie Griffith

I know there are women somewhere with a question... Okay?

Audience Question #5

I'll be brave. He's very new to me, this is... this was a great experience and an honor to watch this film tonight. You know, the subject of this film embodied a human spirit and courage and a lot of characteristics that we don't see in some of our institutions, such as our Congress, and I saw a lot of wisdom being manifested in a lot of activities and in a lot of things that he did in the past for this country and for others abroad, and his work and his thinking was so universal in

nature. So, what is it about the human spirit that America needs to recapture in their hearts and minds?

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

So, the biographer of Niebuhr, Fox, describes him in this kind of interesting way. I was kind of looking in my notes if I could put my hand on it, but he wasn't exactly a precise theologian, he was on the fly. Theology applied to the things that were going on. He has an image of him going fast and smoothing out later, reflecting more and always with a suitcase in his hand. He was active and involved and he was a public theologian in the sense that there was a lot at stake. There were a lot of issues of the time, there were things to be said and things to be done. He knew he couldn't make it all right, but he thought he should do what he could. He had that social gospel heritage that the gospel isn't just about the next world, it's also about transformation in this. And I think there's a good bit of that that we could use to be energized and realize there's a lot at stake for a lot of people and a lot of the institutions we love and care for are more fragile sometimes than we are even aware of.

Marie Griffith

Yes, sure, yes... Yes?

Audience Question #6

Thank you, my name is William Groon, I have four short comments and then the question if you'd bear with me. I don't think there's any public theologian today because we live in a democratic, capitalist society and that there's no social justice advocate I've met who's not critical, extremely, of capitalism which seems to me a certain kind of ingratitude for all that we enjoy, and scripture says to break the yoke of oppression. It says we can, we must, we're to do it, and it also says everything done under the sun is out of envy. So, it seems to me useless to talk about evil within us and sin without talking about the fruit of repentance. There's no nobel economist that I've read that talks about if we're cunning and clever, we'll get rich exploiting people. So, why... there seems to be more of a call to ourselves to repent and to power to repent, it doesn't matter if it's a fascist leader or a socialist leader or a capitalist leader. There's always daily repentance and we're not calling ourselves to that, so I think that's why there's no public theologians.

Marie Griffith

Did you have?

Audience Question #7

I have a question. In the film, there was one comment that I caught about church and it was almost a throwaway comment, that Niebuhr didn't have much to do with the church, and I'm not sure that's fair. I'd like to have you say a little more about that and I would also like to have you comment on the fact or ask the question is what is Niebuhr's relationship with their home denomination, you might say, which was the Evangelical Synod of North America, and during their lifetime, that synod merged with the Reformed Church, became the ENR, then merged with the Congregationalists, became the United Church of Christ all within their lifetime. I was wondering...and I think they were, at least Reinhold was, influential in that, and so, I'm wondering if you could comment on that and also comment on the fact that they all sort of

drifted away, in some ways, from their ENR background. I mean, certainly, Yale, McCormick, other places like that, so...

Marie Griffith

Thank you.

Martin Doblmeier

Well, I'll keep my answer short, so I give plenty of time to Healan and to David on this. The comment that you're referring to comes from Stanley Hauerwas, who said that throughout Niebuhr's life, he never really had much of a... he never really sort of understood the church... he didn't explain the church as sort of the solution to what was happening in the world and I would say that Stanley's a friend, and so Stanley knows how to get himself into a television show and I respect him, but he understands the kind of line that's going to work in a film life this, and so he sort of goes for that and remarkably it always winds up working somewhere along the line. Although, I think in the short shrift that he gave to Reinhold Niebuhr is a little unfair, if I can say that. It's not really true... But, I'll leave this to David, Reinhold doesn't have an ecclesial perspective in the same way that I think H. Richard does. I don't know as much about H. Richard, frankly, but I would not say... They didn't have the same appreciation or love of the church except... appreciation for the church. But, I'll say this: how many of you are pastors here? Can I just...? Okay, so here's a little anecdotal thing that you should know, and this is one of things that came up in the interview that I did with Elisabeth Sifton and it has something to do with the church that we were talking about today and the world that we're living in today. There was much made in the film that Reinhold Niebuhr was traveling all the time, he was lecturing constantly, and they said that, when he would give a lecture on a Friday, even a Thursday or Friday, he would have his suitcase next to the podium, he'd finish the lecture, he'd run to the train station, run to an airport, he was off going someplace else. You would think that most of the time he was lecturing in churches, wouldn't you? In fact, that's not the case, as Elisabeth would say, that more often than not it was the chaplains at universities and seminaries that he was asked to come and preach because the churches were more anxious about him. He was just a little too political, he was a little too disturbing. They might lose support within the congregations, he might be a divisive figure within the congregations. So, for all the rhetoric that we're using today about what's going to be happening in America, I just want to say this is one application for the life and the example of what happened to Reinhold Niebuhr might still be an example for us today, so where's the church going to be in the 21st century? And I think, during Niebuhr's time, he didn't feel as though it was the first call for him to come and speak.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Just quickly, Niebuhr, Reinhold is not the engineer, the engine behind the ecumenical movement, but clearly H. Richard is. H. Richard's *Social Sources of Denominationalism* was written in 1929 and was a manifesto in many ways for the ecumenical mergers that led to the formation of the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, many of these churches went into organic union to overcome the sin of denominationalism that H. Richard so powerfully spoke of and the relationship between that denominationalism and our cultural isolation and our triumphant nationalism, H. Richard was very critical and powerful on that and if you've not read that book recently or ever, I commend it. It's an incredibly powerful piece of American rhetoric.

Professor Healan Gaston

I just want to add here as well that one of things that's most remarkable about the Niebuhr brothers, and really the Niebuhr family as a whole, is the distance that these folks are traveling in their lifetimes and that gets to this question about sort of the various institutional affiliations and sort of distance from the home ground. I mean, it's a pretty remarkable thing that ever one of these people, Reinhold or H. Richard, would have accomplished what they did, but the fact that they each accomplished what they did and were brothers is really phenomenal. I mean, what are the chances of that? You know, and that is, in and of itself, worth meditating on. I wanted to say also an answer to your question about what's missing today, I mean when I think about Reinhold in particular, there's just this passion for justice, but the desire to not allow that passion for justice to go untempered by wisdom, right, and that wisdom itself is something that comes from an appreciation of the mysteries that are part of what it means to say that we sin, right? I mean that's really the way he described it, is like, he would talk about the final mystery of sin, right? He often like sort of would come up against the limits of his own subjectivity and just not really even have the words quite to describe that, right, and that was the thing that made the wisdom that tempered his passion for justice. The last thing is just that those of you that haven't read Elisabeth Sifton's book on the serenity prayer. It's not really a book about the serenity prayer, it turns out, I mean, the serenity prayer is in there, but it turns out to be actually a memoir of her life growing up with her family and one of the things that's very clear is that they had really displaced persons coming through their home throughout her childhood, immigrate, throughout her childhood, that was sort of the [unintelligible] of their lives, and that's a really fascinating, an important, I think, aspect of this conversation about our current situation and what Niebuhr might have to say about it or what his example might give us to think about.

Marie Griffith

Great, yes?

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Here they come, David.

Marie Griffith

He's coming.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

There it is.

Audience Question #8

I was particularly impressed by the excerpt from Rabbi Abraham Herschel's eulogy because he said that Niebuhr was involved with charity, justice, and humility. Now, we mostly think of Niebuhr as involved in justice, but the justice always was an over layer, and the bottom line was love and the thing about humility, I really got to thinking about that. He was humble. He walked humbly with God, you don't think you're going to solve all the problems. I, years ago, was doing

a sabbatical at your rival seminary, Lancaster Theological Seminary, where you used to be a professor...

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Yes, now we're getting into my history.

Audience Question #8

And I was in an honors seminar, and I'm a pastor of many years from the south and we were studying Niebuhr, and one of the students looked at the professor, there's always one joker in the crowd, and he said "we're reading *Moral Man* and *Moral Society*, what good is that going to do me as a local pastor?" And the professor, John Paine, looked at me and he said "Dr. Beebe, you've been out there in the huskings, what good has that done for you?" and I said "well, you know, a lot of my friends who are involved in the civil rights movement have given up because it really hasn't changed. I never thought it was going to change in the first place." That's humility and that's what he had. The idea that we're gonna change the world is not humility and I just... you might want to comment on that.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

Well, I think this might be my last short one, we're getting towards the end...

Marie Griffith

Yes, this will be.

Rev. Dr. David Greenhaw

But I'll just say this one thing that the category of transcendence is really important for Niebuhr. So, it's not that we're wholly eminent, that everything's right here, but there really is a sense of transcendence. But, what is transcendent is God so that he is a theologian. He is one that brings to the public conversation about things that matter, but things that matter informed by a continually evolving lively, troubling, struggling relationship with God and I think that's a powerful testimony and an important thing. If one has that sense of the importance of God and the crazy world we live in, then from time to time we need to stand up and be counted and... do that.

Professor Healan Gaston

On that score, one of the things that surprised me the most, and this is what I thought of when I was asking you all this question of how this film might change the way you think about Niebuhr, I love that clip at the very beginning where he is sort of telling us about, you know, what it means to have a false religion and is getting such glee out of it, this is several years after his stroke, so you can see that he's somewhat impaired by the stroke even then, but I think one of the things that comes across to me in the film and in other engagements with Niebuhr is just the recognition that it's not just a kind of dower repentance that humility inspires in us, it's laughter, right? It's the ability to laugh at ourselves, it's the ability to laugh at the ironies of our situation, and that laughter sometimes carries us through moments that would otherwise be too depressing to really bear. So, that's something that I strongly associate with this thought and this person and... for what it's worth.

Marie Griffith

[Gestures to Doblmeier] Last word?

Martin Doblmeier

Oh, for me? Sorry. No, I've just been engaged. I have to say one of the great thrills for me is night after night I get to be part of these panels and to listen to these people comment on their takes, people who've studied, I'm a big fan of the work of Robin Lovin and to have Healan and David here, it's just been a great joy for me to be sharing in all of this. I just have been a big admirer of Reinhold Niebuhr for years, I don't agree with everything he said. Reinhold Niebuhr didn't agree with everything Reinhold Niebuhr said, but that's what you have to think about, I mean he really came after the big questions of our lives and I like Stanley Hauerwas in many ways. I just admire that and night after night we keep wrestling with these big questions and I think he's a good partner in all this, Reinhold Niebuhr, and it's been an honor for me to have a chance to handle this material and to be with you folks tonight, so thank you.

Marie Griffith

Well, that's a great place to end. Thank you so much to our panelists and let me invite all of you to our reception right outside of here, where hopefully you'll get a chance to purchase copies of the film or meet the filmmaker and these experts here. Thank you so much for being with us tonight.

Martin Doblmeier

And thank you, Marie.