

ABSTRACT

Alien Citizens: Discerning the Now and the Not Yet
in the Thought of Richard John Neuhaus

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Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009) was a prominent author, editor and cleric whose reflections on the relationship between Christian faith and American democracy were highly influential. This paper describes his efforts, over more than four decades as a public intellectual, to correctly prioritize his patriotic attachment to the American experiment and his ultimate loyalty to Christ and the Church. Neuhaus discerned perennial and irresolvable tensions between what he termed the “Now” and the “Not Yet” of the Christian experience, ideas that are roughly analogous to Augustine’s concepts of the City of Man and the City of God. The paper demonstrates how Neuhaus exhorted American Christians to engagement in the political arena, taught how American democracy depends upon acknowledgment of Christ’s lordship, and warned against the desire to build a perfectly Christianized society on earth.

Alien Citizens: Discerning the Now and the Not Yet in the Thought of
Richard John Neuhaus

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
<i>A Lasting Influence and a Propitious Moment</i>	4
<i>Change and Continuity</i>	7
<i>Chapter Structure</i>	9
2. “ON BALANCE AND CONSIDERING THE ALTERNATIVES....” The Provisional Responsibilities of the Now	15
<i>America: “First of the Second Best”</i>	16
<i>The Virtues of Liberal Democracy</i>	21
<i>“Leaven and Light:” The Imperative of Political Engagement</i>	25
<i>Movement Madness</i>	29
<i>Strict Separation</i>	35
<i>Judicial Usurpation</i>	41
3. “JESUS CHRIST IS LORD:” Placing the Now under the Sovereignty of the Not Yet	47
<i>The Collapse of Enlightenment Hegemony</i>	48
<i>Democratic Legitimacy</i>	52

<i>Enduring Foundations</i>	56
<i>The Religious Roots of Religious Tolerance</i>	62
<i>Moral Direction and Providential Purpose</i>	64
<i>Keeping Politics Penultimate</i>	70
<i>From Civil Religion to Public Philosophy</i>	73
<i>The Once-Proud Heritage of Mainline Protestantism</i>	76
<i>Abortion and the Insufficiency of the Naked Public Square</i>	78
4. “AN EXCEEDINGLY AWKWARD AND COMPLICATED BUSINESS:” Preserving the Necessary Tension Between the Now and the Not Yet	83
<i>Monism, Pluralism, and the Integrity of Politics</i>	86
<i>Politicized Religion and the Partisan Church</i>	92
<i>The Priority of the “No”</i>	99
<i>Conclusion: “Alien Citizens”</i>	101
5. “THE STORY OF THE WORLD:” The Relationship of the Catholic Church to the Now and the Not Yet	105
<i>Catholicism and Liberal Democracy</i>	106
<i>The Catholic Moment</i>	109
<i>Repudiating the Thesis</i>	112
<i>Compensating for Ecclesiastical Deficit</i>	114
<i>Rediscovering Augustine</i>	116

6. CONCLUSION	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY	134

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Researching and writing a paper of this magnitude has been, for me, a mostly solitary affair. Day after day I would trundle off to the library, either to pore over stacks of books and articles, or else to stare at a blank, unforgiving computer screen, while mustering up the mental energy to string together yet another bundle of hopefully coherent sentences. All in all, it has been an agonizingly lonely experience. But that does not mean I could have gone through it alone. Many individuals, from friends and family to professors and fellow students here at the J.M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies, deserve credit for their scholarly assistance, moral support and amiable companionship.

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decades ago they collaborated on several intellectual projects. The announcement that he would accept a visiting professorship at the Institute firmed up my resolve to write about Neuhaus during moments when my confidence was wavering. Dr. Moore, who teaches in the Philosophy department at Baylor, is the author of a recent book in which Neuhaus figures prominently. Even if I were able to select members of my thesis committee from among the entire American professoriate, Dr. Berger and Dr. Moore would still be on the short list of ideal candidates. I am fortunate to have attended a university where faculty expertise on Neuhaus is not a scarce commodity.

During my two years at Baylor pursuing a Master's degree, the burden of a heavy workload has been lightened by the pleasures of fellowship with the faculty, students and staff of the Dawson Institute. My sojourn in Waco may have lacked for fried clam joints, winter snowfall, and fellow fans of Boston sports, but it has never lacked for kindness, friendship and laughter. I am grateful to the Institute for taking a chance on someone whose prior career in small-town journalism and marginal GRE scores hardly augured well for graduate school success. And on a lighter note, I am grateful that the people who work and study there patiently put up with my untidy ways around a department library that doubled, at times, as a private office.

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level. That I have persevered through so many reading assignments, class discussions, research papers and exams is a testament to their prayerful support, day by day.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

After a long and illustrious career as a writer and cleric, Richard John Neuhaus succumbed to cancer and died early in 2009. Throughout more than four decades as an author, editor, theologian and all-around intellectual provocateur, this native Canadian enlivened and enriched public discourse in his adopted homeland with sustained meditation on the relationship between religion and the American experiment in liberal democracy. As both a devout Christian and a proudly patriotic American, Neuhaus endeavored unrelentingly to distinguish between what Christians rightly owe to Caesar and what they rightly owe to God. My purpose in this essay is to describe and analyze his lifelong reflections on the proper ordering of these dual allegiances.

Born in Pembroke, Ontario to a large Lutheran family, Neuhaus was a rambunctious and rebellious youth, presenting a constant disciplinary headache for his father—a conservative minister known throughout the community by the informal moniker of “Pope Neuhaus.” Shipped off to a Lutheran high school in Nebraska, Neuhaus continued his mischief-making ways and eventually dropped out. After settling with relatives in rural Cisco, Texas, he spent a few years operating a gas station and grocery store before somehow managing—despite never having earned a high-school diploma—to finagle admission into Concordia University in Austin. From there, he went on to study at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis, securing his ordination to the Lutheran pastorate in 1960.

Subsequently installed at St. John the Evangelist, a predominantly minority and low-income congregation in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, Neuhaus pastored his flock while bursting into the national spotlight as a civil rights associate of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and a founder, alongside Fr. Daniel Berrigan and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of a leading Vietnam War protest organization. Immersed in sundry radical causes during the 1960s, Neuhaus agitated for revolutionary changes to the political foundations and cultural ethos of America: “A revolution of consciousness, no doubt. A cultural revolution, certainly. A non-violent revolution, perhaps. An armed overthrow of the existing order, it may be necessary. Revolution for the hell of it or revolution for a new world, but revolution, Yes.”¹ One of his earliest writings, an essay titled “The Thorough Revolutionary,” used traditional Christian just war criteria to evaluate whether armed rebellion would be justified in the United States.

Neuhaus, however, was never entirely comfortable operating within the revolutionary circle that he referred to habitually as “the Movement.” While sharing many of the Movement’s characteristic discontents about American society, he was disgusted by its descent into puerile antics and hedonistic indulgences that did nothing to address lingering social and political problems—and he concluded that serious reform would always be a “minority vocation.”² The 1970s, then, was time of growing disillusionment with the Movement and the reflexive anti-Americanism it often

¹Richard John Neuhaus, “The Thorough Revolutionary,” in Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 127.

²Richard John Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Radical,” *The Christian Century* (April 26, 1972): 477-478; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Is America Moral? The American Moral Tradition Needs Demonstration Rather than Reaffirmation,” *Commonweal* (July 10, 1970): 342; Richard John Neuhaus, *In Defense of People: Ecology and the Seduction of Radicalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 62.

espoused.³ Although still undoubtedly a political liberal, infuriated by imperial overreach abroad and neglect of the poor and oppressed at home, Neuhaus increasingly shunned revolutionary dogmas, envisioning instead a process of moral and cultural renewal fueled by the synthesis of American civic piety and Judeo-Christian covenantal themes.

In 1981, three years after being relieved of his full-time pastoral duties, Neuhaus launched the Institute on Religion and Democracy and drafted its founding statement, which summoned the Church to a qualified embrace of American democracy and responsible political engagement, at once motivated and circumscribed by its ultimate allegiance to Christ. In his seminal 1984 work, *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus sharpened his attack on legal doctrines and cultural pressures tending to segregate religion and religiously grounded values from the ordering of American public life. As director of the Rockford Institute's Center on Religion and Society during the latter half of the 1980s, Neuhaus edited and wrote articles for a monthly newsletter and a quarterly journal, and presided over a series of scholarly conferences addressing issues in American religion, politics and culture. At the beginning of the next decade, Neuhaus would convert to Catholicism and become a priest, thus inaugurating another major period in his career.

Dismissed from the Rockford Institute in 1989 after a dispute with organizational leaders, Neuhaus and his colleagues regrouped to form the Institute on Religion and Public Life, which published the journal—*First Things*—that he would oversee for nearly two decades. Anchoring each issue of *First Things*, and usually running twenty pages or more, was “The Public Square,” Neuhaus’s personal space for pontifications, paeans,

³For a useful account of Neuhaus’s changes in perspective during the 1970s, see Philip Weiss, “Going to Extremes: Pastor Neuhaus converts from Sixties radical to Eighties Reaganite,” *Harper’s* (November 1983): 10-20.

putdowns and prophecies. Although he tackled just about every subject imaginable within the pages of *First Things*, a handful of contributions stand out in particular: the 1994 founding statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together; the editorial introduction for the 1996 “End of Democracy” symposium, which sparked a blazing controversy by questioning whether conscientious citizens—in the aftermath of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* and other worrying judicial precedents—could still affirm their allegiance to the United States; the 1997 ecumenical statement, “We Hold These Truths”; and finally, a pair of multi-part series on “proposing democracy anew” and on capturing the past and present reality of “Christian America.”

Of course, much more could be said about the various stages of Neuhaus’s career. And admittedly, the boundary lines I have drawn are somewhat arbitrary and imprecise. Nothing I have written should be taken to imply intellectual stasis within any of the periods or to suggest that the disparities between them outweigh the far greater parallels. At appropriate moments within the essay, I shall attempt to highlight both the disparities and the parallels between earlier and later periods. My aim is not to carve up Neuhaus’s career artificially, but simply to posit a rough set of chronological guideposts by which to facilitate an inquiry into his reflections on American democracy.

A Lasting Influence and a Propitious Moment

Neuhaus’s reflections on American politics and religion have exerted profound influence on contemporaries and bid fair to powerfully shape the perspectives of future generations. According to Christopher Wolfe, editor of *The Naked Public Square Reconsidered: Religion and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, a collection of essays commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Neuhaus’s signature volume, he should

be remembered as “one of the most influential commentators on religion, politics and culture in the past three decades.”⁴ Certainly, the publication of such a book—to which an ailing Neuhaus contributed a brief afterword—attests to the enduring nature of the conversations his ideas helped to launch. Similar encomiums have been posted online, alongside links to some of his published articles, footage of lectures and televised interviews, and other material.⁵ The many remembrances gathered there and also batched within a special, April 2009 memorial issue of *First Things* testify to deep reservoirs of admiration and indebtedness among intellectual disciples and compatriots.

For a figure so influential and outspoken, though, comprehensive scholarly examinations of Neuhaus have been strikingly scarce. Although brief reviews of popular books like *The Naked Public Square* or *The Catholic Moment* are abundant, scholarly works encompassing the entirety of his thought are surprisingly few.⁶ To my knowledge, only one doctoral dissertation has focused exclusively on Neuhaus and his writings, and it was composed more than a decade before his death.⁷ Many other pertinent entries in the

⁴*The Naked Public Square Reconsidered: Religion and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Christopher Wolfe (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), xiii.

⁵“Richard John Neuhaus: Online Archive,” <http://richardjneuhaus.blogspot.com> (accessed February 21, 2010).

⁶For insightful reviews of *The Naked Public Square*, see James W. Skillen, *Journal of Law and Religion* 8, no. 1-2 (1990): 563-573; Ted G. Jelen, “Religion and Democratic Citizenship,” *Polity* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 471-481; George Armstrong Kelly, *Society* 23, no. 1 (November-December 1985): 74-76; J.M. Cameron, “Meeting the Lord in the Air,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 11, 1984); Michael J. Sandel, “The State and the Soul,” *The New Republic* (June 10, 1985): 37-41. For insightful reviews of *The Catholic Moment*, see David L. Schindler, “Catholicism, Public Theology, and Postmodernity: On Richard John Neuhaus’s ‘Catholic Moment,’” *Thomist* 53, no. 1 (January 1989): 107-143; William McGurn, “Symbiosis of Church and State,” *The Public Interest* 91 (Spring 1988): 98-102; Peter Augustine Lawler, “Thoughts on America’s ‘Catholic Moment,’” *Political Science Reviewer* 18 (Fall 1998): 197-220; Glenn W. Olsen, “The Catholic Moment?” *Communio* 15 (Winter 1988): 474-487; J. Brian Benestad, “On Richard John Neuhaus’s *The Catholic Moment*,” *Communio* 15 (Winter 1988): 488-495.

⁷Gary Wayne Hardaway, “Restoring Religious Values to Public Education: The Proposal of Richard John Neuhaus,” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1998). Hardaway offers an admiring portrait of Neuhaus’s ideas on religion and American education.

scholarly literature touch upon Neuhaus only obliquely, or treat predominantly his support for free-market economics, an area that falls largely outside the purview of this essay.⁸ Fortunately, considering the relative dearth of secondary sources, Neuhaus himself has written prolifically since the 1960s, authoring more than a dozen books and contributing hundreds of articles to an ideologically diverse set of periodicals. My paper, then, draws principally upon Neuhaus's own prodigious output and uses secondary sources sparingly.

Why has Neuhaus received so unaccountably little attention from scholars? Perhaps they feel that comprehensive examinations must await a greater passage of time, and the degree of critical detachment achieved thereby. Or perhaps, observing how Neuhaus's books and articles often straddled the worlds of popular and scholarly discourse, they deem his writings largely unworthy of their attention. Neuhaus, after all, did describe himself as a "veritable scavenger of other people's ideas, which may on occasion fall together in a moderately original way in the kaleidoscopic confusion of my own mind."⁹ However one explains the phenomenon of relative neglect, I believe the moment is propitious for students and scholars to begin, albeit certainly not complete, an assessment of his legacy in the realm of American religion and politics.¹⁰

⁸Thomas Rourke, *A Conscience as Large as the World: Yves Simon versus the Catholic Neoconservatives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); James Neal Rodgers, "A Critical Analysis of Democratic Capitalism," (PhD diss., Baylor University, 1985). For Neuhaus's views on economics, see Richard John Neuhaus, *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

⁹Richard John Neuhaus, "A Pilgrim Piece of Time and Space," *The Christian Century* (February 19, 1975): 164.

¹⁰During the final stages of completing this paper, I learned that a professor of American Studies at Ryerson University in Toronto is at work on a full-length Neuhaus biography.

Change and Continuity

The popular narrative of Neuhaus's life has been organized, in large part, around the dominant motifs of transition and pilgrimage, especially of the political variety. Journalistic retrospectives immediately following his death accented the ideological distance between Neuhaus's youthful radicalism and the conservatism of his mature years. In these accounts, the early Neuhaus is associated with advocacy for black civil rights, fierce antagonism toward the Vietnam War, and denunciations of hunger and poverty in America and abroad. By contrast, the later Neuhaus is associated with opposition to legalized abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia, resistance to rigid doctrines of absolute church-state separation, support for the "originalist" philosophy of judicial interpretation, and a friendlier stance toward American foreign policy. In typical fashion, the first paragraph of a *New York Times* obituary described Neuhaus as a "theologian who transformed himself from a liberal Lutheran leader of the civil rights and anti-war struggles in the 1960s to a Roman Catholic beacon of the neoconservative movement of today."¹¹ The nearly identical *Washington Post* lede spoke of a "onetime Lutheran pastor who was a voice of conscience in the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s and later became a prominent religious conservative and Catholic convert."¹²

Neuhaus, for his part, disputed this conventional way of narrating his life. In a retrospective piece written for *The Christian Century* in 1990, he recalled, as a young pastor, "trying to situate [himself] in a confusing world" by determining to be, "in

¹¹Laurie Goodstein, "Father Neuhaus, iconic U.S. theologian, is dead at 72," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2009, section B, New York edition.

¹²Alexander F. Remington, "Priest, Conservative Richard Neuhaus," *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2009, Obituaries.

descending order of importance, religiously orthodox, culturally conservative, politically liberal, and economically pragmatic.”¹³ In Neuhaus’s telling, he remained steadfastly loyal to that basic “quadrilateral,” but the definition of “politically liberal” underwent wholesale reinvention, absorbing the disparate obsessions of the Movement while severing ties with “religion and family and patriotism and increased economic opportunity.”¹⁴ In the same article, however, he admitted to having adjusted his political outlook, alluding to several developments that occasioned an odyssey toward conservatism: the advent of “black power” radicalism, which he saw as a betrayal of Martin Luther King’s commitment to non-violent protest; a realization that War on Poverty programs were fostering a culture of dependency and a permanent black underclass; liberal support for abortion rights and the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision; and the refusal of former antiwar allies to condemn human rights abuses inflicted by the victorious North Vietnamese.¹⁵ Still, Neuhaus confessed to being “struck much more by the continuities than by the discontinuities.”¹⁶

While gainsaying neither the obvious rightward movement in Neuhaus’s political proclivities nor the subtleties neglected in this conventional telling, I seek, instead, to demonstrate an underlying continuity within his thought. Briefly put, this essay will attempt to evoke his abiding awareness that human beings inhabit, at once, the City of God and the City of Man, and to trace his ongoing struggle to correctly prioritize these

¹³Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Public Life: The Continuing Conversation,” *The Christian Century* (July 11-18, 1990): 669; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (London: Notre Dame, 1992), 56, 70.

¹⁴*Ibid.*; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 70.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 669-671.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 669.

overlapping and often conflicting loyalties. I will argue that Neuhaus's discernment of perennial and irresolvable tensions between what he termed the "Now" and the "Not Yet" of the Christian experience lies at the heart of his thinking on the American experiment and its religious dimensions. However much his political allegiances may have shifted, and however much the familiar categories of American political allegiance may have shifted underneath him, Neuhaus tried to strike an always precarious balance between the provisional responsibilities of the Now and the eschatological hopes of the Not Yet.

Chapter Structure

Excluding the introduction and conclusion, this essay contains four chapters, each elaborating upon one element of this precarious balance. Chapter Two details Neuhaus's embrace of the patriotic loyalties and temporal responsibilities that comprise the Now of the Christian experience. In this initial chapter, I will discuss his loyalty, albeit a qualified and provisional loyalty, toward the American experiment in democratic governance, and his support—again, qualified and provisional—for political engagement by Christian citizens. While agreeing that America reeks of the corruption and wickedness endemic to the City of Man, he argued forcefully that Christian pilgrims have an obligation, during their period of exile, to pursue whatever justice is achievable. In addition to describing Neuhaus's positive embrace of America and efforts to reform it politically, I will highlight his corresponding protests against certain cultural and legal roadblocks to robust and responsible political engagement.

Chapter Three builds upon Neuhaus's affirmation of provisional responsibilities in the historical arena, exploring how the Now and the Not Yet converge in the context of the American experiment. Neuhaus adduced several ways in which acknowledgement of

the Lordship of Jesus and the truths of Christianity redound to the moral enrichment of American public life. For Neuhaus, religious beliefs and institutions serve the City of Man by legitimizing, sustaining and guiding its affairs, but also by restraining its idolatrous pretensions and holding it accountable to a transcendent moral code derived largely from Judeo-Christian principles. Both dimensions of the dynamic interplay between the Now and Not Yet will be treated in this chapter.

Having described Neuhaus's multifaceted view of the relationship between religion and politics in America, Chapter Four pivots into a discussion of his persistent warning against conflating the provisional responsibilities of the Now and the eschatological hopes of the Not Yet. While promoting religion's influence upon public life, Neuhaus stood against the recurrent temptation, alive on both the Left and the Right, to construct a "premature synthesis" between the City of Man and the City of God. He argued consistently that no earthly socio-political arrangement, however conducive to justice, peace and prosperity, can ever be equated with God's Kingdom. Whereas Chapter Two presents Neuhaus's case against isolating the Now from the Not Yet, Chapter Three presents his case against two additional, closely-related temptations: allowing impatient yearnings for the Not Yet to trample upon a measured devotion to the Now, and allowing an idolatrous devotion to the Now to eclipse or replace transcendent yearnings altogether.

Taken together, these three chapters suffice to sketch the major outlines of my argument. I have included a relatively brief additional chapter, however, to pay closer attention to the impact Neuhaus's conversion to Catholicism had on his reflections about religion and democracy in America. While Catholic thinkers and teachings did not

fundamentally transform his general viewpoint on this subject, I will demonstrate that they did furnish additional layers of philosophical depth and refinement. In the years following his conversion—and even in the years immediately preceding it—Neuhaus increasingly integrated the insights of Catholics as diverse as Augustine of Hippo, John Courtney Murray and Pope John Paul II into his thinking on the Now and the Not Yet.

Certain critics of Neuhaus doubtlessly would object to the proposition that his thought embodies a fruitful tension between the imperatives of the Now and the Not Yet. My conclusion will challenge the arguments of two such critics: Stanley Hauerwas and Damon Linker. Neuhaus and Hauerwas have been friendly sparring partners for decades, disagreeing on many issues of consequence. The Methodist-turned-Episcopalian theologian faults Neuhaus for an inordinate embrace of liberal democracy, arguing that the church must stand estranged from any earthly political or social order, lest it be lulled into the compromised position described by Hauerwas as “doing ethics for Caesar.” Linker, an erstwhile Neuhaus colleague, assails his former boss from a different angle. After resigning his associate editorship at *First Things*, Linker published a book depicting Neuhaus as leading a cabal of “theocons” bent on infiltrating American politics to impose upon the country their favored brand of traditionalist Catholic morality.¹⁷ Whereas Hauerwas accuses Neuhaus of being too assiduous in attending to the provisional responsibilities of the Now, Linker accuses Neuhaus of being too impatient in realizing the eschatological hopes of the Not Yet. I will contend that both critics fail to appreciate the extent to which Neuhaus, in good Augustinian fashion, endeavored to hold these

¹⁷Damon Linker, *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); see also, Damon Linker, “Without a Doubt: A Catholic priest, a pious president, and the Christianizing of America,” *The New Republic* (April 3, 2006): 25-33.

loyalties in tension. Going one step further, I will ponder whether the juxtaposition of such oddly divergent critiques tends to confirm the very tension I wish to highlight.

* * * *

Before proceeding to the first chapter, one further piece of preliminary business should be addressed. The reader may entertain a reasonable expectation that the author of an essay about Richard John Neuhaus disclose his personal views about the subject he would portray, and I am happy to oblige. All too briefly, on what are conventionally classified as “social issues,”—abortion, embryonic stem cell research, same-sex marriage and assisted suicide, for instance—Neuhaus and I differ minimally, if at all. On economics, we share a belief in the virtues of free markets and the dangers of excessive governmental intrusion, but I believe he was too dismissive of alternative, “third-way” philosophies like “distributism,” which prefer family farms and local businesses to corporate behemoths. On church-state relations, we both oppose separationist readings of the First Amendment that would strip the public square of religious arguments, symbols and rituals. Neuhaus, however, was more prepared to endorse arrangements by which government funds are channeled to religious organizations—arrangements I see as constitutionally permissible, but inherently corrupting. And on foreign policy, we both affirm the Christian just war tradition and reject absolute pacifism, but I am probably more skeptical than Neuhaus about the wisdom of America’s current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Having shown my cards, so to speak, on these discrete issues, I would go on to state that my ambition in this essay is to render Neuhaus’s thought objectively, despite a strong measure of personal sympathy, and even admiration. As I have already indicated,

I will defend Neuhaus against critics who charge that he is either too assiduous in attending to the provisional responsibilities of the Now, or too impatient in realizing the eschatological hopes of the Not Yet. But I intend neither to defend nor debunk any of his individual opinions pertaining to American religion, politics or culture.

CHAPTER TWO

“On Balance and Considering the Alternatives...”: The Provisional Responsibilities of the Now

As with so many outspoken public intellectuals, the reputation of Richard John Neuhaus has become inextricably bound up with the political and cultural forces against which he jostled. Admirers and detractors alike associate Neuhaus with his early protests against imperial misadventures in Vietnam, his later animadversions against secularist campaigns to banish religion from public life, and his lifelong crusade to topple the edifice of legalized abortion. They have savored or scoffed at his plentiful polemics panning the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council of Churches and the *New York Times* editorial board, among other high-profile targets.

And yet, if we know Neuhaus by the things he opposed, just as surely do we know him by the things he affirmed. This chapter explores Neuhaus’s consistent embrace of the American experiment in ordered liberty, its democratic system of governance, and robust involvement in the political arena. The first three sections are devoted to Neuhaus’s positive case, in respective order, for America, democracy, and political engagement. Then, switching gears midway through the chapter, I proceed to unfurl the negative case against the cultural, political and legal forces he identified as militating against these essential affirmations. Specifically, this second portion of the chapter contains three sections highlighting Neuhaus’s protest against the radical 1960s Movement, the doctrine of strict church-state separation, and the phenomenon of judicial activism. My goal in weaving together these strands of Neuhaus’s thought is to convey

his appreciation for the integrity—and even, on occasion, the urgency—of the provisional responsibilities that comprise the Now of the Christian experience.

America: “First of the Second Best”

As a youthful radical harboring revolutionary impulses, as a chastened ex-radical disenthralled from Movement-era enthusiasms, and as a mature social conservative, Neuhaus found much to deplore about life in America. His earlier books, articles and speeches featured scathing denunciations of racial inequality, bloodshed in Vietnam, blighted and poverty-ridden urban ghettos, maldistribution of economic resources, and a host of other alleged shortcomings. Later writings railed against rigid doctrines of church-state separation, liberal judicial activism, and permissiveness toward abortion. But unlike many of his radical Movement compatriots, who disparaged their country as irredeemably rotten and a menace to the globe, Neuhaus never abandoned his fondness for America. The rampant injustices he witnessed severely strained, but never snapped, the cords of his patriotic attachment. Reminiscing during the final decade of his life, Neuhaus could declare himself unequivocally “pleased to be an American patriot, and [to] have given a large part of [his] life to explaining the singularity of the American experiment.”¹ But even at the outset of his career, as he flirted with revolutionary politics, Neuhaus would dismiss, as “patent nonsense,” the more overwrought jeremiads of his Movement brethren. Along with much wickedness, he argued, American history has “produced much that is noble, beautiful and worthy of man’s dignity. During much

¹Richard John Neuhaus, “To Be American,” *First Things* (August-September 2004): 95.

of that time, and in spite of slavery, lynchings, and massacres, honorable men could view the American experiment as reason to hope for the world's liberation."²

Neuhaus (as Chapter Four will demonstrate) cautioned steadfastly against the temptation to conflate American democracy, or any other earthly political order, with the Kingdom of God. Measured against the heavenly paradise awaiting the consummation of human history, even peaceful, prosperous and tolerably just societies fall miserably short. But on a planet where such societies share space with nightmarishly despotic regimes, Neuhaus did not hesitate to sharply distinguish between greater and lesser degrees of evil.³ Whatever its historical miscues and contemporary blemishes, Christians need not feel ashamed in esteeming America as clearly superior to the many oppressive alternatives in the world. "In their anticipation of the heavenly city," Neuhaus wrote, "alien citizens know that every earthly order is, at best, second best. But in the past, Christians in America have viewed this order as the first of the second best."⁴ In his 1981 statement marking the founding of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, Neuhaus famously threw down a gauntlet, distancing himself from many mainline Protestant allies

²Richard John Neuhaus, "The Thorough Revolutionary," in Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 194. See also Richard John Neuhaus, "The Moods of a Moralist," in William J. Barnds, *The Foreign Affairs Kaleidoscope: Changing American Perceptions of the Nation and the World* (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1974), 97.

³Richard John Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two," *First Things* (November, 1999): 89.

⁴First Things, "'We Hold These Truths'—An Argument to Be Engaged," *First Things* (November 1997): 72.

with the proposition that “the United States is, on balance and considering the alternatives, a force for good in the world.”⁵

As a leading opponent of the Vietnam War and a disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, Neuhaus understood that America often would arrogantly and recklessly misuse its military and diplomatic might, with baleful consequences for the rest of the world. Such uneasiness, however, did not dissuade him from hoping—even expecting—that the world, and especially its poorest inhabitants, would reap many blessings from the conscientious exercise of American power abroad. Indeed, as an advocate for the generous provision of American resources to alleviate poverty and hunger in Third World nations, Neuhaus worried that the bitter aftertaste of Vietnam would render those with kindred ambitions incapable of envisioning that potential.⁶

For better or worse, Neuhaus recognized that American power and preeminence, even after embarrassing episodes like Vietnam, was not likely to lapse into retreat. Owing to its military supremacy, economic potency, cultural vitality and other salient factors, America would be destined to continue playing an outsized role in world affairs.⁷ “In the jargon of the social sciences,” Neuhaus wrote, “the United States is the world’s ‘lead society.’ The world deserves a much worthier lead society, but for the present and

⁵Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 72; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy: a Statement of the Institute on Religion and Democracy,” <http://www.theird.org/Page.aspx?pid=215> (accessed on February 13, 2010); Richard John Neuhaus, “Religious Freedom in a Time of War,” *First Things* (January 2002): 76.

⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Radical,” *The Christian Century* (April 26, 1972): 479; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Politics of Hunger: Manifesto on the Scandal of Global Poverty,” *Commonweal* (February 8, 1974): 460.

⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” *First Things* (October 1999): 89; Richard John Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” *First Things* (November 2000): 76.

for the foreseeable future, there is no other candidate to challenge the American hegemony.”⁸ He insisted on treating the American colossus as an inexorable fact of modern life, rather than a triumph rightly celebrated or a crisis rightly abhorred. Christians and other concerned citizens might reform and redirect American power in directions consistent with justice, at home and abroad, but they could never hope to neutralize that power completely.⁹ Even if “American society and power are subject to the ailments and sins which have afflicted all social orders from the beginning,” Neuhaus wrote, the fact remains that “the modern world has a great stake in what happens in and to America.”¹⁰

Ultimately, Neuhaus grounded his patriotism not in any inherent goodness possessed by America or its people, but in the inscrutable motions by which Providence contrived to deposit him into the swirls of promise and peril that comprise American history. Put more prosaically, he felt obligated to America because he happened to live there, and not somewhere else. “Of infinite possible times and spaces,” he observed, “America is the time and space in which we are what we are. We as individuals are not abstracted souls but socially constructed persons. There is no self to be saved other than

⁸Richard John Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome: The Church in American Awakening* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 134.

⁹Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Radical,” 479-480; Richard John Neuhaus, *In Defense of People: Ecology and the Seduction of Radicalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 271; Richard John Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 38; Richard John Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy: Thinking and Acting in the Courage of Uncertainty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 88-89.

¹⁰Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 72.

the self of historically conditioned time and space.”¹¹ In his 1975 book *Time Toward Home*, Neuhaus memorably evoked the burdens of historical placement by revealing his expectation of “meeting God as an American,” and of “standing before God as one who identifies with the American social experiment and accepts a measure of responsibility for America’s influence in the world.”¹² In stipulating this expectation, Neuhaus did not intend to elevate his allegiance to the American experiment above his devotion to Christ, his membership in the church, or his yearning for the Kingdom of God. Instead, he meant “simply to say that I look for the vindication of myself in my historical particularity, and of the American experience of which I am part.”¹³

As Neuhaus extrapolated personal obligations from the unique circumstances of his own historical placement, so too did he extrapolate corporate obligations from the unique circumstances of America’s placement in the unfolding drama of world history. In discerning such solemn obligations, he did not mean to traffic heedlessly in the hubristic fancies of divine favoritism, as though America were incapable of wrongdoing or exempt from the sinful propensities indigenous to all earthly societies.¹⁴ He meant only to acknowledge that the American experiment exists not in splendid isolation, but immersed in a turbulent sea of human passions and projects, about which God is not indifferent. “To say that America has a singular responsibility in this historical moment does not mean that America is God’s chosen nation,” but instead that it bears the

¹¹Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 55; see also, Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 37, 56, 162, 219; Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 96; Richard John Neuhaus, “Political Theologies,” *First Things* (December 2004): 77.

¹²Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 56, 64.

¹³*Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 61-62; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 112.

“particular and grave responsibility” incumbent upon any “large and influential part of His creation.”¹⁵

In *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus concocted an illuminating metaphor for his conception of America’s role on the world-historical stage. Conjuring up the hypothetical scenario of a capable adult swimmer, confronted with a drowning ten-year-old girl, who neglects to rouse himself to the rescue effort, he concludes:

We would not hesitate to say that he was responsible for trying to save her. We might even say he was elected to that task. In saying this, we do not imply anything about his superiority or inferiority in comparison with innumerable other swimmers in the world. It is simply that he was at that time and in that place, and others were not. He had the opportunity and the ability, which is to say he had the response-ability. His failure to act as he ought to have acted brings him under judgment.¹⁶

Presumably, the “judgment” invoked by Neuhaus would issue forth not only from onlookers descending upon the drowning scene, the girl’s heartbroken family and friends, and townspeople awakening the next morning to news of the tragedy, but also—and most importantly—from the God Whose eye is on every sparrow and swimming hole. We will have occasion, in the next chapter, to consider how Neuhaus factored God’s sovereignty into his assessments of the American circumstance. For now, it suffices to note his conviction that American entanglement in the messy affairs of world history entails definite obligations, in and beyond America.

The Virtues of Liberal Democracy

Winston Churchill famously and wittily described democracy as the worst system of government devised by man—except, that is, for all the alternatives to democracy, past

¹⁵Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

¹⁶Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 62.

and present. While sympathetic to the attitude of world-weary sobriety captured by Churchill's remark, Neuhaus hoped to cultivate among Christians a more positive appreciation of democracy's virtues. Indeed, "going beyond Churchill and Niebuhr," he pondered whether "biblical people should entertain the possibility that democracy is part of God's intention in world-historical change. This is a tentative suggestion and not a doctrine. It is not revealed but is based upon discernment and prudential judgment."¹⁷ In *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus averred that democracy, and specifically "the dissent essential to democracy," is "mandated by biblical faith," because we live "in a fallen creation in which no person or institution, including the church, can infallibly speak for God."¹⁸

Neuhaus valued liberal democracy for many reasons, chief among them the limited degree of allegiance authentically democratic regimes demand of their citizens.¹⁹ Liberated from burdensome claims upon their loyalty and intrusive supervision of their lives, democratic citizens can "get on with more important business—worshipping God, building families, trying to be decent to others, engaging in good arguments, making a living, and rooting for the Yankees."²⁰ Limited governments leave room for the "mediating institutions" of family, neighborhood, church and local association, enabling

¹⁷Richard John Neuhaus, "Democratic Morality: A Possibility and an Imperative," in *Evangelicals and Foreign Policy: Four Perspectives*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989), 2; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Democratic Prospect," *Worldview* (July-August 1976): 14; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Theocratic Temptation," *The Religion and Society Report* (May 1987): 3; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 170.

¹⁸Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116, 121.

¹⁹Richard John Neuhaus, "Can Atheists be Good Citizens?" *First Things* (August-September 1991): 21; Richard John Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three," *First Things* (December 1999): 70; Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (London: Notre Dame, 1992), 185-186.

²⁰Richard John Neuhaus, "Why We Can Get Along," *First Things* (February 1996): 34; see also, Neuhaus, "Christianity and Democracy."

citizens to pledge themselves freely and energetically to the “several, and sometimes conflicting, sovereignties” that naturally flourish in a climate of carefully circumscribed state authority.²¹

To be sure, Neuhaus did not casually bestow the title of “democracy” upon any regime that deigned to give its people periodic access to the voting booth. Intrinsic to democratic theory and practice, he insisted, is the state’s acknowledgement of and commitment to safeguard a variety of pre-existing, God-given human rights—those rights which the state can neither confer nor abrogate.²² The linchpin of these rights, without which all subordinate rights “are assaulted to their source,” is religious freedom, defined expansively by Neuhaus as encompassing “the freedom to believe, to worship, to teach, to evangelize, to collaborate in works of mercy and to witness to the public good.”²³ In promoting democratic political arrangements, Neuhaus generally took his bearings from the Anglo-American tradition of “limited government; the clear distinction between state and society; rights of conscience, speech, association, and loyalty that are prior to and not dependent upon the state’s acknowledgment of such rights; and the constitutional institutions that protect all of the above.”²⁴

During the 1970s, with his prior revolutionary longings largely dispelled, Neuhaus came increasingly to preach a fundamental linkage between liberal democracy

²¹Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 88; Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy”; Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 213.

²²Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

²³*Ibid.*; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 164-165; Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 2.

²⁴Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 1; see also, Neuhaus, “The Democratic Prospect,” 14.

and the survival of human liberty.²⁵ The most important division in the Christian community, he contended, is not the fault line between liberals and conservatives, but the rupture between those who do and do not believe “that in this moment of history democracy is the necessary product and protector of freedom.”²⁶ Neuhaus accused many churches and religious organizations of becoming “apologists for oppression” when, infatuated with versions of liberation theology, they cheered along Marxist-inspired campaigns for Third World revolution but shamefully overlooked or excused the resulting suppression of human rights and religious freedom.²⁷ Between totalitarian dictatorships and liberal democratic societies, Christians, he believed, should feel no compunctions about vigorously preferring the latter. On certain matters, Christians “must take sides—against anti-Semitism, slavery, racism and abortion, for example. I believe that in this historical moment Christians should be on the side of democratic values.”²⁸

Neuhaus took umbrage when such declarations were misconstrued as conveying blanket approval for the Reagan administration’s policy of fomenting democratic uprisings in the Soviet satellites of Latin America—or any other foreign policy aimed at securing or propagating democracy.²⁹ Among the countries to have embarked upon experiments in democracy, he knew of none that had realized democracy’s full promise

²⁵Richard John Neuhaus, “Reader’s Response: The IRD and Church Dialogue,” *The Christian Century* (April 6, 1983): 319.

²⁶Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy”; Neuhaus, “The Democratic Prospect,” 14-15.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Neuhaus, “The IRD and Church Dialogue,” 320.

²⁹*Ibid.*

or maintained a spotless record of justice.³⁰ Even as he extolled the virtues of democratic governance, Neuhaus looked fervently to the moment when Christ returns to inaugurate the perfect politics of His Kingdom. In the meantime, wanting to “make the best of our unsatisfactory circumstance,” and “knowing that all circumstances are unsatisfactory short of the Kingdom,” he could “discern in liberal democracy and in the American version of it a foreign country where one can be more at home, however provisionally, than in other homelands that are away from home.”³¹

“Leaven and Light:” The Imperative of Political Engagement

In the years immediately following his ordination, nothing mattered more to Richard John Neuhaus than his work as a pastor, ministering to the predominantly black and Hispanic parishioners of Brooklyn’s St. John the Evangelist Church.³² But he was certainly no stranger to political activism, and recalled spending “too much time in board and committee meetings of groups dealing with peace, race, urban affairs and so forth.”³³ Away from the pulpit, he could be found marching for black civil rights, demonstrating against the Vietnam War, and even launching an abortive bid to represent his Brooklyn district in the United States Congress.

Of course, Neuhaus refused to regard his political activities as a private indulgence or idiosyncratic hobby related only tenuously, if at all, to preaching the

³⁰Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 170; Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

³¹Richard John Neuhaus, “The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens,” *First Things* (June-July 1998): 64; see also, Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 6; Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

³²Richard John Neuhaus, “A Pilgrim Piece of Time and Space,” *The Christian Century* (February 19, 1975): 165; Richard John Neuhaus, “Liturgy and the Politics of the Kingdom,” *The Christian Century* (December 20, 1967): 1626.

³³*Ibid.*

Gospel, administering the sacraments, and other, more explicitly church-centered duties. He rebuked the mindset that would dismiss marches, demonstrations and forays into punditry as, at best, superfluous pastimes, and at worst, dangerous distractions from a life of faithful witness. To be sure, he neither expected nor desired most believers to discern a political vocation intense enough to rouse lifetimes of passionate activism or spark ambitions for elected office.³⁴ Neuhaus affirmed throughout his life, however, that Christians—individually, corporately, and in ecumenical partnership—have a responsibility to care for the right ordering of society, which includes, but is not exhausted by, engagement in the arena of politics.³⁵ “We are called,” he wrote, “to be leaven and light” in movements for political, cultural and economic reform.³⁶ Churches, he argued, can equip their members for political combat by “stir[ring] up gifts of reflection, reason, and public concern,” even as they are best advised to refrain from the promiscuous making of official pronouncements, which can deaden members’ political instincts by relieving them from the burdens of reflection and judgment.³⁷

It is important to stress that public involvement, for Neuhaus, reaches far beyond government offices, legislative arenas, and other precincts populated predominantly by professional politicians. He did not subscribe to the constrained view that equates the “public” realm exclusively with the spheres of politics and government, or with

³⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 64-65.

³⁵First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* (May 1994): 16; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 14; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 23.

³⁶Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

³⁷Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 45-49 (quotation from page 49).

institutions and undertakings financed by tax dollars.³⁸ The “mediating structures” paradigm developed by Neuhaus and Peter Berger nicely illustrates this more generous conception of public activity. Berger and Neuhaus sought, in short, to ratify the New Deal consensus in favor of expanding public responsibilities while shifting many of these responsibilities from the central government onto the shoulders of society’s “little platoons.”³⁹ In their original essay outlining the mediating structures idea, Berger and Neuhaus offered both a “minimalist” and a “maximalist” proposition. At minimum, they argued, centralized government authorities should refrain from encroaching on the rightful domains of families, churches and local institutions; but on certain occasions, government should actively utilize the mediating institutions for the realization of public policy objectives.⁴⁰ As an example of the maximalist proposition in motion, one can cite Neuhaus’s support for initiatives under the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations to channel federal welfare dollars toward religiously-affiliated charitable organizations.⁴¹

Neuhaus always retained some admiration for the “sectarian” alternative of withdrawal from politics into close-knit Christian enclaves, as exemplified by the Anabaptist wing of American Protestantism and championed by contemporary thinkers

³⁸Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 117.

³⁹Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, ed. Michael Novak (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1996), 158, 160, 163-164; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 28.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 162-163; Theodore M. Kerr and Richard John Neuhaus, “Mediating Structures: A Paradigm for Democratic Pluralism,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 446 (November 1979): 12.

⁴¹For Neuhaus’s support of the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 welfare reform legislation, see Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (August-September 1998): 83; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 83; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (April 2000): 94; for Neuhaus’s support of George W. Bush’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, see Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (April 2001): 79; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (October 2000): 84.

like Stanley Hauerwas.⁴² But sectarian purity comes at a cost: the “abandonment of our responsibility to care for the world that is the object of God’s creating and preserving love.”⁴³ Neuhaus argued that the pursuit of just societies through political engagement is one way, albeit neither the exclusive way nor the most important way, that Christians obey the biblical command to love one’s neighbor.⁴⁴ Believers cannot hope to usher in the Kingdom of God through their political exertions, but in attending to the “more modestly understood” task of “preventing injustice and maybe even achieving a modicum of justice, political engagement can be a form of discipleship.”⁴⁵

Underpinning Neuhaus’s affirmation of political responsibilities was an emphatic disavowal of the individualistic, de-historicized, and strictly otherworldly model of redemption proffered mainly by Protestant fundamentalists. “All history,” he asserted, “is the history of redemption. There is not a sacred history and then a secular history. There is one, universal history to which God has irrevocably committed himself.”⁴⁶ Against the fundamentalist model of individual souls bottled up and preserved for their Heavenly destination, Neuhaus envisioned a redemptive process more cosmic in scope, encompassing the entirety of creation, which is well underway but radically incomplete,

⁴²Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 10-11, 13; Neuhaus, “The Catholic Moment,” 18.

⁴³Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 14-15.

⁴⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation,” *First Things* (May 1990): 20; Richard John Neuhaus, “Against Christian Politics,” *First Things* (May 1996): 74; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 69; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 174; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 152; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 17, 35; Richard John Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” in *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion*, eds. Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 142, 150, 152; Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 8, 14-15.

⁴⁵Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 15.

⁴⁶Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 64; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “The Idea of Moral Progress,” *First Things* (August-September 1999): 25; Gilbert Meilaender, “Obituary: Richard John Neuhaus (1936-2009),” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2009): 498.

and in which Christians participate, at least obliquely, through their political endeavors.⁴⁷ Such a process definitively ruled out an “engineer emeritus” deity who created the universe and promptly submitted retirement papers, never again to interfere with his handiwork. Neuhaus worshipped, instead, a God actively involved in human history, busily writing a redemption story in which His beloved creatures play starring roles.⁴⁸

Mid-century evangelicalism, mired in “the privatized relativism of Billy Graham and the self-affirming gospel of Norman Vincent Peale,” was a constant source of frustration for Neuhaus, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁹ With their focus on personal morality and individual salvation, the evangelical churches had little interest in building a social and political order consistent with God’s redemptive purposes.⁵⁰ Neuhaus despaired of the “antiworld, antihistorical proclivities of most evangelicals” that “prevent, indeed forbid, their taking with religious seriousness the task of shaping an ethic for this society which, after all, is going up in flames as soon as Jesus gets around to coming back.”⁵¹

Movement Madness

For Neuhaus, the radical Movement of the 1960s, as “personified” in the labors of Martin Luther King, was most importantly about “two things: racial justice and world

⁴⁷Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 152; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 14.

⁴⁸Neuhaus, *Ibid.*, 104; Neuhaus, “The Idea of Moral Progress,” 25.

⁴⁹Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 299-300.

⁵⁰Neuhaus, “Liturgy and the Politics of the Kingdom,” 1623; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 49, 51; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 297; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 162.

⁵¹Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 148.

peace.”⁵² With his unswerving commitment to these objectives, Neuhaus could not help but look contemptuously upon that segment of the Movement more favorably disposed to the countercultural triumvirate of sex, drugs, and rock and roll than to the hard work of achieving a just society.⁵³ Looking back on the Movement’s demise, he came to identify the chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago as the moment when it was “irretrievably captured by the counterculture of pharmaceutical mysticism, polymorphous perversity and the media-seeking antics of such as Abbie Hoffman and his Chicago Seven.”⁵⁴ Appalled at the hedonism exhibited by fellow radicals, Neuhaus counted himself among “those who seek first not the perfect orgasm but the Kingdom of God,” even as the ranks of that nobler contingent were thinning.⁵⁵

While doing battle with that portion of the Movement too submerged in countercultural amusements to care about justice, Neuhaus simultaneously chastised another set of radicals whose all too sincere cravings for justice intermingled with a toxic and counterproductive anti-Americanism. “Many Americans who came to political consciousness in the middle and late sixties cannot be shocked by anything said about the United States,” he wrote. “There is no crime of which the United States is not capable

⁵²Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 57.

⁵³Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Radical,” 481; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 57; Richard John Neuhaus, “Is America Moral? The American Moral Tradition Needs Demonstration Rather than Reaffirmation,” *Commonweal* (July 10, 1970): 342.

⁵⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Public Life: The Continuing Conversation,” *The Christian Century* (July 11-18, 1990): 670.

⁵⁵Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Radical,” 481.

and probably culpable.”⁵⁶ To suggest a more nuanced assessment, as he often tried to do, was to invite “the slings and arrows of outraged radicalism.”⁵⁷

To be certain, Neuhaus did not begrudge the radicals their outrage, as he shared many of their discontents. “At the height of the destruction rained down on Indochina, during the years of assassination, of the killings at Kent State and Jackson State,” he recalled, re-imagining America as a “symbol of hope and human liberation” seemed “ludicrous, if not obscene.”⁵⁸ Valid reasons for anger notwithstanding, Neuhaus would not condone an indiscriminate loathing that mistakenly leaped from the inarguable premise of scandalous episodes in American history to the dubious conclusion that America itself is a scandal.⁵⁹ Regarding the Vietnam War opposition movement, for instance, he distinguished between two major factions: those who saw a stark revelation of America’s essential malevolence, and those who saw a disgraceful betrayal of America’s essential goodness.⁶⁰ Neuhaus sided with the latter interpretation and quarreled with the former.

An anecdote from Neuhaus’s time with St. John the Evangelist nicely illustrates the reflexively anti-American mentality he sought to confront.⁶¹ During the height of his

⁵⁶Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 120; see also, Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 283; Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 93-94.

⁵⁷Neuhaus, “Is America Moral?” 341.

⁵⁸Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 93-94.

⁵⁹Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 70.

⁶⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience,” *Worldview* (October 1967): 12; Richard John Neuhaus, “New Occasions, New Duties for Religion,” *Worldview* (July 1980): 16; Neuhaus, “The Thorough Revolutionary,” 124; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 71-72.

⁶¹Neuhaus recounts this story in Richard John Neuhaus, “Going Home Again: America After Vietnam,” *Worldview* (October 1972): 33; see also, Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 280; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 14. (quotations in this paragraph are taken from *Worldview*)

Vietnam War protest, Neuhaus organized a “Service of Conscience” at which congregants defiantly returned their draft cards. Everything progressed smoothly until he suggested that the service culminate with the singing of a patriotic anthem, “America the Beautiful.” The crowd was “scandalized, much as though someone were to suggest to Bob Hope and Billy Graham at Honor America Day that the crowd should join in singing the ‘Internationale.’” Shocked by the furor his idea had unleashed, Neuhaus denied that singing “America the Beautiful” amounted to sanctifying the existing America. He encouraged skeptics to think of the song as a hymn of aspiration, pointing toward the recovery of glorious ideals lately squandered by American conduct at home and abroad. “That night,” he recalled, “the network news carried the lustiest and most heartfelt rendition of ‘America the Beautiful’ I had ever heard. Unfortunately, that alliance of radical hope and American piety was and is all too rare among those who press for change.”

Whatever the psychic gratifications of fulminating against the American experiment, Neuhaus conceded that an unremittingly adversarial posture would alienate most of the American public and derail prospects for serious reform. Americans will not be inclined to take political advice, he believed, from radicals who give every appearance of being bent on America’s destruction.⁶² As a more fruitful alternative, Neuhaus counseled the emulation of figures like Martin Luther King and Michael Harrington, whose activism sprang from their love of America and its founding principles—a love so

⁶²Neuhaus, “Is America Moral?” 342; Neuhaus, “The Politics of Hunger,” 462; Neuhaus, “Going Home Again,” 35; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 279, 284-285; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 19; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 142; Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 95, 97; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 69-70; Richard John Neuhaus, “Christian Monisms Against the Gospel,” *The Religion and Society Report* (November 1987): 1.

profound they could not abide the depths to which the country had sunk.⁶³ Would-be prophets “will get a better hearing from America” when they begin to “shed tears for Amierca,” Neuhaus wrote, and “when their tears are occasioned not only by despair over the country’s ineradicable wickedness and but by their deep and declared conviction that Americans are capable of being a better people.”⁶⁴

Neuhaus observed how, as a consequence of the Movement’s hostility toward America, patriotic language and symbolism had “gravitated,” by default, toward the “forces of reaction” most likely to suffocate political programs of hope and redemption.⁶⁵ “They did not have to take [the American flag] by force,” he noted ruefully, “but simply picked it up where too many of us left it lying.”⁶⁶ If, in the past, patriotic themes had been exploited to glorify the status quo or airbrush grievous injustices from the national memory, then the political Left—rather than anathematizing patriotism or inciting revolution—should reclaim and rehabilitate these themes by weaving them into a superior vision for the future.⁶⁷ “Critics,” he observed, “can rail against the abuse of ‘the

⁶³Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 183; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Pilgrimage of Michael Harrington,” *Worldview* (May 1974): 47; Neuhaus, “Is America Moral?” 342; Richard John Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” *First Things* (December 2000): 71.

⁶⁴Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 284-285.

⁶⁵Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 93-94; see also, Neuhaus, “Is America Moral?” 342; Neuhaus, “Going Home Again,” 33; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 273; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 39.

⁶⁶Neuhaus, “Is America Moral?” 342.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 101, 275; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 15; Neuhaus, “The Moods of a Moralist,” 99; Richard John Neuhaus, “The War, the Churches, and Civil Religion,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (January 1970): 140.

mystic chords of memory,' but they gain nothing unless they play these chords to better ends."⁶⁸

In addition to its hedonistic indulgences and anti-American animosities, Neuhaus faulted the Movement for a too-eager embrace of romantic environmentalism. One of his earliest books, *In Defense of People*, argued that "the ecology movement in the 1970s is in some respects a needed corrective. In other ways, it is both frivolous and harmless. In more important respects, it is a diversion from, and distortion of, the political questions that will reshape life on Spaceship Earth during the latter part of the century."⁶⁹ In the book, Neuhaus made it clear that he did not discount the ravages of pollution, resource depletion and other environmentally unsustainable practices.⁷⁰ He also made clear, however, that these were political problems best addressed through practical measures aimed at promoting responsible stewardship.⁷¹ This pragmatic stance set Neuhaus at odds with the more extreme partisans of romantic environmentalism, who dreamt instead of a pristine past unspoiled by the intrusion of human civilization.⁷² Enraptured by their vision of an Edenic paradise, the romantic environmentalists contrived to escape or transcend politics, not to engage in politics for the modest betterment of human society and the natural world.⁷³ Neuhaus exhorted extreme environmentalists to redirect their focus to more pressing matters like poverty, hunger, urban decay, nuclear disarmament,

⁶⁸Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 196.

⁶⁹Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 9.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 199; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 92.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 146; 133-134.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 159-161.

prison reform and care for the elderly—the “real and emphatically political tasks confronting the human community.”⁷⁴

Neuhaus also took exception to what he perceived as the environmentalist movement’s preoccupation with physical survival, as though the mere preservation of life on earth could justify morally perverse and economically ruinous measures virtually certain to disproportionately devastate poor communities.⁷⁵ Taken in isolation, he thought, the imperative of survival tends to eclipse the imperative of surviving in a morally praiseworthy way. “The theme of survival,” wrote Neuhaus, “makes impossible the search for the moral purpose of American life. When survival is king, all questions of right and wrong are irrelevant and diversionary.”⁷⁶ Neuhaus linked the survival-at-all-costs mentality to environmentalist enthusiasm for programs of coercive population control that, to his mind, betrayed a troubling propensity toward eliminating the poor over relieving their suffering.⁷⁷ Much better, he argued, “to devote our primary energies to multiplying and redistributing the bread” rather than “reducing the number of guests at the table.”⁷⁸

Strict Separation

Commentators on the proper relationship between church and state in American law and society typically fall, roughly speaking, into one of two categories: the “separationists,” who seek the maximum plausible distance between religion and political

⁷⁴Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 141, 70-71, 116, 127.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 107-110, 113; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 93.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 81, 126, 128, 137, 187, 265.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 209, 269.

affairs; and the “accommodationists,” who either tolerate or advocate for a tighter connection in areas like government funding, symbolic recognition and public policy formation. Neuhaus, of course, sided consistently and unabashedly with the accommodationist camp—and did so well before *The Naked Public Square* left its imprint on the public consciousness.⁷⁹ Indeed, Neuhaus endorsed Jimmy Carter’s 1976 presidential campaign in large part because he hoped a Carter victory would conduce to the weakening of barriers between religious conviction and political deliberation.⁸⁰ And while he never showed much enthusiasm for returning daily prayer and Bible reading to public schools, Neuhaus did regard the Supreme Court decisions that expelled them as important symbolic steps toward the secularization of the public square.⁸¹

St. John the Evangelist served as a crucial incubator for Neuhaus’s thinking on controversial questions of church-state relations. As a pastor assigned to poverty-ridden neighborhoods, he surmised that many members of his flock donated to the church using portions of their welfare allotments. It occurred to him that the ACLU and likeminded organizations could, if so motivated, attack this arrangement as an impermissible vehicle of taxpayer assistance to religion. For Neuhaus, such fastidiousness with regard to the Establishment Clause threatened to cripple those churches ministering to poor areas. It would result, he remarked, in a bizarre situation “where welfare recipients would be

⁷⁹Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 10, 132, 173, 177-178; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 50, 77-78, 152-154; 180-181.

⁸⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “Why I am for Carter: Sensitivity Combined with Vision and Enormous Energies,” *Commonweal* (October 22, 1976): 684.

⁸¹Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 132; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (June-July 1994): 81; First Things, “The Debate About a School Prayer Amendment is not About School Prayer,” *First Things* (February 1995): 7; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Cultural Unavailability of Hellfire and Brimstone,” *The Religions and Society Report* (February 1987): 1; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 137; Richard John Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” *Commentary* (May 1985): 145.

permitted to spend government funds on liquor, lottery tickets, and pornography—on anything, in short, that is not constitutionally ‘tainted’ by a connection with religion.”⁸²

Neuhaus defended the principle of church-state separation construed, more narrowly, as differentiation between the institutional forms and functions of religious and governmental entities.⁸³ He protested only when secularists went beyond advocating institutional separation to press for the wholesale separation of religion from American public life.⁸⁴ At the heart of this protest was what Neuhaus dubbed the “Pfefferian Inversion,” a separationist reading of the First Amendment religion clauses adopted by acolytes of Leo Pfeffer, the renowned American Jewish Congress attorney who successfully argued several landmark church-state cases before the Supreme Court. Historically, Neuhaus argued, religion and religiously-based moral claims have enjoyed a privileged status in the public square. Under the Pfefferian Inversion, however, religion is penalized and handicapped, as free exercise rights are ruthlessly subordinated under a muscular reading of the Establishment Clause.⁸⁵ “As a consequence of such distortions,” Neuhaus wrote, “it is increasingly the case that wherever government goes religion must

⁸²Story and quotations from Richard John Neuhaus, “The Naked Public Square: A Metaphor Reconsidered,” *First Things* (May 1992): 80.

⁸³Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 154; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 33; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 130; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 72.

⁸⁴First Things, “When Church-State Conflicts Aren’t,” *First Things* (March 1991): 7; First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” 19; First Things, “We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship,” *First Things* (October 1997): 53; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 71; Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 133.

⁸⁵Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 148; Richard John Neuhaus, “Just Grievance, Bad Remedy,” *The Religion and Society Report* (September 1985): 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion—From Privilege to Penalty,” *The Religion and Society Report* (March 1988): 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” *This World* (Winter 1989): 74; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 45; Richard John Neuhaus, “Free Exercise Less Free,” *First Things* (May 1990): 71.

retreat, and government increasingly goes almost everywhere.”⁸⁶ And if certain vestigial manifestations of religion have not yet been scrubbed from, for instance, American currency, it is only because the Pfefferians, confident they have secured the essential triumphs, can afford to be magnanimous toward vanquished foes.⁸⁷

For a paradigmatic distillation of the Pfefferian Inversion, Neuhaus turned often to a remark published by the Harvard constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe, who posited a “zone which the free exercise clause carves out of the establishment clause for permissible accommodation of religious interests.”⁸⁸ In actuality, Neuhaus argued, the First Amendment does not contain two clauses, with conflicting aims, which must be “balanced,” pitted against each other, or—as Professor Tribe would have it—“carved out” of one another. By contrast, he spoke habitually of a single, internally harmonious Religion Clause invested with the sole purpose of safeguarding religious liberty.⁸⁹ On this understanding, an entirely subservient non-establishment provision exists primarily to buttress free exercise rights, because an established faith naturally would imperil the

⁸⁶First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” 19; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” *First Things* (February 1992): 15; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Pfefferian Inversion,” *National Review* (May 13, 1988): 44; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 78.

⁸⁷Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 25; Richard John Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” *The Religion and Society Report* (June 1987): 2; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 76.

⁸⁸The Tribe remark is quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, “Extremism in Defense of ‘No Establishment,’” *The Religion and Society Report* (January 1988): 3; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 74; Neuhaus, “The Pfefferian Inversion,” 44; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 15.

⁸⁹Neuhaus, “The Pfefferian Inversion,” 44; Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 1; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 72; Neuhaus, “Free Exercise Less Free,” 71; Richard John Neuhaus, “Polygamy, Peyote, and the Public Peace,” *First Things* (October 1990): 64; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Most New Thing in the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*,” *First Things* (August-September 1998): 75.

religious freedom of dissenters.⁹⁰ As Neuhaus explained, “the free exercise of religion requires the non-establishment of religion. Non-establishment is not a good in itself. The positive good is free exercise, to which non-establishment is instrumental.”⁹¹

Neuhaus regarded the unified Religion Clause as a restraint imposed entirely upon the government, and not religion.⁹² To his mind, the threat of religion conquering the public square paled in comparison to the danger of an overweening state trampling upon religion’s prerogatives.⁹³ Even if a church foolishly petitioned the government for its own establishment, Neuhaus’s ideal First Amendment would protect the church’s ill-advised gambit but forbid the government from giving its acquiescence.⁹⁴ Similarly, he thought that churches and pastors should be free to endorse candidates for political office without jeopardizing their tax exempt status, even though such overt politicization would jeopardize the integrity of the church’s witness to the Gospel.⁹⁵ In general, Neuhaus bridled at aggressive Internal Revenue Service meddling in the affairs of religious organizations. He spoke out often against the notion that tax exemption is tantamount to

⁹⁰Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116; Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 3; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 73-74; Neuhaus, “The Pfefferian Inversion,” 44; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 15; Richard John Neuhaus, “The ‘Clauses’ in Collision,” *First Things* (June-July 1992): 68; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Ruling ‘We’ of the American Jewish Congress,” *First Things* (February 1993): 63; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 69; Neuhaus, “The Most New Thing in the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*,” 75; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 90; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (December 2006): 78; Richard John Neuhaus, “Freedom For Religion,” *New York Sun* (February 27, 2008).

⁹¹Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 1.

⁹²Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 76; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116.

⁹³Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116; Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 2; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 76; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 17.

⁹⁴Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 3; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 76-77; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 72.

⁹⁵Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (November 2006): 74-75; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (December 2008): 70.

a government subsidy, and that churches, as beneficiaries of government largesse, can thus be subjected to government regulation.⁹⁶ The brooding IRS presence, he believed, was intimidating churches into self-censorship and inducing charities to mute their religious characteristics.⁹⁷ “It is a shame,” he argued, that religious organizations, fearful of forfeiting their tax-exempt status, have taken the path of least resistance; but “it is an outrage that they were required to do so.”⁹⁸

Chapter Four will consider Neuhaus’s plea for Christians entering the public square to “translate” explicitly religious teachings into “public” arguments that a pluralistic citizenry can understand and engage. This was a far cry, however, from asserting that the failure to make this “translation” automatically triggers a church-state violation. Neuhaus rejected as antithetical to democracy the position that the Establishment Clause disqualifies those political opinions of religious provenance. “In a republic of free citizens,” he wrote, “every opinion, every prejudice, every aspiration, every moral discernment has access to the public square in which we deliberate the ordering of our life together.”⁹⁹ To be sure, appeals to Scripture or binding church teaching will likely fail to persuade those who acknowledge different sources of

⁹⁶Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 173; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 160; Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 45; Richard John Neuhaus, “Tax Exemption and the Myxomycetous Swamp,” *National Review* (March 18, 1998): 46.

⁹⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “An Uncommon Front,” *The Religion and Society Report* (April 1984): 4; Neuhaus, “Just Grievance, Bad Remedy,” 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religious Freedom, if you Dare,” *The Religion and Society Report*, (January 1987): 7; Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 45; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion vs. Religious Freedom,” *First Things* (December 1990): 62; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (January 1993): 66; Richard John Neuhaus, “Intimidation by (Nonexistent) Law,” *First Things* (October 1993): 68; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (December 1996): 63.

⁹⁸Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 79; see also, Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 3.

⁹⁹Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 13.

authority, or none at all. But “in this representative democracy, the state is forbidden to determine which convictions may be proposed for public deliberation. Through a constitutionally ordered process, the people will deliberate and the people will decide.”¹⁰⁰ Opinions are no more penalized for being religious “than for being atheistic, or psychoanalytic, or Marxist, or just plain dumb.”¹⁰¹

Certainly, much more could be said about Neuhaus’s church-state opinions, with regard to both broad theoretical perspectives and specific First Amendment controversies, but a more thorough discussion could detain us for several chapters. The crucial point to underscore at this juncture is that Neuhaus objected to strict separationism because it hindered Christians from energetic participation in American public life. He aimed to “liberate the Christian claims from their religious ghettos so that they can enter into the world of universal reason and make their impact upon our public understanding of history’s purpose.”¹⁰²

Judicial Usurpation

In modern American history, judges, and especially members of the Supreme Court, are the principal conduits by which separationist principles have been entrenched in the law. Fittingly, then, Neuhaus’s writing began, eventually, to feature frequent calls for reining in the judiciary. Specifically, he came to identify strongly with the doctrine of “originalism” espoused and articulated by figures like Robert Bork and Justice Antonin

¹⁰⁰Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 13; see also, First Things, “When Church-State Conflicts Aren’t,” 7-8.

¹⁰¹Ibid.; see also, First Things, “When Church State Conflicts Aren’t,” 8; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (October 2008): 64; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 46.

¹⁰²Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 50.

Scalia, which holds that judicial interpretation properly confines itself to ascertaining and enforcing the original meaning of Constitutional and statutory provisions under review.¹⁰³ According to this philosophy, judges overstep their bounds when they interject personal moral views into the process of interpretation, or when they contemplate how a specific provision—or society at large—has evolved since the time of passage. Neuhaus rebuked activist judges for undertaking to resolve questions rightly belonging to the legislative branch, and thus depriving the American citizens and lawmakers of opportunities for reflection, deliberation and decision. “The courts,” he declared, “have increasingly arrogated to themselves the big decisions about the ordering of our life together, leaving to the people and their elected representatives the relatively trivial questions of raising or lowering the gasoline tax and balancing the budget.”¹⁰⁴

As with his critique of rigid church-state separation, one can detect faint flickers of an onslaught to come in Neuhaus’s earliest mentions of the judiciary. *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, released in 1977, contained a passage which, read retrospectively, clearly foreshadows the trajectory his thinking would take: “There is a danger,” he wrote at the time, “of judicial decisions increasingly preempting the role of the people in determining public policy and thus further weakening the democratic character of our political process.”¹⁰⁵ Such forebodings erupted nearly two decades later in perhaps the most notorious episode of Neuhaus’s career: the End of Democracy symposium on “The Judicial Usurpation of Politics,” published in the November 1996 issue of *First Things*.

¹⁰³Richard John Neuhaus, “What Can be Asked of a Judge?” *First Things* (October 1991): 8; *First Things*, “We Hold These Truths,” 52; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Constitution vs. the Rule of Judges,” *First Things* (August-September 1994): 73.

¹⁰⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “Ralph Reed’s Real Agenda,” *First Things* (October 1996): 45.

¹⁰⁵Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 71; see also, Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 154-155.

In his editorial introduction to the symposium, Neuhaus infamously pondered “whether we have reached or are reaching the point where conscientious citizens can no longer give moral assent to the existing regime,” and in closing, he added: “America is not and, please God, will never become Nazi Germany, but it is only blind hubris that denies it can happen here and, in peculiarly American ways, may be happening here.”¹⁰⁶

The symposium, and especially the apocalyptic overtones of Neuhaus’s editorial introduction, ignited a ferocious blaze of controversy. Three members of the *First Things* editorial board promptly tendered their resignations, *Commentary* magazine counterattacked by commissioning a rival symposium, and pundits from across the political spectrum debated how Neuhaus’s provocative essay would impact the wider conservative movement.¹⁰⁷ To track every shockwave that rippled forth from the End Of Democracy symposium would carry us far afield. For our purposes, what needs to be stressed is the centrality of “judicial usurpation” to Neuhaus’s reservations about the legitimacy of the American regime. The symposium came on the heels of high-profile cases involving abortion (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*), gay rights (*Romer v. Evans*) and assisted suicide (*Compassion in Dying v. Washington*), among other worrisome judicial precedents. In such cases, Neuhaus condemned elite liberal judges for imposing their own moral preferences, and thus forestalling public deliberation on issues about which America’s sundry moral and religious traditions have much to say. “With respect to the American people,” he wrote, “the judiciary has in effect declared that the most

¹⁰⁶First Things, “The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics,” *First Things* (November 1996): 18, 19.

¹⁰⁷The original symposium and writings issued in reaction to it have been published as “The End of Democracy? The Celebrated First Things Debate, with Arguments Pro and Con,” ed. Mitchell S. Muncy (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1997).

important questions about how we ought to order our life together are outside [their] purview.”¹⁰⁸

As the fallout from the End of Democracy controversy started to subside, Neuhaus arrived at an important realization: Robust political engagement was at once the chief casualty of judicial usurpation and the most promising antidote. If judges were guilty of trespassing on legislative territory, they were only going where legislators feared to tread. It was in this sense that Neuhaus posited a “symbiotic connection between legislative timidity and judicial arrogance,” and announced that “the other side of judicial usurpation is legislative dereliction.”¹⁰⁹ Mindful of the electoral hazards of taking controversial stands, lawmakers too often “prefer to leave difficult and convoluted questions to the courts. This must be called what it is, an abdication of their duty in our representative form of democratic government.”¹¹⁰

* * * *

In this chapter, we have encountered several ways in which Neuhaus embraced the provisional responsibilities of the Now, while simultaneously reproaching those persons, philosophies and legal roadblocks he deemed to interfere with that embrace. And yet, as portions of the chapter have intimated, Neuhaus’s vision of Christian involvement in American public life was not confined to the assumption of provisional responsibilities. Neuhaus desired that Christians take up these responsibilities expressly as Christians, and not merely as secular citizens who happen, by coincidence, to worship

¹⁰⁸First Things, “The End of Democracy?” 19.

¹⁰⁹ Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 71; First Things, “We Hold These Truths,” 53.

¹¹⁰First Things, “We Hold These Truths,” 53.

God in their spare moments. Affirming the Now in isolation from the Not Yet was not an acceptable option. In the following chapter, I shall investigate why Neuhaus thought it essential that pilgrims marooned in the City of Man continue to confess with their lips and believe in their hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord.

CHAPTER THREE

“Jesus Christ is Lord”: Placing the Now under the Sovereignty of the Not Yet

“Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the first and final assertion Christians make about all of reality, including politics. Believers now assert by faith what one day will be manifest to the sight of all: every earthly sovereignty is subordinate to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.”¹ In such categorical language did Neuhaus habitually disclaim the notion that the provisional responsibilities of the Now can be isolated from the eschatological hopes of the Not Yet. Throughout his life, he decried the secularist tendency to declare the American City of Man’s independence from the City of God, ignoring its religious foundations and exempting it from accountability to transcendent moral norms.

This chapter discusses Neuhaus’s reflections on how the Now and the Not Yet converge in the context of the American experiment. After briefly examining his case for the inevitability of a public role for religion, I devote the bulk of these pages to highlighting five specific contributions for which Neuhaus gave religion credit: ensuring the democratic legitimacy of American law, providing durable foundations for the American constitutional order, inspiring a religiously tolerant atmosphere, supplying moral guidance to political discourse, and—perhaps most importantly—keeping the government’s ambitions in check by warning of the divine judgment to come. The chapter closes with sections treating three related features of Neuhaus’s thought: first, his

¹Richard John Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy: a Statement of the Institute on Religion and Democracy,” <http://www.theird.org/Page.aspx?pid=215> (accessed on February 13, 2010); see also, First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millenium,” *First Things* (May 1994): 16.

transition from promoting a civil religion to articulating a public philosophy; second, his elegy for the once-proud culture-forming heritage of Mainline Protestantism; and finally, his use of abortion to illustrate the insufficiency of the naked public square. Having outlined Neuhaus's affirmation of responsibilities in the arena of American democracy, my purpose in this chapter is to ask, and answer, the following question: Within this arena, what difference did it make, for Neuhaus, that Jesus Christ is Lord, and the Christian religion true?

The Collapse of Enlightenment Hegemony

Neuhaus first rose to intellectual prominence during an era when secularization theory held sway in academia and in other elite precincts of American society. Secularization theory, as propounded by theorists like Peter Berger, predicted that modernity's advance would precipitate a decline in religious belief, as scientific progress gradually eroded the cultural prestige and explanatory authority once enjoyed by the doctrines and institutions of religion. Neuhaus repudiated secularization theory for the same reason Berger eventually recanted his earlier projections: a dearth of empirical evidence showing reduced rates of religious belief and affiliation.² "Suffice it that by the usual indices—professed belief, church attendance, prayer, and other activities and commitments identified as religious—the American people are more, not less, religious

²Richard John Neuhaus, "The Democratic Prospect," *Worldview* (July-August 1976): 20; Richard John Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy: Thinking and Acting in the Courage of Uncertainty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 25; Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 139; Richard John Neuhaus, "Unsecular America," *The Religion and Society Report*, (June 1984): 2; Richard John Neuhaus, "Secularization as Religious Belief," *The Religion and Society Report* (June 1989): 1; This World, "What We Intend To Do," *This World* (Spring 1987): 3-4; Richard John Neuhaus, "What the Fundamentalists Want," *Commentary* (May 1985): 42; First Things, "Putting First Things First," *First Things* (Marcy 1990): 9; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Coming Age of Religion," *First Things* (June-July 1994): 67; Richard John Neuhaus, "Secularization in Theory and Fact," *First Things* (June-July 2000): 87.

than they were, say, fifty years ago.”³ As an especially revealing example of this trend, Neuhaus cited the scholarship of Theodore Caplow, a University of Virginia sociologist who revisited Muncie, Indiana six decades after Robert and Helen Lynd conducted their pioneering studies of “Middletown.” Where the earlier authors had discovered evidence of secularization among Middletown residents, Caplow’s research found signs of an unfolding religious revival.⁴

The presumption that modernity would beget a withering away of religious belief was one of two “secular dogmas” Neuhaus saw collapsing under the weight of contrary evidence. According to the second erroneous dogma, if religious faith did not vanish as predicted, it would be sequestered in the private sphere, lest its divisive energies embroil the world in warfare or plunge society back into the Middle Ages.⁵ For Neuhaus, the failure of these secular prophecies to materialize opened up an enchanting possibility: the awakening of publicly relevant religion from an atypical period of hibernation.⁶ In the 1970s, he harbored an “intuition” that “we are now witnessing the end of the cultural (and political) hegemony of the secular Enlightenment. After two hundred or more years, religion and reason, moral tradition and public discourse are beginning to interact in new

³Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 259.

⁴Neuhaus, “Unsecular America,” 2; Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 43.

⁵Richard John Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” *Religious Education* 77, no. 3 (1982): 309; Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 43.

⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “A Pilgrim Piece of Time and Space,” *The Christian Century* (February 19, 1975): 161; Richard John Neuhaus, *In Defense of People: Ecology and the Seduction of Radicalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), 292-293; Richard John Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 208.

and, I think, promising ways.”⁷ Liberated from the Enlightenment stranglehold, “we will no longer have to check our dreams at the door of public discourse, the diversity of moral traditions that shape our history will be able to surface more naturally, and through their renewed potency the pluralism of American life will be enhanced.”⁸

Intuition became reality with the subsequent emergence of the Religious Right as a formidable factor in American politics and culture. Neuhaus had many misgivings about the renascent fundamentalist movement: its unpolished manner, its frequent recourse to Biblical prophecy, and its hyperbolic penchant for announcing sweeping secular humanist conspiracies.⁹ But despite these discomforts, he welcomed fundamentalism’s invitation to rethink popular secular assumptions about the inevitable privatization or disappearance of religion in modern life.¹⁰ As Neuhaus prodded the fundamentalist project toward more constructive engagement in the public square, he simultaneously asked opponents to dispense with dismissive mockery and alarmist forecasts of an impending theocratic takeover.¹¹

The temptation, among fundamentalism’s cultured despisers, was to imagine that “something has gone radically wrong with the script of modernity,” and that “this religious Right, indeed the more general phenomenon of religion bursting out all over, is

⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “Why I am for Carter: Sensitivity Combined with Vision and Enormous Energies,” *Commonweal* (October 22, 1976): 685; see also, Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 309.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 15, 19; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Cultural Unavailability of Hellfire and Brimstone,” *The Religion and Society Report* (February 1987): 2.

¹⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” *Concordia Journal* (July 1991): 287; Richard John Neuhaus, “Anti-Semitism and our Common Future,” *First Things* (June-July 1995): 62.

¹¹Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 41; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 314; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 47.

atavistic, a temporary malfunction in the ordering of time.”¹² In fact, Neuhaus argued, it is not the fundamentalist insistence on blending religion and politics, but the secularist insistence on driving them apart, that represents a historical aberration.¹³ In episodes as diverse as the American Revolution, the battle to abolish slavery, the push for Prohibition and the campaign to eliminate institutionalized anti-black racism, religious passions and convictions have played an instrumental role.¹⁴ Against this historical backdrop, Neuhaus could perceive an unlikely symmetry between figures as ostensibly dissimilar as Jerry Falwell and Martin Luther King. Despite palpable differences in theological and political outlook, both men brought religious themes to bear on issues of public consequence.¹⁵

The diligent efforts of strict secularists notwithstanding, Neuhaus did not believe that American public life could be immunized against religion’s influence. By its very nature, he thought, religion is inherently public and “incorrigibly interventionist,” in that it advances universally applicable moral judgments and objective truth claims about the whole of reality.¹⁶ On this understanding, religion cannot be reduced to a private, personal and wholly voluntary relationship between an individual and whatever deity he or she chooses to worship—a relationship irrelevant to questions of public policy and

¹²Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 42.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 10, 97.

¹⁵Ibid., 78-79.

¹⁶Ibid., 144; see also, Neuhaus, “The Democratic Prospect,” 20; Richard John Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” in *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion*, eds. Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 162; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 14, 86; Richard John Neuhaus, “Establishment is not the Issue,” *The Religion and Society Report* (June 1987): 3; Richard John Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion” *This World* (Winter 1989): 77; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (May 2001): 78.

moral purpose.¹⁷ Quite the contrary: “The gospel,” Neuhaus claimed, “is a *public* statement, based upon *public* evidence, subject to *public* debate, and asserting a *public* reality—namely, the future of the whole world of God’s creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity.”¹⁸ Taking for granted that politics and religion are “constantly coupling and getting quite mixed up with one another,” Neuhaus sought to make their inevitable interaction redound to the benefit of the American experiment in liberal democracy—in ways the next several sections shall explore.¹⁹

Democratic Legitimacy

In the late 1960s, when Neuhaus was actively contemplating revolution against the United States, he denounced the position—popular in radical circles—that a revolutionary vanguard cannot be constrained by any moral strictures distinct from the goals and imperatives of the revolution itself. According to this mindset, if overthrowing the government required murder, torture and other instances of “calculated terrorism,” as surely it would, then the perpetrators of these acts could not be condemned—in light of conventional moral understandings, or explicitly religious principles—as murderers, torturers and terrorists.²⁰ Neuhaus, while refusing to rule out morally-justified recourse to physical and psychological aggression, argued against the existence of “self-authenticating revolutionary morality and revolutionary reasoning,” as though there were

¹⁷Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 20, 103; see also, Neuhaus, “Unsecular America,” 1; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Meanings of Secular,” *The Religion and Society Report*, (December 1984): 1-2.

¹⁸Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 12 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, ix; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 9.

²⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “The Thorough Revolutionary,” in Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 213-220.

“no points of reference by which the revolution can be evaluated.”²¹ While no revolutionary can conform to the laws and moral codes of the regime he is sworn to destroy, he still holds himself accountable to something transcending the revolution, “whether we express it in terms of being accountable to God or to our own consciences or to the highest values known to us, or all these together.”²²

In all likelihood, the mature Neuhaus would have emphasized accountability to God and downplayed—perhaps renounced altogether—accountability to one’s own conscience or highest values. Undoubtedly, though, he retained an indissoluble conviction that authority—be it revolutionary authority or democratic authority—is not self-justifying.²³ We insist, in other words, that laws obtain legitimacy only by embodying, or aspiring to embody, the prevailing moral principles of the society they would govern—principles that necessarily transcend existing law and its human architects.²⁴ Unmoored from common moral understandings, “the law is merely a bundle of rules backed up by force.”²⁵ Neuhaus was confident that most people grasp this truth intuitively: In common parlance, “people distinguish between particular laws and that which they call ‘the law;’” and “in the everyday workings of society,” a “person who is a

²¹Neuhaus, “The Thorough Revolutionary,” 147-148.

²²Ibid., 150-151.

²³Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 295; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 45; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 254; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” *This World* (Spring-Summer 1985): 46; Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” *First Things* (November 1999): 90.

²⁴Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 180; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 249-250, 254, 256; Richard John Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss: Law, Rights, and Transcendent Good,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 1 (1987): 53; Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (London: Notre Dame, 1992), 157, 176.

²⁵Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 249-250.

law unto himself is an outlaw.”²⁶ When the authority of law is self-justifying, and “there is no appeal beyond king or court,” then “the law is finally capricious. And capricious is the one thing that, by definition, law is not supposed to be. Capriciousness has always been the mark of tyranny.”²⁷ Legitimate law, then, must be grounded in the moral values of the society rather than the whims of its rulers.

How do most Americans arrive at the moral precepts in which legitimate law must be anchored? For Neuhaus, this question cannot be answered adequately without accounting for their “incorrigibly religious” character.²⁸ He referred frequently to survey research indicating—year after year, decade after decade—that approximately ninety percent of Americans identify, in some capacity, as Christians.²⁹ When asked, furthermore, to specify the sources from which they derive their moral views, overwhelming majorities cite the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible generally, church teachings, or the catch-all category of “religion.”³⁰ Also

²⁶Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 253; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 176; see also, Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss,” 54.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 256; see also, Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss,” 53.

²⁸Richard John Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” *First Things* (February 1992): 14; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” *First Things* (December 1999): 71; Richard John Neuhaus, “Incorrigibly Christian America II,” *First Things* (March 2000): 106; Richard John Neuhaus, “De-Christianizing America,” *First Things* (June-July 2006): 58.

²⁹Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 45; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Sources of Tolerance,” *First Things* (January 1992): 57; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Religious Right as Terrible Threat, Utter Irrelevance, or Something Else,” *First Things* (December 1994): 75; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 71; Richard John Neuhaus, “Incorrigibly Christian America,” *First Things* (February 2000): 81.

³⁰Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 21, 60, 95; Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 3; Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 45; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion” 77, 83; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 310; Neuhaus, “What the Fundamentalists Want,” 43; Neuhaus, “The Sources of Tolerance,” 57; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Couture of the Public Square,” *First Things* (December 1993): 66-67; First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together, 19; Neuhaus, “Incorrigibly Christian America,” 82; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 40-41, 112; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 294.

overwhelmingly, they regard religious institutions as the “morality-bearing component in culture.”³¹ Of course, Neuhaus was careful not to overstate what survey research can reveal about the innermost recesses of the human heart. He harbored few illusions about the depth of the respondents’ faith or the soundness of their theological knowledge. Indeed, he was inclined to judge their faith commitments shallow and their grasp of the connections between religion and morality muddled.³² “America is Christian,” Neuhaus remarked, “in the way that it is English-speaking. Relatively few speak the language very well, there is little agreement on how it should be spoken,” and “some speak it hardly at all.”³³ In the same way, most Americans identify as Christians, despite lacking knowledge of the finer points of Christian doctrine and often failing to live up to Christianity’s exacting moral standards.

From the standpoint of democratic theory, Neuhaus argued, sincerity of belief trumps sophistication of belief. Americans may be confused about the precise religious foundations of morality, but they are convinced that such foundations exist.³⁴ In a society marked by such a consensus, to erect a truly naked public square is to provoke a crisis of democratic illegitimacy. When religious convictions are declared inadmissible in political discourse, the resulting laws will not reflect—and indeed, may positively

³¹Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 45; see also, Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 178-179.

³²Ibid.; Richard John Neuhaus, “How Christianity Coopts its Contradictions,” *First Things* (August-September 2000): 84-85; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 41.

³³Neuhaus, “The Sources of Tolerance,” 57; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “‘Real Existing Christianity’ in America,” *First Things* (April 2000): 84-85; Richard John Neuhaus, “The End of Abortion and the Meanings of ‘Christian America,’” *First Things* (June-July 2001): 72; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 286.

³⁴Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 45; Neuhaus, “Incorrigibly Christian America,” 81-82.

assault—the moral values of the people upon whose consent democracy depends.³⁵ As Neuhaus explained, “to separate government from the reality of religion—from that which speaks to the deepest and highest and most commanding ways of understanding what is really real—is to separate government from the people who are the source of its legitimacy.”³⁶ In an oft-quoted passage of *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus applauded the Religious Right for having “kicked a tripwire alerting us to a pervasive contradiction in our culture and politics. We insist that we are a democratic society, yet we have in recent decades systematically excluded from policy consideration the operative values of the American people, values that are overwhelmingly grounded in religious belief.”³⁷

Enduring Foundations

Neuhaus did not believe the American experiment could be explained or defended without reference to its religious underpinnings. He accused public school teachers and textbooks of distorting the American founding by elevating the influence of Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke and downgrading the influence of ideas traceable to the Judeo-Christian tradition.³⁸ In understandable frustration, he noted, many Christians have committed the opposite mistake, wrongly portraying the founding fathers

³⁵Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 145; Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 40; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 77-78; Neuhaus, “Establishment is not *the* Issue,” 3; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 259; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 14, 16; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Ruling ‘We’ of the American Jewish Congress,” *First Things* (February 1993): 64; First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” 19; Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” *First Things* (October 1999): 90; Richard John Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” *First Things* (December 2000): 72.

³⁶Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 72.

³⁷Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 37; see also, Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 312.

³⁸Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 101-102; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Bible, the American Revolution, and the New Revisionists,” *The Religion and Society Report* (May 1986): 1.

as a band of born-again evangelicals who espoused an explicitly Biblical theory of politics.³⁹ The truth, according to Neuhaus, is that the American founding represents a somewhat untidy composite of seventeenth century Puritan thought and eighteenth century Enlightenment thought.⁴⁰ Lockean contractual principles enjoy a starring role, but “hovering in the background—and sometimes pressing to front stage center—is the other story, the story of John Winthrop’s covenant. In the beginning, and all along the way, America is the product of a Puritan-Lockean synthesis, and sometimes the synthesis has looked like an inherently contradictory muddle.”⁴¹ Still, he believed, neither element of the American founding could be neglected.

Neuhaus identified two essential ways in which religion and religious truth claims contributed to the formation and preservation of the American experiment. First, he argued, the founders knew that religious institutions could inculcate the moral virtue without which liberty threatens to sink into license.⁴² They could rest content with a constitutional order embodying a thin conception of the common good, knowing that

³⁹Neuhaus, “The Bible, the American Revolution, and the New Revisionists,” 1-2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Can Atheists be Good Citizens?” *First Things* (August-September 1991): 21.

⁴⁰Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 30; Neuhaus, “The Bible, the American Revolution, and the New Revisionists,” 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Democracy and Trust,” *The Religion and Society Report* (December 1986): 1; First Things, “What Can be Asked of a Judge?” *First Things* (October 1991): 7; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of Pope John Paul II,” *First Things* (May 1997): 19; Richard John Neuhaus, “We Hold These Truths—An Argument to be Engaged,” *First Things* (November 1997): 69; Richard John Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” *First Things* (November 2000): 75; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 47.

⁴¹Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 75.

⁴²Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 22; Richard John Neuhaus, “Unoriginal Intent,” *The Religion and Society Report* (July 1987): 4-5; First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” 72; First Things, “We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship,” *First Things* (October 1997): 51.

churches would attend to society's moral foundations.⁴³ "A limited, individualistic, and procedure-based polity was only plausible," Neuhaus wrote, "because so much else was already in place, so to speak. The values and virtues that the polity assumed were chiefly the business of religion."⁴⁴ Second, religion proposed at the time of the founding, and has proposed ever since, the truths held to be self-evident by the signers of the Declaration of Independence: that God created man and endowed him with certain inalienable rights. As Neuhaus argued, the "theistic references" of the Declaration cannot be dismissed as mere "crowd-pleasing asides" or "rhetorical fluff;" they are "integral to the moral argument of the document" that religious truths about man and society are at the heart of the American constitutional order.⁴⁵

Just as a physical structure can collapse if its foundations are allowed to erode, Neuhaus understood that the edifice of the American experiment could crumble if the citizenry ceases to believe and proclaim its foundational truths. Experiments, by their very nature, can succeed or fail. For America to survive and prosper, then, its constituting truths must be articulated anew for each generation, lest the cords of patriotic sentiment weaken or snap altogether, leaving the nation susceptible to decay from within or aggression from without.⁴⁶ "I believe," Neuhaus wrote, "that democracy is as

⁴³Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 146; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 141; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Constitution vs. the Rule of Judges," *First Things* (August-September 1994): 72.

⁴⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 141.

⁴⁵Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of Pope John Paul II," 19; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 141; see also, *First Things*, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," 18; Richard John Neuhaus, "Democracy, Desperately Dry," in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, eds. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 10.

⁴⁶Neuhaus, "Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment," 36; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 189; Neuhaus, "Christianity and Democracy"; *First Things*, "We Hold These Truths," 51; Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One," 88; Richard John Neuhaus, "Religion in Public Life:

audaciously new today as it was when it was first proposed. If it does not have to be reinvented, it certainly has to be rethought, by every generation.”⁴⁷ Doing his own part to repair the fraying bonds of democracy, Neuhaus partnered with a coalition of religious leaders to craft an ecumenical statement, “We Hold These Truths,” which was published in the October 1997 issue of *First Things*. The statement, endorsed by a religiously diverse group of public intellectuals, clergymen, churches, universities, seminaries and independent organizations, expressed gratitude to God for the “blessing” of the American experiment and offered a prayer that it would continue to flourish.⁴⁸ The coalition purported to “propose” democracy once more, to renew public enthusiasm and fidelity toward both the contractual and covenantal foundations of the American system.⁴⁹

While the vitality of American democracy depends upon religious truths, the chief responsibility for proclaiming these truths belongs to churches and individual Christians, and not to the state. By enacting the First Amendment, Neuhaus argued, the government had done something “utterly unprecedented” in human history, which was to handcuff itself with a “self-denying ordinance” that relinquished all control over “the reasons by which it was morally legitimated.”⁵⁰ Bounded by the “Religion Clause,” it is constitutionally forbidden to enforce obedience to the higher authority from which its foundational truths were derived, and so the burden of sustaining loyalty to these truths

The Continuing Conversation,” *The Christian Century* (July 11-18, 1990): 671; Neuhaus, “Democracy, Desperately Dry,” 11.

⁴⁷Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 88.

⁴⁸First Things, “We Hold These Truths,” 51.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “The American Mind,” *First Things* (December 2001): 85; see also, Neuhaus, “Unoriginal Intent,” 5; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 13; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Politics: ‘The Great Separation,’” *First Things* (January 2008): 61.

falls to ordinary citizens and religious institutions.⁵¹ Under the self-denying ordinance, “the sovereignty of the government is deliberately and expressly checked by the sovereignty of the people,” leaving to people free to appeal to a higher sovereignty of their choosing.⁵²

Neuhaus’s belief in the religious dimensions of the American experiment prompted him to reluctantly conclude that atheists should not, on the whole, be regarded as good citizens. He acknowledged, of course, that most atheists have shown themselves perfectly capable of obeying laws, paying taxes, and exhibiting an array of neighborly virtues.⁵³ In a nation premised upon religious truths, however, good citizenship requires more than a disposition to obey the law and occasionally lend a helping hand.

A good citizen is able to give an account, a morally compelling account, of the regime of which he is part. He is able to justify its defense against its enemies, and to convincingly recommend its virtues to citizens of the next generation so that they, in turn, can transmit the regime to citizens yet unborn. This regime of liberal democracy, of republican self-governance, is not self-evidently good and just. An account must be given. Reasons must be given. They must be reasons that draw authority from that which is higher than the self, from that which is external to the self, from that to which the self is ultimately obliged.⁵⁴

In Neuhaus’s view, Christians turn out to be the best citizens “not despite but *because* their loyalty to the *civitas* is qualified by a higher loyalty.”⁵⁵ He referred often, in this connection, to the opening passage of James Madison’s *Memorial and Remonstrance*,

⁵¹Neuhaus, “Unoriginal Intent,” 5; Richard John Neuhaus, “An Unnecessary Idolatry,” *First Things* (April 1994): 63; Neuhaus, “The Constitution vs. the Rule of Judges,” 72; Richard John Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” *First Things* (February 1996): 33; Richard John Neuhaus, “A Republic, If You Can Keep it,” *First Things* (April 1997): 63; Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of Pope John Paul II,” 19-20; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 89-90; Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” 72; Neuhaus, “Religion and Politics: ‘The Great Separation,’” 61.

⁵²Neuhaus, “Religion and Politics: ‘The Great Separation,’” 61.

⁵³Neuhaus, “Can Atheists be Good Citizens?” 20.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 21; see also, Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 50.

⁵⁵*Ibid* (emphasis in original).

which makes prior allegiance to the “Governour of the Universe” a precondition of membership in “Civil Society.”⁵⁶

Neuhaus confessed to an improbable and slightly embarrassing admiration for John Dewey, despite the progressive philosopher’s left-wing political proclivities and hostility toward traditional religion. With his efforts to transform democratic ideals into America’s “common faith,” Dewey demonstrated an awareness that the American experiment cannot survive without a set of foundational beliefs.⁵⁷ In a similar fashion, and despite similar fundamental disagreements, Neuhaus applauded the modern philosopher John Rawls for his attempts, in *A Theory of Justice* and subsequent publications, to derive the first principles of a just society from the hypothetical deliberations of citizens shielded, by a “veil of ignorance,” from any knowledge of their social status, economic fortunes or natural abilities.⁵⁸ Whatever his disagreements, Neuhaus vastly preferred the perspectives of Dewey and Rawls to that of the “liberal ironist,” Richard Rorty, who wanted to “josh” people out of their concern for America’s moral or metaphysical foundations, or else “declare them crazy and try to prevent them from doing damage to others.”⁵⁹ Americans, he believed, have a commendably

⁵⁶Quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, “Church, State and Peyote,” *National Review* (June 11, 1990): 41; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “‘Lofty Neutrality’ Toward Religion,” *The Religion and Society Report* (September 1988): 7; Richard John Neuhaus, “Polygamy, Peyote, and the Public Peace,” *First Things* (October 1990): 66; Neuhaus, “Can Atheists be Good Citizens?” 20-21; Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 17; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Most New Thing in the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*,” *First Things* (August-September 1998): 76; Neuhaus, “The American Mind,” 75; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Democracy: A Necessary Tension,” *First Things* (June-July 2004): 74; Richard John Neuhaus, “Freedom For Religion,” *New York Sun* (February 27, 2008).

⁵⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “After Modernity,” *The Religion and Society Report* (February 1988): 4; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 82; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 48.

⁵⁸Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 134; Neuhaus, “After Modernity,” 2; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 257; Neuhaus, “The American Mind,” 84.

⁵⁹Neuhaus, “After Modernity,” 3; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 38.

irrepressible desire to know why the American political order deserves their allegiance, and they will not adopt Rorty's posture of nonchalance.

However laudable the intentions of Dewey and Rawls, Neuhaus did not believe they could succeed in proposing alternative foundations for the American experiment. In the case of Rawls, the abstruse character of his thought and its meager visibility outside the ivory tower precludes the possibility of popular acclaim.⁶⁰ More importantly for Neuhaus, however, the projects of both philosophers foundered on their willingness to displace the entrenched religious beliefs of most Americans. Dewey's "common faith" aimed to supplant America's historic Judeo-Christian faith, and Rawls' model of public deliberation excluded appeals to what he termed "comprehensive doctrines."⁶¹ By banishing religion from their respective systems, Neuhaus argued, Dewey and Rawls guaranteed that these systems would never obtain democratic legitimacy.

The Religious Roots of Religious Tolerance

As Neuhaus well understood, the European "Wars of Religion" touched off by the Protestant Reformation left an indelible stamp upon the subsequent development of modern Western society. The decades of bloodshed convinced many Enlightenment-era thinkers, along with their likeminded contemporaries, that religion, unless carefully confined to the private sphere, naturally breeds intolerance and violent persecution,

⁶⁰Neuhaus, "The Religious Right as Terrible Threat, Utter Irrelevance, or Something Else," 74; Neuhaus, "The End of Abortion and the Meanings of 'Christian America,'" 68.

⁶¹Neuhaus, "Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment," 47; Neuhaus, "Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion," 83; Neuhaus, "The American Mind," 84; Richard John Neuhaus, "Being Religious in Public Debate," *First Things* (June-July 1995): 64; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 33-34.

rendering stable political life all but impossible.⁶² In this version of post-Reformation history, tolerance emerges as a secular triumph secured against fierce headwinds of religious opposition.⁶³ Stanley Fish, debating Neuhaus in the February 1996 issue of *First Things*, memorably articulated the notion that a commitment to absolute truths cannot be reconciled with a commitment to tolerance: “To put the matter baldly, a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas but to shut it down...The religious person should not seek an accommodation with liberalism; he should seek to rout it from the field, to extirpate it, root and branch.”⁶⁴

Neuhaus conceded that the secularist account of the origins of religious tolerance contained important elements of truth. Christians who partook eagerly of the sixteenth and seventeenth century warfare had yet to fully internalize the religious principles that forbid the coercion of consciences.⁶⁵ And they were brought to a fuller appreciation of these neglected principles, in large part, by the hostile forces of the Enlightenment.⁶⁶ Such concessions, however, did not lead Neuhaus to doubt the essential compatibility of religious conviction and religious tolerance. It is inaccurate, he wrote, to suggest that “Christianity has made its peace with pluralism and democracy, as though they were forced upon it and only grudgingly accepted....The Church acknowledges these children

⁶²Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 144-145, 156; Richard John Neuhaus, “Truth and Tolerance,” *First Things* (October 1994): 75; Neuhaus, “Religion and Politics: ‘The Great Separation,’” 60.

⁶³Neuhaus, “Truth and Tolerance,” 75; Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 27; Neuhaus, “Religion and Politics: ‘The Great Separation,’” 60.

⁶⁴Stanley Fish, “Why We Can’t All Just Get Along,” *First Things* (February 1996): 21.

⁶⁵Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 27, 31.

⁶⁶Neuhaus, “We Hold These Truths—An Argument to be Engaged,” 71.

as her own, even if some of the midwives involved in the delivery were less than friendly to the Church.”⁶⁷ God had used His enemies to teach His people an important lesson.

Neuhaus disagreed fundamentally with the gravamen of the secularist account. To his mind, Christian teachings about the inviolable dignity of man provide the sturdiest foundation for the protection of religious liberty. In this respect, there is no “tradeoff between truth and tolerance,” since tolerance is mandated by the truth that “everyone is a child of God, that consciences are not to be coerced, and even terribly wrong opinions are to be tolerated out of respect for the human dignity of those who hold them.”⁶⁸ Religious liberty, then, represents an achievement of religion, rather than a reluctant compromise made for the sake of maintaining peace in a pluralistic society. As Neuhaus contended, it is chiefly a “religious restraint that prevents biblical believers from coercing others in matters of conscience. For example, we do not kill one another over disagreements about the will of God because we believe it is the will of God that we should not kill one another over our disagreements about the will of God.”⁶⁹

Moral Direction and Providential Purpose

In *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus asserted, in bluntly realistic language, that politics “has to do most essentially with power—getting, keeping and exercising it.” He

⁶⁷Neuhaus, “We Hold These Truths—An Argument to be Engaged,” 71.

⁶⁸Neuhaus, “Truth and Tolerance,” 74; Richard John Neuhaus, “Starting Fights,” *First Things* (May 1993): 58; see also, Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 31; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 73; Richard John Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” *First Things* (May 2001): 78.

⁶⁹Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” 14-15; see also, Neuhaus, “After Modernity,” 4; Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 73; Richard John Neuhaus, “Eastern Europe and the Swedish Model,” *First Things* (March 1991): 56; *First Things*, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” 19; Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 31; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Idea of Moral Progress,” *First Things* (August-September 1999): 22; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 73.

proceeded to define “power” as “the ability to get other people to do what you want, and not to do what you do not want.”⁷⁰ On the whole, however, Neuhaus espoused a more elevated conception of the political enterprise, in which the getting, keeping and exercising of power is invested with moral purpose. Drawing upon the philosophy of Aristotle, he maintained that politics pertains most fundamentally to moral deliberation about how the common life of the polity is to be ordered.⁷¹ Against the mantra that morality cannot be legislated, Neuhaus insisted that legislation cannot help but express and enforce the prevailing moral sentiments of a given community. The American “culture war,” in this sense, does not pit “moral” views against “amoral” alternatives, but instead involves a clash of competing moral visions.⁷²

Neuhaus expected the religious values of the American people to give moral direction and discipline to their public discourse. Judeo-Christian claims about the inherent dignity and divinely-ordained destiny of man supply “transcendent points of reference” that suggest the moral parameters within which a God-honoring form of political deliberation can unfold.⁷³ Deprived of this religiously-inspired moral framework, politics forfeits its modest dignity and deteriorates into a mere clash of

⁷⁰Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 30; see also, Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 15.

⁷¹Richard John Neuhaus, “Sense and Nonsense About Victimless Crimes,” *The Christian Century* (March 7, 1973): 282; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 274-275; Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 39; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” *This World* (Spring-Summer 1986): 55; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 215; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 215; Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 34; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 89; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 19-20; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 293.

⁷²First Things, “When Church-State Conflicts Aren’t,” *First Things* (March 1991): 8; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (May 1998): 70; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 90; Richard John Neuhaus, “Culture Politics, and Other Kinds,” *First Things* (April 2001): 68-69; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 294.

⁷³Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 145, 235.

interests, with the machinations of raw political power overtaking efforts at principled persuasion.⁷⁴ “Without a transcendent point of reference,” Neuhaus wrote, “conflicts of values cannot be resolved; there can only be procedures for their temporary accommodation. Conflicts over values are viewed not as conflicts between contending truths but as conflicts between contending interests.”⁷⁵ In this regard, Neuhaus’s protest against the exclusion of religion from political discourse can be seen as “a call for us to assume the dignity of being moral actors” who are “not merely atomistic individuals with interests to be accommodated but persons of reason and conviction whose humanity requires participation in the process of persuasion.”⁷⁶

Beyond shaping public deliberation on discrete issues, Neuhaus looked to religion to impart an overarching sense of purpose for the entire American experiment. No society, he believed, will long tolerate the pervasive sense of being adrift, as though its endeavors were so many meaningless scraps earmarked for history’s trash heap.⁷⁷ For Neuhaus, religion keeps a society’s focus oriented toward a promised future when its struggles to achieve justice will be vindicated. In *Time Toward Home*, for instance, he criticized the popular mindset that America would overcome its tumultuous recent history only by returning to some hypothetical, prelapsarian past.⁷⁸ To be sure, “the headache is

⁷⁴Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 39, 44; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 215.

⁷⁵Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 110.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “Liturgy the Public Hope,” *Commonweal* (October 31, 1969): 130; Richard John Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option: Freedom Beyond Fashion,” *Worldview* (December 1970): 9; Richard John Neuhaus, “Progress and Politics,” *Worldview* (September 1980): 18; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 100, 105, 274; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 14, 113.

⁷⁸Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 7-8, 96; Richard John Neuhaus, “Going Home Again: America After Vietnam,” *Worldview* (October 1972): 31-32.

real. As are Vietnam and inflation and slums and Vietnam and Watergate and unemployment and racism and Vietnam.”⁷⁹ But instead of yearning for Eden, Neuhaus wanted to tap into “another stream of American consciousness that insists our society is a lively experiment and adventure”—one capable of envisioning and progressing toward a future much worthier of its high calling.⁸⁰

Dating back to his earliest writings, Neuhaus hoped to combat feelings of purposelessness by rekindling in America the once-ubiquitous sense of being commissioned by God for an errand into the wilderness.⁸¹ “That America is guided by Providence,” he wrote, “is a belief deeply entrenched in the seventeenth-century beginnings, the constitutional period, Lincoln’s ponderings on our greatest war, and Woodrow Wilson’s convictions about the inseparable connections between freedom and American destiny.”⁸² While others have recoiled at the messianic themes deployed by contemporary American leaders like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, Neuhaus saw no great departure from the religion-soaked rhetoric of ages past.⁸³

Certainly, Neuhaus had a keen appreciation for the abuses and arrogance to which the presumption of divine favor had sometimes given license. As a concrete example of this danger, he cited the historical assurance that Americans had a “Manifest Destiny” to

⁷⁹Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 3.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 13; see also, Neuhaus, “Going Home Again: America After Vietnam,” 32, 34; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 278-279.

⁸¹Neuhaus, “A Pilgrim Piece of Time and Space,” 163; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 281, 289; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 312; Richard John Neuhaus, “American History and Theological Nerve,” *First Things* (January 2000): 72-73; Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 73.

⁸²Richard John Neuhaus, “America as a Religion,” *First Things* (April 2005): 57.

⁸³Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 76; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (June-July 2002): 94; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (December 2002): 84; Neuhaus, “America as a Religion,” 57.

overspread the continent and proclaim their rightful supremacy.⁸⁴ “From John Winthrop and John Adams up through the present,” Neuhaus wrote, “there has been a frequent bombast and boosterism—and no little measure of sinful pride—in the ways people have talked about America’s ‘destiny’ and its meaning for world history.”⁸⁵ Americans, “prone to a vaulting idealism,” have rendered their historical portrait in “angelic hues, untouched by the ambiguities, corruptions and lust for power associated with mere mortals.”⁸⁶ Still, Neuhaus did not want instances of American arrogance to cast into disrepute the notion of providential guidance and protection.

Neuhaus feared that America’s instinct for providential awareness had gone dormant after the convulsive impact of the 1960s, as the nation was bombarded with accusations of systemic racism, imperialism and exploitation of the poor, among other evils. American elites, especially, had grown profoundly uneasy with attempts to discern a benevolent hand of Providence guiding the movements of American history.⁸⁷ Neuhaus expressed deep ambivalence about the apparent shift from overweening arrogance to inordinate self-flagellation. He worried that the growing disinclination to “theologize” American history betokened not only a welcome repudiation of national idolatry, but also a “failure of nerve and imagination, a loss of confidence in providential purpose, [and] a

⁸⁴Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 282; Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 76.

⁸⁵Neuhaus, “American History and Theological Nerve,” 74; see also, Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option,” 9; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 70; Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 73-74.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 72.

⁸⁷Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option,” 9; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 74; Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 37; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 312-313; Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 73; *America as a Religion*, 57.

refusal to accept the responsibility that attends the reality of Christian America.”⁸⁸

Steering delicately between the “intoxicating visions” of a redeemer nation and the abject surrender of all Providential intuition, Neuhaus concluded: “To think we know God’s precise purpose in history is presumption. To assume there is no such purpose is a loss of intellectual and spiritual nerve.”⁸⁹

We have noted already that Neuhaus saw the American founding as embodying a synthesis between the themes of contract and covenant. The contract, by specifying the basic rules and procedures that govern public discourse and political authority, is essential to creating and sustaining basic societal stability.⁹⁰ But contractual agreements alone cannot suffice to keep America’s Providential perspective alive. For this, Neuhaus encouraged Americans to think of themselves as bound in covenantal relationship to God, both enjoying the promise of His blessings and accepting the burden of His judgment.⁹¹ This does not mean Neuhaus regarded America as God’s chosen people, given a status tantamount to that of ancient Israel. As he explained, “God has made no special covenant with America as such, but only with “His creation, with Israel, and with His Church.” He believed, however, that America has a “peculiar place in God’s promises and purposes,” because of its dominant presence in world affairs.⁹²

⁸⁸Neuhaus, “American History and Theological Nerve,” 74; see also, Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 74.

⁸⁹Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” 73.

⁹⁰Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 46; Neuhaus, “The Constitution vs. the Rule of Judges,” 72.

⁹¹Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option,” pg 8; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 169; Neuhaus, “Unoriginal Intent,” 2; Neuhaus, “Contract, Covenant, and the Beginning of ‘The American Century,’” 74.

⁹²Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

Keeping Politics Penultimate

Thus far, we have seen religion assigned to the tasks of legitimizing the American experiment, fortifying its foundations, and furnishing transcendent reference points to guide its public moral discourse. Neuhaus, however, reserved an even weightier responsibility for bearers of the message that Jesus Christ is Lord: keeping politics penultimate, by restraining the modern state's insatiable appetite for power and proclaiming its accountability to a higher sovereignty. Those who would affirm and nurture the American experiment must also, through their acknowledgement of Christ's lordship, "challenge the imperiousness of the political" and "debunk the inflated importance of politics."⁹³ As Neuhaus argued in his founding statement for the Institute on Religion and Democracy, "communal allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom is an indispensable check upon the pretensions of the modern state. Because Christ is Lord, Caesar is not Lord. By humbling secular claims to sovereignty, the Church makes its most important contribution by being, fully and unapologetically, the Church."⁹⁴

Neuhaus hoped Christian churches would issue constant and forceful reminders that the state, no less than individuals, will be judged by its fidelity to God's laws.⁹⁵ He always insisted that the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance signals the promise of divine judgment, rather than a chauvinistic presumption of divine

⁹³Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 14; Neuhaus, "Religion in Public Life: The Continuing Conversation," 671; see also, Neuhaus, "Democracy, Desperately Dry," 13.

⁹⁴Neuhaus, "Christianity and Democracy"; see also, Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 27; Neuhaus, "The Ambiguities of 'Christian America,'" 291; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 75; Richard John Neuhaus, "Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation," *First Things* (May 1990): 70; Neuhaus, "Religion and Politics: 'The Great Separation,'" 61.

⁹⁵Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116, 118, 165.

favoritism.⁹⁶ It suggests not that Americans are a chosen people incapable of wrongdoing, but instead that “there is a transcendent point of reference to which we as a people are accountable.”⁹⁷ This was one reason Neuhaus cheered the massive public outcry that greeted the Ninth Circuit ruling—later overturned by the Supreme Court on technical grounds—that “under God” violates the Establishment Clause.⁹⁸ He did not think unelected judges could prevent the American people from acknowledging what he took to be a theologically incontrovertible principle: that America, like all other nations, is under the dominion of God.

Where religious voices neglect to bear witness to the certainty of transcendent judgment, an important bulwark against the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the modern state has been stripped away. Neuhaus believed such tendencies were more or less universal, in that even democratic regimes strive to “encompass the whole of social reality” and transform themselves into a substitute church.⁹⁹ Thus, for Neuhaus, the naked public square is the most hospitable environment for the growth of totalitarian movements, because the institutions best equipped to inculcate humility and reverence for

⁹⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “What we Mean by Human Rights, and Why,” *The Christian Century* (December 6, 1978): 1180; Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option,” pg 9; Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 113; Neuhaus, “The Cultural Unavailability of Hellfire and Brimstone,” 2; Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy: Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 76; Neuhaus, “Why We Can Get Along,” 33; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 89-90; Richard John Neuhaus, “Political Blasphemy,” *First Things* (October 2002): 92; Neuhaus, “Religion and Democracy: A Necessary Tension,” 83.

⁹⁷Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 76.

⁹⁸Neuhaus, “Political Blasphemy,” 91-92; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (March 2004): 69-70.

⁹⁹Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Two,” 89; see also, Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 171; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens,” *First Things* (June-July 1998): 63; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part One,” 89.

God's sovereignty have been dispossessed of their public platform.¹⁰⁰ Whatever their ideological coloration, totalitarian regimes—the ultimate repudiation of penultimate politics—recognize no authority higher than themselves, and no transcendent moral standards to which they can be held accountable.¹⁰¹ Regimes like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia can tolerate the eccentric pieties of isolated individuals, but they cannot abide publicly resonant pronouncements that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹⁰² As Neuhaus observed, “once religion is reduced to privatized conscience, the public square has only two actors in it—the state and the individual. Religion as a mediating structure—a community that generates and transmits moral values—is no longer available as a countervailing force to the ambitions of the state.”¹⁰³

Neuhaus thought hopelessly naïve the breezy confidence expressed in some quarters that America could never fall prey to a totalitarian fate.¹⁰⁴ In a 1976 address, he predicted portentously that a totalitarian regime would supplant the American experiment within another century “unless there is a new and widely convincing assertion of the religious meaning of liberal democracy.”¹⁰⁵ Modifying the language of Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Neuhaus observed that “transcendence abhors a

¹⁰⁰Neuhaus, “What we Mean by Human Rights, and Why,” 1180; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 84; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 71.

¹⁰¹Neuhaus, “The Thorough Revolutionary,” 165-166; Neuhaus, “What We Mean by Human Rights and Why,” 1179.

¹⁰²Neuhaus, “The Democratic Prospect,” 14; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 156; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 82, 190.

¹⁰³Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 82.

¹⁰⁴Neuhaus, “The Democratic Prospect,” 17; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 83; First Things, “We Hold These Truths,” 19.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

vacuum.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, the naked public square does not remain naked, and “when recognizable religion is excluded, the vacuum will be filled by *ersatz* religion, by religion bootlegged into public space by other names.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, the naked public square remains forever vulnerable to a totalitarian takeover: Where specifically Judeo-Christian teachings have been evicted, the state can rush into the vacuum, constructing a pseudo-religion that sanctifies itself and allows no appeal to a higher authority.

From Civil Religion to Public Philosophy

When mulling over the available resources for legitimizing and nurturing the American experiment while keeping it under transcendent judgment, Neuhaus spoke variously of two conceptual models that unite devotion to God and country: civil religion and public philosophy. Tracing the arc of his intellectual career, one can observe him gradually discarding the former and embracing the latter. On the subject of civil religion, Neuhaus was quite conversant with the academic debate revived by Robert Bellah’s 1967 *Daedalus* article, which posited “an elaborate and well institutionalized civil religion in America” existing “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches.”¹⁰⁸ The closing chapters of *Time Toward Home* reveal his fluency in the argot of civil religion’s most prominent theorists, interpreters and critics. Blanketing these pages are allusions to Bellah’s seminal article on the concept, Martin Marty’s distinction between “priestly” and “prophetic” modes of civil religion, Sidney Mead’s advocacy for a

¹⁰⁶Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 80.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 80; see also, Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 49, 213; Richard John Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality: A Possibility and an Imperative,” in *Evangelicals and Foreign Policy: Four Perspectives*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989), 7; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 8-9; Neuhaus, “The Couture of the Public Square,” 68; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three,” 61.

¹⁰⁸Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967), 1-21.

“religion of the republic,” Will Herberg’s attack on exaltation of the “American Way of Life,” J. Paul Williams’ explicit call for teaching democracy as a religion unto itself, Sydney Ahlstrom’s essay lamenting the “death of patriotic piety,” and W. Lloyd Warner’s study of reverential Memorial Day observances in American small towns.¹⁰⁹

Many of Neuhaus’s earliest writings reveal the high hopes he invested in civil religion as a promising avenue of social and political renewal. The final chapter of *In Defense of People* called for “articles, books and conferences” to “unabashedly take up the issue of our civil religion, of what Americans believe about themselves and their place in history in view of their professed determination to be a moral people.”¹¹⁰ Writing in *Commonweal*, he suggested that Christian churches could serve as “civil religion’s avant garde.”¹¹¹ The youthful Neuhaus could speak of Christianity and civil religion as existing in a symbiotic, mutually harmonious relationship marked by “intimate association and interdependence,” in which “each supports the other” and “lends plausibility to the other.”¹¹² He saw both as comprehending the covenantal themes of betrayal, repentance and forgiveness that reformers could enlist to ignite a new passion for justice in America.¹¹³

During this early period, Neuhaus could acknowledge the tensions and incongruities between civil religion and authentic religion without abandoning his

¹⁰⁹Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 188-219.

¹¹⁰Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 301.

¹¹¹Neuhaus, “Liturgy the Public Hope,” 134.

¹¹²Neuhaus, “Going Home Again: America After Vietnam,” 36; Richard John Neuhaus, “The War, The Churches, and Civil Religion,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (January 1970): 138.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 35.

enthusiasm for cultivating a fruitful interaction.¹¹⁴ Only with the publication in 1975 of *Time Toward Home*, it seems, were his first notes of ambivalence about civil religion—both the term and the phenomenon it aspires to capture—made manifest. “Everyone agrees,” Neuhaus wrote, “on the reality of the ‘whatever we are talking about’; namely, that there is in American society a vague but real cluster of symbols, values, hopes and intimations of the transcendent which overarch our common life.”¹¹⁵ He expressed a growing discomfort, however, with labeling this “something” a religion, preferring to speak of American “public piety.” Advertising a civil religion “cannot help but invite the misunderstanding and hostility of those who feel they already have a religion.”¹¹⁶ Neuhaus’s scruples were substantive as well as semantic. He especially feared the emergence of a fully freestanding and crudely nationalistic civil religion: untethered from Christianity, answering to no higher authority, and enshrining America as an object of idolatrous worship.¹¹⁷

In the 1980s and beyond, Neuhaus shifted decisively toward promoting and articulating the idea of a public philosophy, which he defined as “the mediating language between religious truth and public decision.”¹¹⁸ A public philosophy, in other words, is not identical to any theology or to the moral prescriptions derived from that theology. But as a “mediating language,” it must be in “conversation” with, or “sympathetically

¹¹⁴Neuhaus, “Going Home Again: America After Vietnam,” 35.

¹¹⁵Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 201.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 39.

¹¹⁸Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” 45-46.

attuned” to, the prevailing religious beliefs of the American people.¹¹⁹ According to the British scholar Ian Markham, Neuhaus desired a public philosophy not to achieve “the tyranny of one vision over others,” but to foster “the engagement, argument, and disagreement of different accounts of the good in the civil public square.”¹²⁰ For Neuhaus, the construction of a public philosophy necessitated a new era of ecumenical dialogue between Christians and Jews, such that their kindred traditions of moral reflection could speak more powerfully to dilemmas unfolding in the public square. “It becomes apparent,” he wrote, “that cultivating the Jewish-Christian relationship is more than a matter of interfaith politesse; it is essential to reconstituting the moral basis of our common life.”¹²¹

The Once-Proud Heritage of Mainline Protestantism

In *The Naked Public Square*, Neuhaus devoted three full chapters to chronicling the rise and fall of Mainline Protestantism in America: its proud heritage as moral caretaker for the American experiment, its descent into strident left-wing partisanship, and, consequentially, its gradual slide into near irrelevance. “One must make an effort to recall,” he wrote, “that not many years ago the [National Council of Churches] was seen to be as secure a part of the American establishment as Harvard University or the

¹¹⁹Richard John Neuhaus, “Theology, Public and Other,” *The Religion and Society Report* (October 1984): 6; Neuhaus, “The Bible, the American Revolution, and the New Revisionists,” 2; see also, Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” 84; Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” 72; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 42.

¹²⁰Ian Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 123.

¹²¹Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” 72.

American Medical Association.”¹²² In its heyday, Neuhaus argued, the leaders and institutions of Mainline Protestantism took seriously the imperative of giving moral and religious direction to American culture. They “attend[ed] to the cultivation of individual and communal virtue, and to maintaining a sense of national purpose, even of destiny.”¹²³ Most importantly, the Mainline nourished an intuition that the fate of the American experiment figures prominently in the larger narrative of God’s world-historical purposes—indeed, that “God had a hand in America’s beginnings and was guiding it to the fulfillment of his appointed purpose.”¹²⁴

Chapter Four will delve into the reasons Neuhaus adduced to explain Mainline Protestantism’s exhaustion as a culture-forming instrument, and Chapter Five will take up Neuhaus’s thoughts on the religious tradition best positioned to inherit its mantle. What needs to be stressed in this chapter is the sorrow he felt when contemplating the Mainline’s marginalization. “However severe the failings of the mainline,” Neuhaus wrote, “the nobility of its earlier vision should not be slighted. From the seventeenth century and well into the present century, it carried and articulated the moral tradition that made authentically political discourse possible.”¹²⁵ Critics of the Mainline should resist the temptation to “chortle” at its demise, for it presided over a tradition “not

¹²²Richard John Neuhaus, “No Time to Chortle,” *The Religion and Society Report* (January 1989): 1; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Three Constellations of American Religion,” *First Things* (March 2001): 77; Richard John Neuhaus, “When America was Christian,” *First Things* (May 2003): 84.

¹²³Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 140; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 61.

¹²⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 208; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 209-210.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 261.

untouched by moments of greatness,” and whose accomplishments should not be minimized or forgotten.¹²⁶

Abortion and the Insufficiency of the Naked Public Square

It will not have escaped notice that an issue intimately interwoven through every strand of Neuhaus’s worldview—abortion—has received but glancing attention thus far. Now is the moment to fill this lacuna, for no issue more dramatically pointed up the crux of his distress over the naked public square. Ironically enough, given his legacy as a staunch defender of pro-life principles, Neuhaus started out with a measure of sympathy toward arguments for carefully circumscribed abortion rights—though certainly not for abortion-on-demand. He speculated about “individual and even group instances of self-defense” in which abortion might be warranted.¹²⁷ On one occasion, he even voiced the pro-choice claim that “the decision must finally rest with the mother and those directly responsible for the child’s care.”¹²⁸ Even so, the youthful Neuhaus considered solicitude toward the weak and vulnerable a touchstone of decent societies, and he clearly wanted public policy weighted toward preserving the lives of the unborn.¹²⁹

As with his nascent beliefs on church-state relations, Neuhaus drew early lessons about abortion from his experience as pastor of St. John the Evangelist. Pondering the opinion that abortion spares many from the burden of living in miserable poverty, he bridled at the logical conclusion that most of his poor parishioners should have never

¹²⁶Neuhaus, “No Time to Chortle,” 2; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “The Catholic Moment,” *National Review* (November 7, 1986): 46.

¹²⁷Richard John Neuhaus, “The Dangerous Assumptions,” *Commonweal* (June 30, 1967): 412.

¹²⁸Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 193.

¹²⁹Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 116-117.

been born.¹³⁰ In general, Neuhaus argued that the triumph of legalized abortion both exposed and exacerbated a rupture between two forms of liberalism: one preoccupied with maximizing individual autonomy, and the other emphasizing communal obligations, especially to society's poorest and weakest members.¹³¹ He famously observed that "the liberal banner has been placed on the wrong side" of the abortion debate, insofar as liberalism, as exemplified Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, ought naturally to support a more inclusive definition of both the political community and the human family in general.¹³² In other words, having done so much to welcome racial minorities into the fold, liberalism ought to draw its next concentric circle around the unborn.

Neuhaus had no patience with those who dismissed abortion as a private or narrowly religious quarrel unfit for the political arena. He insisted that nothing more loudly demands deliberation by We the People than discerning who belongs to the We. With abortion, Neuhaus argued, "a most solemn question is posed: Whom do we recognize as members of the community with a claim upon legal protection?"¹³³

Abortion, however, poses an additional difficulty: Beyond being a proper—indeed

¹³⁰Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 125.

¹³¹Richard John Neuhaus, "Hyde and Hysteria: The Liberal Banner has been Placed on the Wrong Side of the Abortion Debate," *The Christian Century* (September 10-17, 1980): 849; Neuhaus, "The End of Abortion and the Meanings of 'Christian America,'" 69; Richard John Neuhaus, "Catholics, Protestants, and the Meanings of Freedom," *First Things* (August-September 2003): 70; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 12, 27.

¹³²Neuhaus, "Hyde and Hysteria," 851; Neuhaus, "The Dangerous Assumptions," 410-411; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 115; Neuhaus, "Religion in Public Life: The Continuing Conversation," 670.

¹³³Neuhaus, "Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment," 43-44; see also, Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 144; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 27; Neuhaus, "Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America," 315; Neuhaus, "The Catholic Moment," 46; *First Things*, "We Hold These Truths," 52; Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew—Part Three," 71; Neuhaus, "The End of Abortion and the Meanings of 'Christian America,'" 67; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 44, 140.

urgent—subject for political discourse, it is fraught with ultimate moral questions about the rights and duties of individuals, families and entire societies. “Not since slavery,” Neuhaus wrote, “have such elementary questions, backed by such formidable force, been raised about the legitimacy of the controlling ideas by which our society is ordered.”¹³⁴

As an issue, then, where fundamental political questions and ultimate moral questions converge, abortion exposes the insufficiency of the naked public square. It cries out for public deliberation, but with religion and religiously grounded morality evacuated from the public square, we are deprived of the resources needed to undertake that deliberation in its fullness. Nor is abortion the only question, past or present, to generate such an impasse. As Neuhaus explained:

Herein lies a key component of our dilemma. At the very time when questions of great and irrepressible moral moment are forcing themselves upon us we discover that we do not have shared ideas or even a shared vocabulary for their public deliberation. That is to say, we do not have such shared ideas or vocabulary *if* we exclude from the public square the religiously informed beliefs of the American people.¹³⁵

Most of the time, Neuhaus agreed, conflicts can be settled through recourse to agreed-upon legal and political procedures, but abortion—like slavery before it—has burrowed beneath these layers of consensus to provoke questions unanswerable without the aid of religion.¹³⁶

¹³⁴Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss,” 55; see also, Neuhaus, “The Dangerous Assumptions,” 408, 410; Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option,” 5; Neuhaus, *In Defense of People*, 193; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 315.

¹³⁵Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 46-47 (emphasis in original); see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 27; Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” 315; Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss,” 55; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 177.

¹³⁶Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 182.

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Engineering a naked public square, and barring any interaction between religion and politics, represents one way of eliminating the necessary tension between the Now and the Not Yet. Another way of driving out this tension is to forge a premature synthesis between the two realms: either by allowing impatient yearnings for the Not Yet to trample upon a measured devotion to the Now, or by allowing an idolatrous devotion to the Now to eclipse or replace such yearnings altogether. The following chapter shall explore Neuhaus's reflections on the perils of premature synthesis and the perennial temptation of "getting it all together before God gets it all together."

CHAPTER FOUR

“An Exceedingly Awkward and Complicated Business”: Preserving the Necessary Tension Between the Now and the Not Yet

If, as Neuhaus insisted, Jesus Christ is truly Lord over all reality, including politics, and the Now is firmly under the sovereignty of the Not Yet, then one might plausibly infer at least a modicum of support for projects to impose Christian theology and morality on the American populace. Such a conjecture, however, would be woefully wrongheaded. As this chapter shall demonstrate, Neuhaus sought to preserve a necessary tension and distance between the Now and the Not Yet, discouraging efforts to construct what he termed a “premature synthesis” between the two realms.

For many Christians, Neuhaus believed, “all talk about provisionality and modesty is suspect,” in that “it seems to suggest a weak-kneed accommodationism that is prepared to settle for less than the triumph of the truth.”¹ Thirsting impatiently after the promised glory of the Not Yet, such Christians are not satisfied “that the naked public square be filled and informed by civil moral discourse,” but demand instead that it “be taken over and turned into nothing less than the temple of God.”² They may practice tolerance toward neighbors and fellow citizens who refuse to acknowledge Christ’s lordship, but only with a guilty conscience, as though “they would be much more

¹Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 123.

²Richard John Neuhaus, “The Theocratic Temptation,” *The Religion and Society Report* (May, 1987): 3; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 121-122; Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 93.

aggressively intolerant of those who do not accept the truth that they possess” if only they were more courageous and secure in their faith.³

By cultivating a sense of the inevitable distance between the Now and the Not Yet, Neuhaus hoped to discipline and refine—but never to extinguish—such passionate yearnings for the Kingdom of God. During their exile in the City of Man, he argued, Christians must resist the temptation to conflate any socio-political arrangement, however conducive to justice, peace and prosperity, with the promised Kingdom.⁴ Still further, they must resist the delusory belief that their own exertions, in the political arena and elsewhere, can hasten the Kingdom’s arrival.⁵ “Everything is second best,” Neuhaus wrote, “compared to the city from which we were born and to which our journey tends—the City of God. There and only there will questions of faith and moral judgment and right ordering be once and satisfactorily resolved.”⁶

³Richard John Neuhaus, “Truth and Tolerance,” *First Things* (October 1994): 78; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” *First Things* (February 1996): 27.

⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 115; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Bible, the American Revolution, and the New Revisionists,” *The Religion and Society Report* (May 1986): 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” *This World* (Spring-Summer 1986): 56; Richard John Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” *This World* (Winter 1989): 73; Richard John Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality: A Possibility and an Imperative,” in *Evangelicals and Foreign Policy: Four Perspectives*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989), 7; Richard John Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy: a Statement of the Institute on Religion and Democracy,” <http://www.theird.org/Page.aspx?pid=215> (accessed on February 13, 2010); Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 34; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of Pope John Paul II,” *First Things* (May 1997): 21; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens,” *First Things* (June-July 1998): 64; Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Two,” *First Things* (November 1999): 89; Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (London: Notre Dame, 1992), 21; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” *Concordia Journal* (July 1991): 292.

⁵First Things, “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* (May 1994): 18; Richard John Neuhaus, “Against Christian Politics,” *First Things* (May 1996): 73; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 45.

⁶Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 292.

Even during the 1970s, when his confidence in the redemptive significance of politics had arguably reached its zenith, Neuhaus never succumbed to the utopian fantasy of building Heaven on earth. As he wrote in *Time Toward Home*, for instance, the most elementary Christian affirmation is that “history has not gotten itself together. Only the coming of the Kingdom of God, of God’s rule in its fullness, will resolve the dialectics and contradictions of historical experience. Every other resolution proffered is premature, false and, if we submit to it, finally idolatrous.”⁷ In an essay elaborating on the 1975 Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation, which was drafted in part to combat such desires for premature, false and finally idolatrous resolutions, Neuhaus commended “the persistent assertion, even celebration,” of the tension between the Kingdom of God and all earthly societies.⁸

Neuhaus urged Christians to devote their ultimate allegiance not to the American experiment, or any other earthly political sovereignty, but to the institution tasked with heralding and preparing for the Kingdom’s coming: the Church.⁹ Simply by “being the Church”—by anticipating and modeling in its own life something infinitely better than

⁷Richard John Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 25; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy: Thinking and Acting in the Courage of Uncertainty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 15, 17, 28, 38-39; Richard John Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” in *Against the World for the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion*, eds. Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 144.

⁸Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 147.

⁹Richard John Neuhaus, “Can Atheists be Good Citizens?” *First Things* (August-September 1991): 21; Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 33; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Two,” 89; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Democracy: A Necessary Tension,” *First Things* (June-July 2004): 75; Richard John Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome: The Church in American Awakening* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 149; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 21, 174.

the City of Man—the Church makes its “greatest public contribution.”¹⁰ To faithfully discharge this obligation, though, “it must maintain a critical distance from all the kingdoms of this world, whether actual or proposed. Christians betray their Lord if, in theory or practice, they equate the Kingdom of God with any political, social, or economic order of this passing time.”¹¹

The yawning gulf between present circumstances and the promised future creates a tension that exiles in the City of Man are not meant to resolve or escape before their pilgrimage ceases. This chapter explores Neuhaus’s efforts to discourage two particular ways of denying or eliminating this tension. In the first section, I discuss his treatment of the misbegotten desire to impose an explicitly Biblical politics upon a stubbornly pluralistic polity. Then, in the two subsequent following sections, I describe his frustration with churches so consumed by politics that they lose sight the Kingdom, or reinterpret the Kingdom as an earthly political paradise. The chapter closes with Neuhaus’s recommendation that Christians embrace the tension between the Now and the Not Yet by agreeing to live as “alien citizens.”

Monism, Pluralism, and the Integrity of Politics

Perhaps no piece of the English language has been savaged more thoroughly by Neuhaus than “monism” and its grammatical variants. By “monism,” he meant the religiously-motivated desire to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth by constructing “an intact, cohesive social order in which there is a unity, or at least a synchronization, of

¹⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” *First Things* (December 1999): 74; see also, Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy”; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 286; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 19; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion and Public Life: The Continuing Conversation,” *The Christian Century* (July 11-18, 1990): 673.

¹¹Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy.”

political, economic, and cultural authority.”¹² Those possessed of the monistic impulse cannot abide the necessary tension and distance between the City of God and the City of Man. They are “determined,” in other words, “to get it all together before God gets it all together.”¹³ Monists of all political stripes refuse to distinguish between “the earthly city and the heavenly, the spiritual order from the civil, the community of faith from the body politic, the ‘now’ from the ‘not yet’ of the oncoming Kingdom, [and] the penultimate from the ultimate.”¹⁴ They forget that these realms must remain distinct until such time as God decides to get them all together.

According to Neuhaus, the monistic temptation has been a perennial feature in the long history of Christianity. Catholic Christendom, John Calvin’s Geneva, Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate, and the Puritan settlement in Massachusetts all testified, in his opinion, to a persistent craving that the things of God and man be gotten all together on an accelerated timetable.¹⁵ In his own day, Neuhaus steadfastly preached against the peculiar monistic hungers he saw bubbling up within both conservative and liberal factions. On the Right, he feared the growing influence, in certain fundamentalist circles, of Christian Reconstructionism, which would reconstitute American society on explicitly

¹²Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 132; see also, Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 288.

¹³Richard John Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation,” *First Things* (May 1990): 20; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 101; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 192.

¹⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “Christian Monisms Against the Gospel,” *The Religion and Society Report* (November 1987): 3; see also, Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 16; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 194; Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom?” 19.

¹⁵Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 185; Richard John Neuhaus, “We Hold These Truths” — An Argument to be Engaged,” *First Things* (November 1997): 71.

Biblical foundations, discarding democracy as a heretical innovation.¹⁶ Under the dominion of Reconstructionists, Neuhaus warned, “unbelievers will not be tolerated, unrepentant adulterers and homosexuals will be executed, lawbreakers will make restitution, possibly as slaves, and the economy will be based on the gold standard,” among other measures adopted “when the righteous seize control.”¹⁷ On the Left, he argued, latter-day heirs of the Social Gospel tradition, and even liberal publications like *Sojourners*, exhibit similarly monistic passions. They agree with the Reconstructionists on the imperative of building the Kingdom on earth, differing only on the Kingdom’s precise political and social blueprint.¹⁸

Against monists of the Left and Right, Neuhaus contended for a mode of political and cultural engagement compatible with the inherently pluralistic character of the City of Man. He trumpeted John Courtney Murray’s observation that pluralism is “written into the script of history,” and even added his own corollary: that “God has done the writing.”¹⁹ In a pluralistic society, Neuhaus argued, Christians must acknowledge that “nobody has the correct fit between the ultimacies of God’s self-revelation in Christ and the penultimacies of the ordering of our political life.”²⁰ They must be content, in other words, to replace the naked public square not with a “sacred public square,” but a “civil

¹⁶Neuhaus, “The Theocratic Temptation,” 2; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 194; Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom?” 15-20.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 210-211; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 192; Neuhaus, “The Theocratic Temptation,” 3; Neuhaus, “Christian Monisms Against the Gospel,” 3; Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom?” 16; Neuhaus, “Religion and Democracy: A Necessary Tension,” 76.

¹⁹Richard John Neuhaus, “A New Order of Religious Freedom,” *First Things* (February 1992): 15; see also, Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 193; Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 30; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” 72; Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 133.

²⁰Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 291.

public square” in which “different convictions about the common good are engaged within the bond of civility.”²¹

The form of pluralism welcomed by Neuhaus would not require Christians to withdraw from the political arena or to refrain from drawing upon their religious convictions while engaged in public deliberation. He strenuously denied that pluralism means “pretending that our deepest differences make no difference.”²² Neuhaus insisted, however, that the presence of diverse religious and moral perspectives in the public square creates an obligation that Christians “translate” their arguments into a “public vocabulary that is as accessible to as many people as possible,” while exercising a “disciplined restraint in appealing explicitly to religious authority.”²³ Even if the First Amendment permits believers to invoke concepts like Biblical inerrancy in public debates, such a strategy threatens to alienate fellow citizens who disagree on particular instances of Biblical interpretation or subscribe to an entirely different source of authority.²⁴

²¹Richard John Neuhaus, “Civil Religion or Public Philosophy,” *First Things* (December 2000): 72; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Back to the Fifties?” *First Things* (April 1995): 62; First Things, “We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship,” *First Things* (October 1997): 53; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” 71; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 185.

²²Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” 72; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (February 1995): 67; Richard John Neuhaus, “To Choose and Be Chosen,” *First Things* (October 2000): 87-88; Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (February 2007): 66; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 76.

²³*Ibid.*, 73-74; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 125; Richard John Neuhaus, “Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment,” *This World* (Spring-Summer 1985): 45-46; Richard John Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” *Religious Education* 77, no. 3 (1982): 314; Richard John Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss: Law, Rights, and Transcendent Good,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 1 (1987): 62; Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 30; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 48.

²⁴Richard John Neuhaus, “Being Religious in Public Debate,” *First Things* (June-July 1995): 64; First Things, “When Church-State Conflicts Aren’t,” *First Things* (March 1991): 8; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” 74

A failure to convert Biblical precepts into suitably public arguments figured prominently in Neuhaus's initial indictment of politically resurgent fundamentalism. While the fundamentalists were to be applauded, in his mind, for proclaiming the public relevance of the Biblical narrative, their manner of proclamation could not be reconciled with America's pluralistic character.²⁵ The cardinal offense was to "enter the political arena making public claims on the basis of private truths."²⁶ Since fundamentalist interpretations of Bible passages "work within a closed circle of supposedly revealed truth that is neither accountable to nor accessible to those outside that circle," the validity of their claims cannot be "publicly weighed and tested."²⁷ According to Neuhaus, a genuinely public argument must be "transsubjective," which is to say, "not derived from sources of revelation or disposition that are essentially private and arbitrary."²⁸ He worried that the fundamentalists' refusal to subject religious arguments to the scrutiny of public reason would endanger their campaign against secularism by reinforcing the belief that religion and politics truly belong in separate spheres.²⁹

Fortunately, Neuhaus thought, the Christian tradition boasts a rich variety of resources to help bridge the gap between religious and secular worldviews, such that "believer and unbeliever, regenerate and unregenerate, can engage one another in a

²⁵Neuhaus, "Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America," 314.

²⁶Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 36; see also, Neuhaus, "Religion, Secularism and the American Experiment," 46.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 19, 37, 158; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, "The Catholic Moment," *National Review* (November 7, 1986): 46.

shared world of discourse.”³⁰ Pointing to concepts like “common grace” and “general revelation,” he affirmed that God has vouchsafed a degree of moral wisdom to all of His creatures, whether or not they acknowledge Christ as lord and savior.³¹ Neuhaus pinned his hopes for fruitful moral discourse between Christians and non-Christians on the essential claim of the natural law tradition: that human reason can apprehend basic norms of right and wrong conduct. If the universe is governed by natural law, then Christians can contend for moral truths in the public square without appealing to Scriptural or ecclesiastical authority, since these truths are accessible by reason to all thoughtful citizens.³²

Neuhaus, of course, opposed the rigorous separation of religion and politics. At the same time, however, his confidence in the human capacity for reason persuaded him to grant that the political enterprise—apart from the guidance, supervision or interference of religion—possesses an integrity all its own. If God has distributed the faculties of reason and moral discernment generously amongst His creation, then Christians cannot claim a monopoly on political wisdom. In this sense, Neuhaus could wholeheartedly state his preference for being ruled by the proverbial wise Turk rather than the proverbial foolish Christian.³³ Just as the state must acknowledge its utter incompetence in the

³⁰Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 43-44.

³¹Richard John Neuhaus, “In the Peace Movement: New Boy on the Block,” *The Religion and Society Report* (March 1987): 3; Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 56; Neuhaus, “Nihilism Without the Abyss,” 62; Richard John Neuhaus, “Eastern Europe and the Swedish Model,” *First Things* (March 1991): 56; Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 30; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 43-44.

³²*Ibid.*, 3; Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 56; Neuhaus, “Being Religious in Public Debate,” 64.

³³Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 37, 44-45; Richard John Neuhaus, “No Fault Prophecy,” *National Review* (April 10, 1987): 44; Neuhaus, “In the Peace Movement,” 3; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 253.

affairs of religion, he argued, so too must churches concede the superior wisdom of political leaders in sensitive matters of statecraft or the intricate details of policy formation.³⁴ In response to Ronald Reagan's famous 1983 declaration, before the National Association of Evangelicals, that the Bible contains answers to all of America's most pressing problems, Neuhaus wrote: "Indeed, with respect to the ordering of our ultimate loves and loyalties. But the answers to the right ordering of tax policy, the strategy for peace in a nuclear age, and the reform of the welfare system—such answers are not to be found in the Bible," but through the careful exercise of human reason.³⁵

Politicized Religion and the Partisan Church

Monism, then, breeds an impatient yearning for the Kingdom of God that would deny both the value of pluralism and the integrity of the political enterprise, thus precluding a measured devotion to the provisional responsibilities of the Now. Neuhaus, however, identified another, perhaps more insidious catalyst for erasing the tension between the Now and the Not Yet: an inordinate attachment to secular causes that either crowds out the language and symbolism of eschatological hope or exploits them for their political usefulness.

Neuhaus faulted many activist churches of the 1960s for succumbing all too easily to this latter temptation. In their zeal to make a difference politically, he argued, they had been serially guilty of "baptizing as theological or moral insight political viewpoints and

³⁴Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three," 73.

³⁵Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 254.

causes that did not truly emerge from the Christian tradition itself.”³⁶ If they envisioned at all the coming of God’s Kingdom, it was “indistinguishable from the fulfillment of whatever radical projects engaged [their] loyalties” at a given moment.³⁷ Neuhaus challenged the churches to demonstrate more clearly the scriptural or liturgical warrants for their political pronouncements, and to distinguish more carefully between viewpoints the Christian faith makes mandatory and viewpoints about which believers can validly disagree. As he wrote in *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, “protest or advocacy that is offered *in the name of the church or of the Christian faith* must be clearly related” to the teachings of the Bible and the settled doctrines of the faith.³⁸

Throughout his career, Neuhaus continued to recoil at political proposals linked only superficially or tendentiously to core religious teachings. Many denominational and ecumenical organizations, he observed, tend to “move with wondrous alacrity from Bible citation to policy prescription,” barely pausing to consider whether the connection is merited.³⁹ In sadly predictable fashion, groups of conservative and liberal predisposition would discover a Biblical basis for specific policies to which they were already sympathetic. As Neuhaus remarked, “suspicion may be justified when a program that is said to be shaped by specifically Christian vision parallels *tout court* the programs of

³⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Radical,” *The Christian Century* (April 26, 1972): 480.

³⁷Neuhaus, *Time Toward Home*, 2.

³⁸Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 11 (emphasis in original); see also, Neuhaus, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Radical,” 481; Richard John Neuhaus, “American Ethos and the Revolutionary Option: Freedom Beyond Fashion,” *Worldview* (December 1970): 5; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 143.

³⁹ Neuhaus, “In the Peace Movement,” 3; see also, Neuhaus, “No Fault Prophecy,” 44; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Church as Interest Group, Once More,” *First Things* (April 1992): 71; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 43.

secular parties that are at least indifferent to that vision. That is a degree of happy convergence that one might have thought is reserved for the Kingdom of God.”⁴⁰

Especially as he gravitated, in later decades, toward a conservative political identity, Neuhaus wanted to emphasize that his quarrel was not predominantly with the liberal stances of organizations like the National Council of Churches, but with politicized religion in general.⁴¹ The Christian message is “debased,” he argued, when churches condescend to the role of “chaplain-cheerleader for competing political teams.”⁴² Such behavior obscures the fact that all political options fall under transcendent judgment, and that no one platform carries the divine imprimatur.⁴³ And like the fundamentalists, who would impose a subjective reading of the Bible on a pluralistic populace, captivity to partisan programs tends to discredit the case for religion in the public square. If churches merely march underneath the Democratic or Republican Party banners—if, in other words, they contribute nothing beyond manpower and moralistic sloganeering—then secularists can only be confirmed in their suspicion that religion has little relevance to the ordering of public life.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 35; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “A Subversive Activity,” *The Religion and Society Report* (January 1984): 1.

⁴¹Ibid., 35, 223; Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 7; Neuhaus, “The Church as Interest Group, Once More,” 70; Neuhaus, “Against Christian Politics,” 72-73.

⁴²First Things, “The Electoral Uses and Abuses of Religion,” *First Things* (December 1992): 7; see also, Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 156; Neuhaus, “A Subversive Activity,” 1; Richard John Neuhaus, “Just Grievance, Bad Remedy,” *The Religion and Society Report* (September 1985): 2; Richard John Neuhaus, “Two Civil Religions,” *The Religion and Society Report* (February 1989): 2; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 275; Neuhaus, “No Fault Prophecy,” 44.

⁴³Neuhaus, “The Church as Interest Group, Once More,” 74; First Things, “The Electoral Uses and Abuses of Religion,” 7; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 14, 18.

⁴⁴Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 223, 225, 237; Neuhaus, “Just Grievance, Bad Remedy,” 2; Neuhaus, “No Fault Prophecy,” 44; Neuhaus, “The Church as Interest Group, Once More,” 74; First Things, “The Electoral Uses and Abuses of Religion,” 7; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 14.

Ironically, then, Neuhaus regarded religion's striving for political relevance as the surest route to political irrelevance. Indeed, it was this sort of pathetic chasing after political fashions that he blamed for precipitating Mainline Protestantism's twentieth century downward spiral. In Neuhaus's telling, Mainline leaders, having gradually lost confidence in the core doctrines of Christianity, became conspicuously eager to enlist in political causes launched and directed by secular progressives, who viewed their religious collaborators at best with amusement or indifference.⁴⁵ Having surrendered its culture-forming role to this newly ascendant secular vanguard, the Mainline soon discovered itself to be eminently expendable. It "was left," Neuhaus observed, "to sniff around for crumbs that fell off from the tables of the cultural elite. Or, like an aged and somewhat eccentric aunt, it was thanked for occasionally helping out with tasks defined and controlled by others."⁴⁶

Desperate to keep its star burning brightly in the secular progressive firmament, Mainline Protestantism increasingly gave itself over to left-wing political sermonizing related only tenuously to the Gospel message or the church's mission. As Neuhaus argued, the positions staked out by Mainline organizations essentially mirrored the positions of secular liberal advocacy groups, save for a handful of selectively appended Biblical passages.⁴⁷ Even the once-prestigious National Council of Churches "was by the end of the century a skeleton of its former self, barely able to pay its bills, pitifully

⁴⁵Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 215-216.

⁴⁶Ibid., 220; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 225; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Coming Age of Religion," *First Things* (June-July 1994): 68; Richard John Neuhaus, "Three Constellations of American Religion," *First Things* (March 2001): 77; Richard John Neuhaus, "When America was Christian," *First Things* (May 2003): 84.

⁴⁷Ibid., 234; Neuhaus, "The Coming Age of Religion," 67; Neuhaus, "Against Christian Politics," 73.

seeking to demonstrate its public relevance by acting as a wholly owned subsidiary of the liberal wing of the Democratic party.”⁴⁸ Again, it should be emphasized that Neuhaus’s disquiet was not occasioned by the leftward direction of the Mainline’s political lurch. The real disgrace was in exchanging the Gospel of Christ for the “gospel of politics,” and in failing, as a consequence, to articulate a set of moral principles by which all political positions can be judged.⁴⁹

Neuhaus was especially concerned to prevent conflicting political allegiances within the Christian community from causing the church itself to fracture along political fault lines. He thought it essential that the church continue to serve as a place where unity in Christ outweighs divergent perspectives about the right ordering of society.⁵⁰ The church, Neuhaus argued, “understands itself to be a community of faith, worship, and discipline that transcends and sharply relativizes the social and political divides of the world.”⁵¹ By elevating unity in Christ above partisan antagonisms, Neuhaus was exhorting church members not to ignore or keep silent about their differences in political outlook, but to engage these differences in the secure knowledge that higher loyalties are held in common. “A healthy Christian community,” he wrote, “is one in which different and often conflicting views and commitments are not only openly admitted but

⁴⁸Neuhaus, “Three Constellations of American Religion,” 77.

⁴⁹Richard John Neuhaus, “No Time to Chortle,” *The Religion and Society Report* (January 1989): 1; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 223.

⁵⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus,” *Worldview* (June 1973): 48; Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 11, 43; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 141-142; Richard John Neuhaus, “Confessions New and Old,” *The Religion and Society Report* (December 1988): 1; Neuhaus, “Christianity and Democracy”; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 286-287; Neuhaus, *America Against Itself*, 15, 17.

⁵¹Neuhaus, “Confessions New and Old,” 1.

celebrated. Within the sure bond of Christ, a restless community interacts around disparate and always provisional sightings of the Kingdom.”⁵²

In lifting up the church’s ultimate allegiance to the Gospel, Neuhaus was setting himself resolutely against the rival notion of a “partisan church,” defined and sustained by fidelity to a political cause rather than the confession of Christ as lord and savior. For too many Christians, he lamented, “the Church can no longer be a meeting place where understanding can be sought, ideas shared and communion celebrated among those on opposite sides of the barricades. The Church must decide; it must make an unambiguously partisan commitment.”⁵³ Neuhaus denounced the idea a church constituted by partisan agreement as “the ultimate consequence of a loss of transcendence” and a betrayal of Christ tantamount to idolatry.⁵⁴

To illustrate the distinction between an authentically Christian church and a partisan church, Neuhaus contrasted the idea of a “theology of politics” against the idea of a “political theology.” A theology of politics “affirms the political enterprise itself and gives assurance that the ‘ought’ that is pursued in that enterprise can be congruent with the will of God.”⁵⁵ Rather than pressing for a specific political agenda, it concerns itself more generally with articulating “the public rules by which social life is to be ordered and which are accessible to all rational actors.”⁵⁶ A political theology, by contrast, “is more

⁵²Neuhaus, “Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus,” 48; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 141-142; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 225.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 155.

⁵⁵Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 56; see also, Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 216.

⁵⁶Ibid., 57.

closely tied to a political ideology.”⁵⁷ It subjects Christian truth claims and liturgical practices to a test of partisan utility, making their value contingent upon a perceived usefulness in symbolically foreshadowing or concretely realizing desired political results.⁵⁸

For Neuhaus, the most dangerous political theologies seducing the church were the versions of liberation theology popular in impoverished Latin American countries, which refashioned the Christian Gospel of deliverance from sin into a Marxist gospel of deliverance from the predations of capitalism. Liberation theologians, he remarked, are “eager to bring the masses in on the secret about traditional religion, namely, that it is not about what most people have thought it was about. It is not about God and angels and heaven and hell ‘out there’ or in the distant future but about radical change here and now.”⁵⁹ Exalting the quest for socialism above the message of salvation, liberation theology enshrined revolutionary potential as the touchstone of Christian truth.⁶⁰ Neuhaus, however, vigorously contested the notion “that we can select, invent, and reshape religious symbols” purely for service in revolutionary programs.⁶¹ Any revolution, he wrote, that “requires a compromise of theological truth, or sets itself up as the norm of theological truth, is a bad revolution....For the Christian, the truth of ultimate

⁵⁷Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 56-57.

⁵⁸Ibid., 57; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 217.

⁵⁹Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 76.

⁶⁰Neuhaus, “Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus,” 46; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 145; Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 68; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 197, 227.

⁶¹Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 87.

allegiance is the Gospel of God's justifying grace in Jesus Christ, and the community of ultimate allegiance is the Church constituted and sustained by the Gospel."⁶²

Of course, Neuhaus was anything but indifferent about alleviating the suffering of the poor, both material and spiritual, and his overall support for free-market capitalism always came packaged with countervailing critiques. Still, he joined Pope John Paul II and other Catholic hierarchs in rejecting liberation theology as a perversion of the Christian Gospel that falsely converted the promise of redemption into promise of socio-economic transformation.⁶³ No validly Christian theology, Neuhaus insisted, can "attempt to reconstitute or redefine the Church in terms of a program of social and political change," to "posit an ideologically-defined 'people's church' against the Church constituted by the Gospel," or to "replace the Gospel itself with an ideology for social transformation which we then call the Gospel."⁶⁴

The Priority of the "No"

In *The Catholic Moment*, and also in a lengthy *This World* article, Neuhaus related the cautionary tale of Emanuel Hirsch, a German Protestant theologian who became a Nazi party loyalist. In Hirsch's fall from grace, he saw the perils of partisan captivity made frighteningly manifest. As Neuhaus describes him, Hirsch was an intellectual who held liberal democracy in contempt and yearned for a more potent political ethic capable of catapulting the German people to world supremacy.⁶⁵ He did

⁶²Neuhaus, "The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment," 68.

⁶³Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 287.

⁶⁴Neuhaus, "The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment," 69; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 227.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 59; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 218-219.

not view the German church as a community where political differences are transcended in the name of a higher loyalty to Christ, but instead sought a “true people’s church of the historical moment” that could commit unreservedly to National Socialism.⁶⁶ Sensing a perfect harmony between Christian principles and the imperative of German advancement, Hirsch — with good intentions but poor foresight — ended up giving a “moral and theological carte blanche” to Hitler’s program.⁶⁷

Hirsch’s allegiance to the Nazi regime prompted an anguished letter from a friend and fellow theologian, Paul Tillich. Despite sharing an ambivalent attitude toward liberal democracy and some sympathy for socialism, Tillich was horrified that Hirsch would so closely identify Christian truth claims with any one set of national or political ambitions. As Neuhaus describes the argument, the core accusation made by Tillich was that “Hirsch has collapsed theology into politics, giving an uncritical spiritual legitimation to his judgment of contingent events.”⁶⁸ Hirsch had forgotten, in other words, that Christian unity must transcend national, racial, or class-based solidarity.⁶⁹

Neuhaus commended one lesson, in particular, from Tillich’s reproach: the necessity of correctly prioritizing what Tillich called the “reservatum” and the “obligatum”—roughly defined as a No and a Yes. In the domain of Christian political commitments, the No must always take priority to the Yes. Many transparently oppressive and unjust regimes—Soviet Russia, Communist North Korea, or theocratic

⁶⁶Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 221; see also, Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 60.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 221; see also, Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 61.

⁶⁸Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 62; see also, Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 222.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 63; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 222-223.

Iran, for instance—warrant a categorical No, but no earthly political arrangement deserves the categorical Yes that Hirsch bestowed upon Nazi Germany.⁷⁰ Having already pledged their ultimate Yes to the Kingdom of God, Christians can give at most a partial, provisional Yes to the flawed political structures of the temporal realm. As Neuhaus explained, “history has thrown up numerous distortions of the common good to which the Church can and must say No. Short of the Kingdom of God, however, there is no politically established definition of the common good—nor any candidate for such establishment—to which the Church can say an unequivocal Yes.”⁷¹

Conclusion: “Alien Citizens”

H. Richard Niebuhr famously limned five archetypes employed by theologians to characterize the relationship between Christ and Culture. In the opening chapter of *The Catholic Moment*, Neuhaus borrowed from Niebuhr’s conceptual apparatus to ascertain the proper relationship between the nearly analogous domains of Church and World. After running through the specific virtues and shortcomings he associated with each model, Neuhaus declared himself partial to the option of Church and World in paradox. “In this way of thinking about Christian existence,” he explained, “the Christian lives, as it were, in different worlds [and] different realities,” wherein “the things that we think we know do not fit together.”⁷² It is a situation experienced not as a “riddle or puzzle” to be solved by human reasoning, but as an intractable reality to be “superseded” by the advent

⁷⁰Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy*, 32; Neuhaus, “Calling a Halt to Retreat,” 144, 148; Neuhaus, “The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment,” 65; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 225; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 291.

⁷¹Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 225.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 22-23.

of God's Kingdom.⁷³ "Church and world," Neuhaus predicted, "will continue in paradox for the duration. We cannot resolve it, and we must not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can resolve it, before the End Time."⁷⁴

In a world fraught with paradox, how then shall Christians live? Neuhaus, in response, advocated for the fittingly paradoxical concept of living as "alien citizens."⁷⁵ Neither denigrating nor absolutizing their overlapping loyalties toward the Now and Not Yet, alien citizens attend to provisional responsibilities that reflect—but never replace—their eschatological hopes. As Neuhaus opined, "it is not 'more Christian' to be an alien, nor is it 'more Christian' to be a citizen; both belong to radical discipleship. The preachers of earthly power need to be reminded that we are aliens. The preachers of powerlessness and disengagement need to be reminded that we are citizens."⁷⁶

Neuhaus was fond of illustrating the paradox of alien citizenship by reference to the second century Letter to Diognetus, in which the anonymous author, addressing a befuddled Roman pagan, vindicates the apparent indifference of the early Christian community toward earthly power and pleasure. As citizens, the letter states, "Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life." At the same time, "there is something extraordinary about their

⁷³Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 24.

⁷⁴Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 35.

⁷⁵Ibid., 193, 287; Neuhaus, "'We Hold These Truths' — An Argument to be Engaged," 70; Neuhaus, "The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens," 64; Neuhaus, "The Ambiguities of 'Christian America,'" 288-289; Richard John Neuhaus, "Democracy, Desperately Dry," in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, eds. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 16.

⁷⁶Neuhaus, "Democratic Morality," 16.

lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.”⁷⁷ Even though Christians today live under conditions very different than their second century predecessors, Neuhaus thought the Letter to Diognetus nevertheless speaks profoundly to their circumstance as pilgrims on earth.

In every historical period, and under regimes both friendly and hostile, Christians have endeavored to strike the proper balance between their dual identities of alien and citizen. Where the government has conferred official favor upon their faith, and even in robustly pluralistic climates like America, they have been enticed into partaking excessively of the comforts and privileges of citizenship. On other occasions—either by deliberate choice, as with the Anabaptist communities; or by necessity, as with the targets of state-sponsored persecution—they have passed their earthly sojourn primarily as aliens. Short of the Kingdom’s coming, Neuhaus did not expect any satisfactory resolution to the nettlesome dilemma of divided loyalties. “Being alien citizens,” he wrote, “is an exceedingly awkward and complicated business, and Christians will likely never get it entirely right until our exile is ended, and then we won’t have to worry about it anymore.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷Neuhaus cites passages from the Letter to Diognetus in Richard John Neuhaus, “Is Patriotism a Virtue?” *The Religion and Society Report* (July 1987): 3; Neuhaus, “Christian Monisms Against the Gospel,” 3; Neuhaus, “Democratic Morality,” 16; Neuhaus, “Against Christian Politics,” 74; Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Two,” 89; Richard John Neuhaus, “How Christianity Coopts its Contradictions,” *First Things* (August-September 2000): 86; Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 150-151; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 285; Neuhaus, “Democracy, Desperately Dry,” 15.

⁷⁸Neuhaus, “The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens,” 64.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The Story of the World”: The Relationship of the Catholic Church to the Now and the Not Yet

In 1990, Neuhaus made a momentous decision that surprised many of his personal friends and professional colleagues: to leave the Lutheran faith in which he had been raised, and to which he had devoted nearly three decades of his adult life, in order to join the Roman Catholic Church—where he would be ordained as a priest soon thereafter. Neuhaus, for his part, had always envisioned a time when Lutherans could rejoin the church from which they withdrew in the sixteenth century. The purpose of Lutheranism, he maintained, was not to create a new and autonomous denomination, but to serve as a movement of reform within the one true Church. Only when he concluded that Lutheranism had resigned itself to the likelihood of permanent estrangement did Neuhaus begin seriously to contemplate “becoming the Catholic [he] was.”¹

Although much more could be said about Neuhaus’s underlying motivations, the theological impetus for his conversion is not principally the subject of this chapter. I have undertaken, instead, to ascertain the impact of Catholic thinkers and concepts on his view of the relationship between the Now and the Not Yet. In actuality, one can detect the influence of Catholic ideas on Neuhaus’s thought well before he formally joined the Church. In the opening pages of *The Naked Public Square*, published six years before his conversion, Neuhaus described himself as a Lutheran possessed of certain catholic

¹A more thorough account of the reasons for his conversion can be found in Richard John Neuhaus, “How I Became the Catholic I Was,” *First Things* (April 2002); Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 31-59.

sensibilities.² And his prediction, in *The Catholic Moment*, that Catholics were poised to take the lead in giving moral direction to the American experiment, came three years prior to his departure from Lutheranism.

This chapter opens by exploring Neuhaus's increasing reliance upon Catholic insights—particularly the writings of John Courtney Murray and Pope John Paul II—in making the case for the Now of American democracy. The subsequent section recounts his reasons for investing the Catholic Church with the culture-forming responsibilities that used to belong to Mainline Protestantism. Two further sections examine how the Church's witness has maintained the tension between the Now and the Not Yet—first, by repudiating the state church concept; and second, by providing an institutional barrier against national idolatry. And finally, I discuss how Neuhaus's gravitation toward the Catholic faith led him to a newfound appreciation for Augustine's insights about the City of Man and the City of God. The overarching purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate that Catholicism, while not fundamentally altering the character of his reflections on the Now and the Not Yet, did supply a host of philosophical and theological resources from which his own writings handsomely profited.

Catholicism and Liberal Democracy

Throughout much of American history, the relationship between Catholicism and liberal democracy has been marked by a mutual uneasiness occasionally erupting into outright hostility. With notable exceptions like John Carroll, the first bishop assigned to the United States, Church authorities have denounced liberal democracy as a heretical innovation, dismissing the democratic concept of individual rights as incompatible with

² Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), ix-x.

the Catholic spirit of community. Many Americans, for their part, have subscribed to what Neuhaus dubbed the “Blanshard Thesis,” named for Paul Blanshard, a prominent mid-twentieth century secular humanist and outspoken critic of Catholicism.³ According to the Blanshard Thesis, Catholicism and American democracy are inherently antagonistic, since Catholic loyalties belong to a hierarchical institution headed, as the saying goes, by a foreign potentate.⁴

Rejecting the Blanshard Thesis, Neuhaus turned especially to the writings of John Courtney Murray and the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II for distinctly Catholic arguments in favor of liberal democracy. Murray, the Jesuit priest and theologian whose once-controversial theories ended up playing a pivotal role in the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council, endeavored to reconcile Catholic doctrines with the principles of the American founding. In his best-known work, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, and elsewhere, Murray sought to demonstrate how Catholic teachings about human nature, political order and natural law reasoning could supply the sturdiest moral and theological foundations for the American experiment. Neuhaus hoped the “Murray Project”—as he called the combined efforts of Murray and his acolytes—would offer Catholics the intellectual and spiritual resources to affirm liberal democracy without compromising the core convictions of their faith.⁵

³Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 247-248.

⁴*Ibid.*, see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Kinds of Catholics,” *National Review* (July 3, 1987): 42; Richard John Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” *First Things* (May 2001): 70; Richard John Neuhaus, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Meanings of Freedom,” *First Things* (August-September 2003): 68.

⁵Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 248, 252; Neuhaus, “Kinds of Catholics,” 42; Richard John Neuhaus, “Democracy, Desperately Dry,” in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, eds. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 4-17.

In Neuhaus's view, the Murray Project received an enormous boost from the pontificate of John Paul II, and especially his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. Written to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's celebrated statement on right relations between workers and employers, *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical delivered what Neuhaus interpreted as a thorough vindication of liberal democracy as practiced in America.⁶ In his judgment, the pope's treatise represented a "summing up of the theological, philosophical, and practical case for the modern democratic society."⁷ Prior to John Paul's ordination, Neuhaus argued, Catholic hierarchs were inclined to view liberal democracy suspiciously because of lingering traumas from the virulently anti-clerical French Revolution.⁸ Only with *Centesimus Annus* did "magisterial teaching about modernity, democracy, and human freedom" truly absorb the very different legacy of 1776—that a political system premised upon protection of individual rights need not entail hostility toward the Catholic ideal of vibrant communal life.⁹

Neither in John Courtney Murray's writings nor in John Paul's encyclicals did Neuhaus discover anything approaching an uncritical celebration of the American experiment. Murray, he observed, "could be as withering as Reinhold Niebuhr in his

⁶Richard John Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II," *First Things* (May 1997): 16.

⁷Richard John Neuhaus, "'We Hold These Truths' — An Argument to be Engaged," *First Things* (November 1997): 71; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew — Part One," *First Things* (October 1999): 87-88; Richard John Neuhaus, "Religion and Politics: 'The Great Separation,'" *First Things* (January 2008): 60; Richard John Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome: The Church in American Awakening* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999), 143-144.

⁸Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 169; Richard John Neuhaus, "Poland: Reflections on a New World," *First Things* (February 1994): 22; Neuhaus, "Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment," 72; Richard John Neuhaus, "While We're at It," *First Things* (April 2006): 69.

⁹Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II," 18; see also, Neuhaus, "Proposing Democracy Anew — Part One," 89; Neuhaus, "Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment," 72.

strictures against national pride and self-aggrandizement.”¹⁰ And *Centesimus Annus*, he acknowledged, contained “searing criticisms” of the many injustices America either has actively perpetuated or passively allowed to smolder.¹¹ Neuhaus admired Murray and John Paul not because they sanctified the existing America or excused away its flaws, but because they upended the Blanshard Thesis, showing how Catholics pledged fully to the Not Yet of God’s Kingdom could faithfully devote themselves to the Now of the American experiment.

The Catholic Moment

The preceding two chapters have detailed Neuhaus’s distress over Mainline Protestantism’s plunge from the heights of public prominence to the depths of near irrelevance, as the once-proud moral caretaker for the American experiment, desperate for the approbation of the secular elite that inherited its mantle, was reduced to the role of cheerleader for progressive political causes. For Neuhaus, the Mainline’s abdication of its cultural throne created a vacuum that America’s rival religious traditions would inevitably compete to occupy. Drawing upon the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto’s theory of the “circulation of elites,” he hypothesized that the Mainline was simply following a well-worn path: After reigning over a particular branch of society for a long period, an elite group “becomes flabby or disillusioned and no longer performs the

¹⁰Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 252; see also, Neuhaus, “Democracy, Desperately Dry,” 8.

¹¹Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” 21.

function by which it acquired its privileged social position,” and some new elite “circulates” in to displace the exhausted predecessor.¹²

Which religious tradition would supplant Mainline Protestantism in its position at the commanding heights of American culture? Neuhaus devoted the final three pages in the closing chapter of *The Naked Public Square* to briefly assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the most obvious candidates. Reluctantly, and despite fervent wishes to the contrary, he concluded that the newly assertive Religious Right stood the best chance of grabbing the Mainline’s baton. After all, they had become adept at invoking the sort of patriotic themes that Mainline leaders had grown to find embarrassing, and they had “played a large part in alerting the society to the absurdities and dangers of the naked public square.”¹³ In thinking through his forecast, Neuhaus did not pass lightly over the Catholic Church. “By virtue of numbers, of a rich tradition of social and political theory, and of Vatican II’s theological internalization of the democratic idea,” he argued, “Catholics are uniquely positioned to propose the American proposition anew.”¹⁴ He ultimately refrained, however, from heralding a “Catholic moment” in America based on a suspicion that the most politically committed Catholics were showing troubling signs of emulating the partisan style of Mainline Protestant organizations.¹⁵

Three years later, with the publication of *The Catholic Moment*, Neuhaus evidently overcame his earlier hesitations. American society finally had arrived at a

¹²Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 261-262; see also, Richard John Neuhaus, “Educational Diversity in Post-Secular America,” *Religious Education* 77, no. 3 (1982): 316.

¹³*Ibid.*, 264; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 227; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Catholic Moment,” *National Review* (November 7, 1986): 46.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

“moment,” he proclaimed, “in which the Roman Catholic Church in the United States assumes its rightful role in the culture-forming task of constructing a religiously informed public philosophy for the American experiment in ordered liberty.”¹⁶ Because of the Church’s “size, tradition, structure, charisms, and energies,” he continued, it “will have a singular part in shaping the world-historical future of Christianity.”¹⁷ To be sure, Neuhaus envisioned the Catholic Church carrying out its culture-forming responsibilities in close ecumenical partnership with fundamentalists and evangelicals.¹⁸ Still, he expected Catholicism to take the lead in furnishing the moral and philosophical resources through which this partnership might cultivate a God-honoring interaction between the Now and the Not Yet.¹⁹

Neuhaus never shed entirely his misgivings about Catholicism potentially traveling the same road as the Mainline churches, and thus missing its appointment to provide moral leadership for the American experiment. This sense of uneasiness was occasioned by what he saw as the widespread assumption that Catholics had “arrived” in America, so to speak, only by conforming to the regnant ethos of individualistic Protestantism—which is to say, by becoming “just like everybody else.”²⁰ Having been welcomed into the mainstream of American society following the presidency of John F. Kennedy and the modernizing ambitions of the Second Vatican Council, the Church

¹⁶Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 283; see also, Neuhaus, “The Catholic Moment,” 46.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 287; Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 124-131; “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* (May 1994): 16-20; “We Hold These Truths: A Statement of Christian Conscience and Citizenship,” *First Things* (October 1997): 51-54.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁹Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” 70-73.

²⁰Richard John Neuhaus, “Three Constellations of American Religion,” *First Things* (March 2001): 73; see also, Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 237; Neuhaus, “Kinds of Catholics,” 42; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 121.

could be tempted to settle for being just another denominational option in the cafeteria of individualized American spirituality.²¹ Only by remaining faithful to its core doctrines and ecclesiastical self-understanding—by remaining, in other words, “the church we mean when we say ‘church’”—did Neuhaus believe that Catholicism could fulfill the promise of the Catholic Moment.²²

Repudiating the Thesis

Regarding the hotly contested question of the Second Vatican Council’s legacy, Neuhaus—eschewing the conventional framing of the Council as essentially a dispute between conservatives and liberals—liked to distinguish between what he called the “party of continuity” and the “party of discontinuity.” In the former camp were those, like Neuhaus, who did not discern a fundamental break with the past; while the latter cohort consisted of arch-conservatives who saw a craven surrender of Catholic patrimony and liberals who saw a hidebound, atavistic institution mercifully dragged into modernity.²³ While generally counting himself among the party of continuity, Neuhaus made at least a partial exception when discussing the Church’s embrace, during the Council, of full religious liberty.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Neuhaus argued, the Catholic hierarchy tended to prefer a state church model resembling Spain under General Franco—in short,

²¹Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 259; Neuhaus, “The Catholic Moment,” 46; Richard John Neuhaus, “To Be American,” *First Things* (August-September 2004): 97; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 150.

²²Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 10. (Neuhaus borrowed this expression from the Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce); see also, Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 262-263.

²³Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 49; Richard John Neuhaus, “What Really Happened at Vatican II,” *First Things* (October 2008): 26-27; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 178.

“a Catholic state in a Catholic society.”²⁴ Vatican authorities considered established Catholicism as the “thesis” and pluralism as the corresponding “hypothesis,” which could be tolerated provisionally until conditions had ripened sufficiently to implement the thesis.²⁵ For Neuhaus, Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Freedom represented an emphatic repudiation of the state church model, and the concomitant doctrine that “error has no rights.”²⁶ Thanks to the patient labors of theologians like John Courtney Murray, the Church learned that its monistic hunger to collapse the Not Yet into the Now had “compromised and obscured the lordship of Christ by confusing his rule with ecclesiastical power in the temporal realm.”²⁷ It was a lesson poignantly symbolized for Neuhaus by the refusal of Pope John Paul I to be crowned with the papal tiara, which had signified the Vatican’s aspirations to earthly power.²⁸

As a member of the party of continuity, Neuhaus could not bring himself to treat the Church’s embrace of pluralism and religious liberty as an innovation totally unrelated to pre-Vatican II Catholicism. While previous generations of Vatican leadership might have pined for a Catholic State in a Catholic society, where error has no rights, the Church has always upheld—in theory, if not in practice—the principle of human dignity.

²⁴Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 132; see also, Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 116; Richard John Neuhaus, “The Theocratic Temptation,” *The Religion and Society Report* (May 1987): 3; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 249; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” *Concordia Journal* (July 1991): 288.

²⁵Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 194; Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 132-133.

²⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “Eastern Europe and the Swedish Model,” *First Things* (March 1991): 57; Richard John Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” *First Things* (February 1996): 31; Neuhaus, “‘We Hold These Truths’ — An Argument to be Engaged,” 71; Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 289; Neuhaus, “Democracy, Desperately Dry,” 6.

²⁷Neuhaus, “‘We Hold These Truths’ — An Argument to be Engaged,” 71; see also, Neuhaus, “The Ambiguities of ‘Christian America,’” 289.

²⁸Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 161.

“The Second Vatican Council’s declaration on religious freedom,” Neuhaus noted, “is titled *Dignitatis Humanae*. Respect for the dignity of the other person created in the image of God requires that we not silence him or exclude him but try to persuade him.”²⁹ Error as such may have no rights, but errors always come attached to people who do have rights.³⁰ Neuhaus was fond of quoting a remark from Pope John Paul II’s 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*: “The Church imposes nothing. She only proposes.”³¹ He added: “She would not impose if she could. Authentic faith is of necessity an act of freedom....The Church is to propose—relentlessly, boldly, persuasively, winsomely.”³²

Compensating for Ecclesiastical Deficit

Catholicism, then, keeps alive the necessary tension between the Now and the Not Yet by rejecting the premature synthesis represented by the ideal of a Catholic state in a Catholic society. It further maintains this tension, Neuhaus argued, by acting as an institutional barrier against the premature synthesis represented by the elevation of a particular nation-state into a substitute church. Historically, he believed, America has suffered from an acute “ecclesiastical deficit,” brought on jointly by its refutation of an established church and the near invisibility of Catholicism during the founding period.³³ Without a visible and rooted ecclesiastical presence—a church “not notional but real”—

²⁹Neuhaus, “Why we Can Get Along,” 31; see also, Neuhaus, “Eastern Europe and the Swedish Model,” 57.

³⁰Ibid., 31; Richard John Neuhaus, “Proposing Democracy Anew — Part Three,” *First Things* (December 1999): 73.

³¹Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome*, 144; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 144-145; Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” 19.

³²Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II,” 19.

³³Richard John Neuhaus, “Our American Babylon,” *First Things* (December 2005): 25.

Americans are deprived of the natural outlet for their transcendent hopes and aspirations, and the nation, to borrow from G.K. Chesterton, acquires “the soul of a church.”³⁴ Protestants might protest that their own churches transcend national allegiance, but they lack the “stubbornly institutionalized thus and so-ness,” or the “sheer isness,” of which Rome can boast.³⁵ By dint of its chronological and geographic reach, Neuhaus argued, the Catholic Church is best positioned to arrest the mutation of wholesome patriotic piety into national idolatry.³⁶

Drawing upon the work of Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson, Neuhaus liked to claim that the story told by the Catholic Church—man’s fall and redemption, and the promised future of God’s Kingdom—constitutes nothing less than “the story of the world.”³⁷ As “the reality of Christ through time,” the Church’s story forms, in Neuhaus’ words, “the center upon which world history turns, and the end toward which it presses.”³⁸ By forever reminding the world of the transcendent destiny it is inclined to resist or forget, the Church’s story sets an eschatological horizon for all other personal, local, national and civilizational stories, very much including the story of the American

³⁴Neuhaus, “Our American Babylon,” 25; see also, Neuhaus, “Three Constellations of American Religion,” 73; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 171.

³⁵Neuhaus, “Three Constellations of American Religion,” 75; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 62.

³⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “Genuine Pluralism and the Pfefferian Inversion,” *This World* (Winter 1989): 84; Neuhaus, “Our American Babylon,” 24-26; Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” 73.

³⁷Neuhaus, “Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment,” 72; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 154.

³⁸*Ibid.*

experiment.³⁹ Catholicism, then, tells a story that prevents patriotic Americans from reading too much divine significance into their own national story.

Rediscovering Augustine

Perhaps the most enduring consequence of Neuhaus's gravitation toward Catholicism was a rediscovery of Augustine and a newfound appreciation for his magnum opus, the *City of God*. In the years following his conversion, Neuhaus came to celebrate the Augustinian Two Cities paradigm as the best conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between the Now and the Not Yet of the Christian experience. Reminiscing about his intellectual development in a largely autobiographical article written for *The Christian Century* during the year of his conversion, Neuhaus described himself as "increasingly formed and informed by the radical wisdom of Augustine," whom he credits for warning against "the perilous confusion and fatal conflation of the City of God and the City of Man."⁴⁰ In a *First Things* symposium commemorating the twentieth anniversary of *The Naked Public Square*, he suggested that the book would have relied firmly upon Augustine's insights had it been composed after he joined the Catholic Church.⁴¹

³⁹Neuhaus, "Something Like, Just Maybe, a Catholic Moment," 73; Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters*, 154.

⁴⁰Richard John Neuhaus, "Religion and Public Life: The Continuing Conversation," *The Christian Century* (July 11-18, 1990): 671.

⁴¹"The Naked Public Square Now: A Symposium," *First Things* (November 2004): 24.

Alongside Augustine, Neuhaus had long commended several similar attempts within the Christian tradition at distinguishing between the temporal and eternal patterns of Christ's Lordship:⁴²

In making arguments over the years, I have been ecumenical in enlisting resources as various as the Augustinian 'two cities,' the Lutheran 'twofold kingdom of God,' the Calvinist 'spheres of sovereignty,' the 'Christian realism' of Reinhold Niebuhr et al., and the Catholic understanding of the common good grounded in natural law and explicated in the Church's social doctrine. All of these are, I believe, compatible with and supportive of the liberal tradition that I affirm.⁴³

For all the incongruities between these modes of thinking, Neuhaus applauded them for conveying something essential about the Now and the Not Yet. Throughout most of his life, he seemed content to trumpet this essential "something" without wading too deeply into the philosophical and theological weeds. But eventually, Neuhaus shifted toward articulating a more candidly Augustinian vocabulary, a process culminating in his December 2005 *First Things* essay, "Our American Babylon," and his final book, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile*, published posthumously in 2009.

American Babylon, as the title would suggest, analogizes the American circumstance to the ancient Israelites' season of captivity in Babylon. Just as Jeremiah exhorted the exiled Jewish community to seek the good of Babylon while patiently awaiting its liberation, Neuhaus calls upon his Christian countrymen to seek the good of America while they patiently await the coming of God's Kingdom. Wherever and whenever they happen to dwell, God's people are called to provisional responsibilities in

⁴²Richard John Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy: Thinking and Acting in the Courage of Uncertainty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 21-22; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Obligations and Limits of Political Commitment," *This World* (Spring-Summer 1986): 56; Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment*, 216; Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 115; Richard John Neuhaus, "The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens," *First Things* (June-July 1998): 62.

⁴³Neuhaus, "The Extraordinary Politics of Alien Citizens," 62.

the City of Man as they complete their pilgrimage toward the City of God. In the entire Christian tradition, Neuhaus writes, there is “no more compelling depiction of our circumstance than Saint Augustine’s *City of God*. Short of the final coming of the Kingdom, the City of God and the earthly city are intermingled. We are to make use of, pray for, and do our share for the earthly city,” while never forgetting the true destination of our pilgrimage.⁴⁴ References to Augustine, and to the Cities of God and Man, are strewn liberally about the book’s pages, and as Neuhaus confirms, “the influence is pervasive.”⁴⁵

* * * *

Does Neuhaus’s thought truly embody an Augustinian tension between the imperatives of the Now and the Not Yet? That is the question to which we now turn. In the concluding section of this paper, I address two prevailing varieties of criticism to which Neuhaus has been subjected. One group of detractors has accused Neuhaus of harboring a desire to transform the American order into something resembling a Christian theocracy. Another set of critics has charged — more plausibly, in my opinion, but still wrongly — that Christian truths have figured all too scantily in his perspective on liberal democracy.

⁴⁴Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 32.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 22-23.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

As I have already had occasion to mention, the “End of Democracy” symposium published in the November 1996 issue of *First Things*—and especially the editorial introduction openly questioning the legitimacy of American democracy—exposed Richard John Neuhaus to torrents of obloquy, not least from his fellow conservatives. In the outpouring of commentary prompted by the symposium, the theocratic impulse allegedly betrayed by Neuhaus emerged as one of the dominant themes. While his remonstrations against judicial overreach won universal applause among conservatives, many erstwhile allies could not stomach what they took to be his ambitions to implement an explicitly Christian political order. The rival symposium published in *Commentary* contained many reactions of this variety.

Constitutional law scholar Walter Berns, for instance, ascribed to Neuhaus the opinion that “the Constitution is essentially a religious document, embodying moral law, and specifically...the natural law as espoused by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and enunciated in various papal encyclicals even today.”¹ Berns, who stepped down from the *First Things* editorial advisory board to voice his disapproval, warned that the symposium would “confirm the opinion, held by many Americans, some of them Republicans, that religious conservatives are extremists and are not to be trusted.”² Irwin Stelzer, a conservative economist, bemoaned “the decision by the denizens of *First*

¹Walter Berns, “On the Future of Conservatism,” (Contributor) *Commentary* (February 1997): 15.

²*Ibid.*, 16.

Things to come out of the closet and ‘fess up to their immortal longings for a society that derives its legitimacy solely from their divinely informed approval.”³ Alleging “contempt for the democratic process,” Stelzer concluded that “Jewish intellectuals may be useful exponents of some of the positions of the *First Things* Catholics, but they should not expect to be partners in a governing theocracy.”⁴

Other parties to the intramural skirmish, while refraining from accusing Neuhaus of theocratic tendencies, saw in the “End of Democracy” editorial an impatient longing that American public policy conform to Christian moral standards. In a *First Things* letter to the editor, Midge Decter reminded Neuhaus that “the cultural battle over these issues will be a long and slogging and often thankless one.”⁵ Decter, a one-time editor at *First Things* and wife of Norman Podhoretz—one of Neuhaus’s harshest critics during the controversy—concluded her letter with a personal appeal: “I presume in the name of friendship, then, to accuse you of growing impatient with your labors, and in your impatience, reckless. And I beg you: do not be impatient, and for heaven’s sake do not be reckless about the legitimacy of this country.”⁶ In both the *Commentary* symposium and her own letter to *First Things*, the conservative intellectual historian Gertrude Himmelfarb—who had resigned from Neuhaus’s editorial board—sounded a similar note of moderation. Conservatives, she wrote, have “succeeded in bringing about important

³Irwin Stelzer, “On the Future of Conservatism,” (Contributor) *Commentary* (February 1997): 38.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Midge Decter, “Correspondence,” *First Things* (January 1997): 9.

⁶*Ibid.*

changes in the polity and social policy,” but they will build on this momentum only by remaining “patient, prudent, and responsible.”⁷

Of course, one might plausibly wonder how much chastisements of this sort truly reveal about Neuhaus’s religious and political propensities. After all, contributors to the *Commentary* symposium and other critics of the “End of Democracy” editorial were responding merely to one article, rather than examining Neuhaus’s thought in its entirety. Had any of them been assigned to carefully review several decades’ worth of his writing, they might well have reached very different conclusions. Therefore, even if they have misread the “End of Democracy” editorial as a brief for theocracy or a groaning of eschatological impatience—as I believe they have—it would strain credulity to suggest that they have labeled Neuhaus a thoroughgoing theocrat. One cannot use this logic, however, to exonerate Damon Linker, author of *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege*. Linker, an associate editor at *First Things* for nearly four years, has read through virtually the entire Neuhaus corpus, producing what amounts to an intellectual biography of his former boss, albeit an unpersuasive one. His central claim is that Neuhaus envisions “a future in which the country is thoroughly permeated by orthodox Christian piety, and secular politics are driven out in favor of an explicitly theological approach to ordering the nation’s public life.”⁸

Both the mentor and the wayward protégé denied that any personal animus instigated the writing of *The Theocons*. In the “Acknowledgments” section, Linker cited “loyalty to the truth and devotion to the good of the nation” as the sole motivating

⁷Gertrude Himmelfarb, “On the Future of Conservatism,” (Contributor) *Commentary* (February 1997): 22.

⁸Damon Linker, *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), xiii.

factors.⁹ He recalled that Neuhaus was “unfailingly generous” and maintained that he “harbor[s] no ill will” toward any of the “theocons.”¹⁰ Neuhaus, for his part, commented on the book only once, and very briefly, in the pages of *First Things*, pleading that a “point-by-point refutation of the book’s many misrepresentations would be exceedingly tedious.”¹¹ According to Neuhaus, Linker was a “cooperative colleague” who “gave no indication that he was not completely supportive of the mission of the magazine,” with the exception of its post-September 11 stance on American foreign policy.¹² Conceding the inscrutability of the human heart, I raise no quarrel with these explanations. One need not speculate about hidden grudges, however, to recognize the sheer intellectual distance Linker has traveled from Neuhaus, for such evidence abounds throughout the pages of *The Theocons*.

In Linker’s telling, the energetic mix of writing, editing and institution-building practiced by Neuhaus—along with allies like Michael Novak and George Weigel—has been part of a calculated plan to obtain political power for theocratic ends. The first step, Linker argues, was to create a “theocon infrastructure” consisting of think tanks, journals and intellectual coalitions.¹³ Having laid the institutional and intellectual foundations for a theocratic takeover, Neuhaus’s alliance would then wait for the election of an ideologically biddable president willing to implement the theo-conservative agenda.¹⁴

⁹Linker, *The Theocons*, 230.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Richard John Neuhaus, “While We’re At It,” *First Things* (August-September 2006): 76-77.

¹²Ibid, 77.

¹³Linker, *The Theocons*, 81-87.

¹⁴Ibid., 87, 116, 118.

With the inauguration of a conservative evangelical in George W. Bush, Linker argues, the theocons had discovered a politician they could easily manipulate.¹⁵ Looking apprehensively toward the possible triumph of Neuhaus's movement, Linker envisions "a future in which American politics and culture have been systematically purged of secularism and the country reconstituted as an emphatically Catholic-Christian nation."¹⁶ In such a country, he predicts, "Catholic moral absolutism" would reign supreme in the public square, citizens would find themselves at the mercy of "unchecked ecclesiastical authorities," and non-Christian dissenters would be targeted for persecution.¹⁷

Leave aside Linker's bizarre intimations of a sinister plot, hatched and coordinated by Neuhaus, to fundamentally transform the American political order by discreetly pulling the levers of presidential power. Neuhaus, of course, has been indispensable in the building of a formidable intellectual movement, and he did consult periodically with then-President Bush on issues like abortion and faith-based initiatives. My primary concern, however, is not with Linker's implausible conjectures regarding Neuhaus's underlying motivations, but with his specious conclusions about Neuhaus's ideas. Linker appears to have ignored, or at least to have insufficiently appreciated, Neuhaus's many condemnations of the Christian Reconstructionist movement to reconstitute America on the basis of Biblical law. He makes no mention of Neuhaus's many broadsides against the monistic drive to "get it all together before God gets it all together." Readers of *The Theocons* would find no indication that Neuhaus believed in the inherently pluralistic character of the City of Man or acknowledged the integrity of

¹⁵Linker, *The Theocons*, 118-119.

¹⁶Ibid., 178.

¹⁷Ibid., 207.

non-Christian political wisdom. Nor would they be introduced to his mantra that the ideal replacement for the naked public square is not the “sacred public square,” but the “civil public square.” These elements of Neuhaus’s thought, and many others, demonstrate clearly that the primary target of Linker’s indictment ought to be declared innocent of harboring theocratic temptations.

That Neuhaus is too impatient in realizing the eschatological promises of the Not Yet is a charge easily refuted. Not so easily refuted is another, more searching critique of how Neuhaus has ordered his earthly and heavenly loyalties, and indeed, my intention is not exactly to refute it, for it represents more an honorable disagreement than a transparent falsehood. The gravamen of this alternative critique is that Neuhaus is too assiduous about attending to the provisional responsibilities of the Now: too comfortable, that is, pledging allegiance to America, too confident that God’s blessing falls upon its democratic system, and too indifferent toward Christian principles and ecclesiastical commitments that ought to challenge and circumscribe his patriotism. Among those who have profitably pursued this basic line of argument is Michael Baxter, a radical proponent of Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement whose appointment to the Notre Dame theology department occasioned much consternation within and beyond the faculty, despite his estimable academic credentials. But perhaps the ablest, most pugnacious exponent of this critique is Neuhaus’s longtime friend and intellectual sparring partner, Stanley Hauerwas—Baxter’s dissertation adviser at Duke University.

In a lengthy 2005 article for the *Houston Catholic Worker*, Baxter takes Neuhaus to task for assuming that America is, in the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, a nation “under God.” He argues, for starters, that such a description clashes with the prevalence

in America of abortion, marital breakdown, and a host of behaviors inconsistent with Christian moral standards.¹⁸ More importantly, Baxter claims, the phrase obscures significant theological disparities between the branches of Christianity, and overlooks the reality of citizens who practice a different religion or none at all.¹⁹ Therefore, when Neuhaus invokes God in public argument, he is invoking not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the “god of civil religion, whose function is to serve the aims and purposes of the nation.”²⁰ According to Baxter, then, Neuhaus treats America as “the political body through which God’s will is carried out,” leaving the church with “no real role in this political sphere.”²¹

Hauerwas mounts his most sustained critique of Neuhaus in a response to the latter’s founding statement for the Institute on Religion and Democracy, which calls for the church to embrace liberal democracy and reject the prevailing alternative of Marxist totalitarianism. Liberal democracies, he warns, “can be just as tyrannical in their claims on the loyalties of their citizens as totalitarian alternatives. Indeed, the tyranny may be all the more perverse because we have freely given the democratic state the right to command our consciences.”²² Hauerwas rejects Neuhaus’s central claim that the primary division within the contemporary American church is between those who do and do not grasp the necessary connection between liberal democracy and the survival of human

¹⁸Michael J. Baxter, “Why Catholics Should be Wary of ‘One Nation Under God:’” Richard Neuhaus in a Time of War,” *Houston Catholic Worker* 25, no. 1 (January-February 2005), <http://www.cjd.org/paper/neuhaus.html> (accessed on July 12, 2010).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Stanley Hauerwas, “Symposium on ‘Christianity and Democracy: A Statement of the Institute on Religion and Democracy,’” (Contributor) *Center Journal* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 47.

freedom. He insists, to the contrary, that “the overriding conflict of our time is the same as that from the beginning, for it is the conflict between those who would remain loyal to God’s kingdom and those who would side with the world.”²³ When the church accepts Neuhaus’s ultimatum that it must choose between democracy and totalitarianism, Hauerwas argues, it no longer “witnesses to God’s sovereignty over all nations,” but instead becomes captive to the world, and particularly to the American nation-state.²⁴

Maintaining the independence of the church from all earthly political orders is a critical theme in the respective indictments of Baxter and Hauerwas. For both thinkers, the church cannot be reduced to a mere voluntary association within American society that either confers or withholds its support for liberal democracy. For the church to fulfill Neuhaus’s exhortation to fully and unapologetically “be the church,” they argue, it must remain an alternative society that practices the perfect politics of God’s kingdom. In Baxter’s description, the church is “the one community in which the obligations of Christians to the cities of this world are properly ordered to the love of God. For this reason, the cities of this world are never ‘under God’ in such a way that Christians may pledge their allegiance to them.”²⁵ Hauerwas concurs, observing that “the church is the only true polity we can know in this life.”²⁶ By recruiting the church to an embrace of American democracy, they argue, Neuhaus severely compromises its ability to serve as an alternative political community that restricts one’s loyalty to all other political communities.

²³Hauerwas, “Symposium,” 50.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Baxter, “Why Catholics Should be Wary of ‘One Nation Under God.’”

²⁶Hauerwas, “Symposium,” 51.

It is a matter of no small consequence that Baxter and Hauerwas regard pacifism as a mandatory Christian commitment, while Neuhaus holds that participation in armed conflict is warranted when the several conditions of the Christian just war tradition have been satisfied. Not only has this disagreement contributed to their vast differences of opinion on American foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, but more importantly, it penetrates to the core of their divergent perspectives on the right ordering of the Now and the Not Yet. Whereas Neuhaus would argue that Christians can offer loving service to God and neighbor through their participation in just wars, Hauerwas and Baxter would counter that perpetrating violence in defense of the American experiment elevates loyalty to the nation-state above loyalty to Christ. For Hauerwas, the church obscures the lordship of Christ when it concedes that “Christians too must be willing to choose sides and kill in order to preserve the social orders in which they find themselves.”²⁷ Baxter argues that Neuhaus’s willingness to countenance warfare in defense of America dictates his reliance upon generic appeals “to God, to Christians, to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to America-as-a-Christian-nation.”²⁸ Neuhaus cannot introduce concepts of greater theological and ecclesiological specificity, he claims, because this could undermine the national unity that a successful war effort demands.²⁹

As I have indicated previously, the positions staked out by Baxter and Hauerwas can be described, by and large, as honorable disagreements with Neuhaus. I do not discern in their arguments anything remotely analogous to the egregious distortions retailed by Damon Linker and *The Theocons*. Neither critic doubts the ultimate depth or

²⁷Hauerwas, “Symposium,” 50.

²⁸Baxter, “Why Catholics Should be Wary of ‘One Nation Under God.’”

²⁹Ibid.

sincerity of Neuhaus's commitment to Christ and the Catholic Church, and one could plausibly entertain the belief that the similarities between them outweigh the admittedly significant differences. As Hauerwas explained in a special issue of *First Things* commemorating Neuhaus's life, "I never doubted that if Richard was ever forced to choose between his loyalty to the Church or America he would choose the Church. I just thought that choice should come sooner than Richard did."³⁰ Still, I would argue that the intellectual portraits of Neuhaus painted by thinkers like Hauerwas and Baxter fail to evoke fully his grasp of the irresolvable tension between the Now and the Not Yet. While faulting Neuhaus for a supposedly inordinate devotion to American democracy, they gloss over his many assertions that no earthly political order can ever be equated with the Kingdom of God, and that Christians, as a consequence, must live as alien citizens, neither absolutizing their commitment to the responsibilities to the Now nor forgetting their ultimate loyalty to the Not Yet. Also, while Hauerwas and Baxter criticize Neuhaus for exhorting the church to support and sustain American democracy, they largely overlook his simultaneous exhortation for the church to restrain the ambitions of the state by reminding it of the divine judgment to come. As Neuhaus consistently avowed, when the church collectively, and American citizens individually, proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, the unmistakable implication is that Caesar cannot be lord.

In my judgment, Scott Moore's 2009 book, *The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Politics and Religion at the End of Modernity*, portrays Neuhaus in a manner that avoids

³⁰Stanley Hauerwas, "The Kingdoms of the World," *First Things* (April 2009): 71.

the twin pitfalls associated with Linker and Hauerwas.³¹ That Moore writes as a critic of Neuhaus who appears quite sympathetic to ideas advanced by the likes of Hauerwas and Baxter makes his fair-minded portrayal all the more laudable and noteworthy. *The Limits of Liberal Democracy* is not primarily about Neuhaus, but about encouraging Christians on both the Left and Right to rethink unexamined assumptions that American democracy and Christian faith coalesce neatly. Moore uses the controversy over Neuhaus's "End of Democracy" editorial to illustrate a widening rift between conservatives for whom American legitimacy must not be questioned and conservatives willing to radically question its legitimacy in the name of Christ.³² The controversy over Baxter's appointment at Notre Dame, according to Moore, reveals an essentially analogous rift among religious liberals.³³

Moore effortlessly dispatches the argument that Neuhaus is a closet theocrat, pointing toward his criticism of the Christian Reconstructionist movement and his rejection of the notion that America is a Christian nation in anything but a "blandly demographic" sense.³⁴ Neither, he suggests, is Neuhaus so blissfully at home in American democracy that his patriotic loyalty overshadows his loyalty to Christ. As the End of Democracy editorial demonstrates, Neuhaus is hardly unable to conceive of conditions under which Christians could no longer, in good conscience, continue to pledge allegiance to America. He and Baxter "reject," albeit with differing degrees of

³¹Dr. Moore, who teaches philosophy at Baylor University, served as a member of my thesis committee.

³²Scott H. Moore, *The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Politics and Religion at the End of Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 29-45.

³³*Ibid.*, 47-60.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 67-68.

certitude, “the notion that it is always possible to be both faithful Christians and ‘good Americans,’” and they are both “unwavering in their fidelity to the Christian gospel over and against a modern political agenda.”³⁵ In this regard, Moore compares Neuhaus favorably to conservative allies like Gertrude Himmelfarb and liberal nemeses like Richard Rorty, for whom “the question of the nature of government is not up for discussion or philosophical speculation.”³⁶

* * * *

I have attempted to demonstrate, throughout this paper, how Richard John Neuhaus exhorts Christians to affirm loyalties to both the City of Man and the City of God, while endeavoring always to hold those loyalties in tension. I have attempted, in this section, to demonstrate that Neuhaus did not forget or ignore this tension either by growing too comfortable in the City of Man or growing too impatient for the City of God. One further question remains to be addressed: How does one account for the fact that Neuhaus has been the target of such oddly divergent critiques? Is it not exceedingly peculiar that he has been accused both of harboring an inordinate love of American democracy and of conspiring to replace that democracy with a theocratic system?

In response to this quandary, I would make a somewhat-counterintuitive suggestion: that both critiques, taken together, serve to confirm that Neuhaus embodies the very tension this paper has sought to highlight. Individually speaking, these critiques may be unpersuasive, but considered in concert, they illustrate the competing impulses that must, of necessity, confront one who would take seriously both the provisional responsibilities of the Now and the eschatological promises of the Not Yet. To

³⁵Moore, *The Limits of Liberal Democracy*, 71-72; 83.

³⁶Ibid., 85-100 (quote taken from page 94).

acknowledge and live out the tension between these two dimensions of the Christian experience is not to adopt a posture of compromise, offering oneself only half-heartedly to both the City of Man and the City of God, but to embrace these loyalties—and the obligations entailed by these loyalties—in their fullness. On this understanding, it is perfectly natural that Neuhaus's life and intellectual career would oscillate between moments of intense patriotic pride in America and moments of despair over the godlessness and immorality that its democratic freedoms permit. Still, having surveyed his career and his writings in full, I would confess—as Neuhaus did when surveying his political journey from Left to Right—to being struck more by the continuities than the discontinuities.

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