

The Liberalism of Richard John Neuhaus

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AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH in 2009, Richard John Neuhaus had been a public figure for nearly four decades. To admirers and friends, he was arguably the most influential American Christian intellectual since Reinhold Niebuhr or John Courtney Murray. The *New York Times* described him 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.” It was a conventional biographical arc—Neuhaus’s life was defined by exchanging the ideals of liberalism for the dogmas of religious traditionalism.

But that story is misleading, if not worse, since it distorts the convictions of a man wholly defined by his convictions. Neuhaus spent his life contending for the soul of the liberal tradition. Conversions great and small marked his career, and he often quoted Cardinal Newman, saying that “to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” But his commitment to political liberalism, far from being a youthful error he later repudiated, was one of his life’s few consistent threads. The other was his orthodox Christian faith.

The key to understanding Neuhaus is to see him as a defender of a consensus, uniting commitments to both Christianity and liberalism, which he believed to be rooted firmly in American history and the truth about human society. Its central proposition, which Neuhaus defended in over 20 books and hundreds of articles, holds that American democracy depends on the moral beliefs and practices of religious believers. Neuhaus paired this with a second and more original thesis. He held

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that liberalism is *itself* endangered by those discouraging traditional religious voices from public deliberation. Secular liberalism is not a tautology, he maintained; it is a contradiction.

Neuhaus was this movement's sharpest critic and keenest observer, as evidenced by his 1984 book, *The Naked Public Square*, which examined the cultural conflicts that would define our politics for a generation. Neuhaus did more, however, than foresee the rise of secularist politics. He undertook the long work of articulating an alternative "public philosophy" and assembling an ecumenical network committed to its refinement and dissemination. Liberalism, he proposed, is founded on truths embedded in the American experience that can be discerned by any reasonable person: that human beings possess powers of rational deliberation, that these same powers make human community and self-government possible, and that both are grounded in the rights we possess from nature and God—the ultimate ground of human freedom and limited government.

More than half a decade after Neuhaus's passing, the growing estrangement of both left and right from his vision makes it worth revisiting—and perhaps proposing anew.

LIBERALISM AS CONVERSATION

What is liberalism? The question tempts misunderstanding. As Tocqueville before him, Neuhaus recognized that there are a number of liberalisms—and that its American form differed fundamentally from its varieties elsewhere. Neuhaus's understanding reflected his experience as a coalition-builder as much as his reading of modern political thought. The distinctive note of liberalism, he claimed, is that it regards politics as a form of conversation. A liberal community is deliberative in character. And America is such a community. "The goal of the American political order," Neuhaus argued, "is to maintain a circumstance in which citizens are locked in civil argument."

Here Neuhaus borrowed openly from Jesuit philosopher John Courtney Murray, whose landmark 1960 book, *We Hold These Truths*, argued that a community is formed by human beings joined in rational debate. Neuhaus emended Murray, however, by both lowering and expanding the boundaries of civil discussion. Although Murray was, along with Jacques Maritain, one of the century's leading Catholic defenders of liberal democracy, he retained a scholastic tendency to see politics as dependent on a consensus forged by classical philosophy.

Neuhaus found this implausible and undemocratic. He did not deny that the “civilizational circle of moral conversation,” as he explained in *American Babylon*, was rational in character; he only doubted that public deliberation ought to be circumscribed by narrowly theoretical terms. But Neuhaus had additional grounds for correcting Murray. The dialogue that constitutes our political life, Neuhaus argued, is chiefly about morality, not metaphysics. From Aristotle, he adopted his definition of politics as “free persons deliberating the question, How ought we to order our life together?”

Moral reflection is not therefore a distraction or an obstacle to political life; politics is a form of ethics. It is the activity through which we deliberate about how to live together, an exercise in shared reasoning that seeks to propose and justify government action. Recognizing that this challenged the idea that liberalism is neutral about questions of moral purpose, Neuhaus defended his position on liberal grounds. He reasoned that if a liberal democracy orders its life through discussion — and not by appeal to revelation, custom, or force — it must be united by some kind of moral agreement about the proper ends and means of political life. “Conversation that is not disciplined is mere babble,” he wrote in *The Catholic Moment*, “and exploration that is not guided is mere adventurism.”

So it is a commitment to moral truths, and not agnosticism about them, that makes democratic deliberation possible. Neuhaus always insisted on the liberal credentials of his argument, and he took every opportunity to advertise them.

Few thinkers were as influential on him as Walter Lippmann, who had succeeded, Neuhaus believed, in identifying the crisis of liberal democracy as well as indicating a path of renewal. Lippmann’s *The Public Philosophy* was particularly important, and Neuhaus invoked its themes regularly. Published in 1955, the book argued that a “mounting disorder” within liberalism had left it morally incapacitated and vulnerable to incivility and fanaticism. Liberalism’s renewal, Lippmann offered, required the articulation of a public philosophy, rooted in the tradition of natural law, which could unite citizens in the bond of a common morality. “Except on the premises of this philosophy,” Lippmann wrote, “it is impossible to reach intelligible and workable conceptions of popular election, majority rule, representative assemblies, free speech, loyalty, property, corporations and voluntary associations.”

Neuhaus seconded Lippmann's call for a public philosophy, built now around the ideal of moral conversation. He conceded this might seem unrealistic. "A common public discourse has been shattered," Neuhaus recognized, "leaving only the shards of myriad 'constructions of reality.'" He also acknowledged it was controversial. "It is possible that the most controversial dissent today is dissent from the proposition that there is or, more precisely, that there *should be* no normative consensus." But the alternative to a morality in common, Neuhaus warned, is moralities in conflict, and the dissolution of moral consensus can only turn politics into civil war by other means.

A common morality, Neuhaus posited, is expressed in what Murray called "the American Proposition," which articulates the "constituting vision" of our political community. This proposition is exceptional in that it is the product of human reflection and choice, not historical accident. It is an agreement arrived at deliberately, through an intentional act of popular sovereignty. America is therefore a people on purpose and for a purpose, and these purposes are announced in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

At the heart of our constitutional consensus is a public morality articulated largely in the language of rights. Neuhaus contended that these rights are fundamentally moral in that they express natural human obligations and the immunities that follow from them; properly understood, they protect the freedom not to do as one wishes, but the freedom to do what one must. To say these rights are inalienable is therefore to say that government can neither bestow nor abrogate them. They inhere in human beings as such, having their proximate cause in nature and their ultimate source in God. Neuhaus recognized that we rarely agree on the meaning of this common morality—hence the necessity of ongoing debate and deliberation—and he did not think it a conclusive guide to most political decisions. It is, however, the sum of the things we hold in common, the ensemble of moral truths whose existence, if not practical implications, are not in question.

The purpose of our constitutional consensus is to sustain a "civil public square." This was something explained at length in Neuhaus's books, but sometimes lost sight of in the back-page skirmishes of his journals *Worldview*, *This World*, and *First Things*. Neuhaus saw our constitutional order, in other words, as both an expression of, and a guideline for, the unfinished debate that constitutes our political tradition: "Our

constitutional order presents itself as a political community deliberating its right ordering on the basis of the political sovereignty of ‘the people’ exercised through the specified means of representative democracy.” The moral content of the American Proposition is therefore minimal but solid. It affirms those moral truths necessary to protect and sustain civil discussion among free and equal people.

If Neuhaus’s reading of the American Proposition was not always original, his account of its ongoing authority was more novel. In *America Against Itself*, he again offered arguments inflected by liberal thought and tailored to win a hearing from the political left. For a thinker committed to defining our national identity, Neuhaus was curiously detached from historical debates about the original intentions and personal identities of the founders. He did not think them unimportant, and he sometimes aligned himself with a line of interpretation that ran from Jefferson and Lincoln up through Murray and Martin Luther King. But our political order cannot be justified, he maintained, by textual or historical appeals alone.

As an experiment in ordered liberty, America stands under the judgment of the future as much as the past. We are not only continuously testing the truths we hold, we will be tested by them as well. This acknowledgement that our nation stands under judgment helped Neuhaus to make one of his most important arguments. It was defended most extensively in his first major book, *Time Toward Home*. Written to coincide with the American bicentennial, it reflected the nation’s sour mood by lamenting, “American thinkers have neglected, or given up on, the task of defining America.” Neuhaus’s proposal, inspired by a creative reading of theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, anticipated lines of argument that would consume the rest of his career. He declared that America should not define itself primarily by the achievements of its past. If America is to discern a more certain purpose for an uncertain future, the story of America must be placed within the larger story of the world.

THE SACRED CANOPY

Neuhaus looked to religion to impart this overarching sense of meaning to American life, as well as to provide sound criticism of it. As always, he affiliated his views with a half-forgotten liberal pedigree. If Walter Lippmann diagnosed our need for a common morality, John Dewey recognized our need for a common faith. First given as university

lectures in 1934, Dewey's *A Common Faith* inspired a generation of progressive reformers by calling for a religious creed that would set aside dogmatic disputes and embrace all people of goodwill in the cause of social reform. Neuhaus dismissed Dewey's hostility to biblical faith and undisguised attempt to turn democracy into a substitute religion; but he agreed profoundly with Dewey that religion could be a source of civic unity rather than division.

Neuhaus pressed this argument vigorously. Sociologically, he observed, all human communities require a "sacred canopy." A decades-long collaboration with sociologist Peter Berger impressed on Neuhaus the lesson that a society will fail if it cannot give a compelling account of itself in terms that transcend its pursuit of worldly goals. Theologically, he argued, all moral claims are rooted in beliefs about how the world is and how the world ought to be. Neuhaus compressed his argument, as he often did, into a memorable maxim: "Politics is chiefly a function of culture, at the heart of culture is morality, and at the heart of morality is religion."

It is paramount to appreciate that Neuhaus never endorsed the idea of a "civil religion," a much-discussed topic following Robert Bellah's celebrated 1967 article in *Daedalus* that endorsed just such a concept. Neuhaus denounced the argument, advanced by some communitarians, that religion ought to be valued for its social utility, even while he affirmed its indispensability for democratic politics. This required him to distinguish carefully between what he termed "political theology" and a "theology of politics." The former invokes theology to justify a political ideology or particular course of action. To Neuhaus, this was idolatrous. The latter offers a theological understanding of politics as a sphere of human life under divine rule and guidance. To Neuhaus, this was a Christian responsibility.

As a Christian, Neuhaus believed that theological reflection on the meaning of America is one way that believers can contribute to the good of their earthly city. As a student of St. Augustine, Neuhaus believed this required placing the story of America within the biblical story of the city of God. In a 2005 address, he encouraged Christians "to retell the American story relative to God's providential purpose" but cautioned that this must involve a respect for the proper autonomy of the political realm. Neuhaus cited precedent: "The Puritans, the Founders, Lincoln, and our foremost intellectuals were all confident that they could give

such an account of the American experiment. The ability to give such an account was, with exceptions, confidently assumed until about the middle of the twentieth century.”

How should Christians think about possible connections between national experience and God’s purposes in time? Neuhaus noted that Americans have traditionally thought about the relationship through the idea of covenant:

The constituting idea of the American experiment was that we are bound together not simply by a social contract but by a covenant. The biblical idea of covenant embraced by earlier Americans is something deeper and more profound and more binding than a contract; it also engages another party, a party who transcends the agreements that we strike among ourselves. The other party, of course, is God.

By calling ours a covenantal nation, Neuhaus intended to describe a religious sensibility, cutting across confessional lines, that has informed the American experience. It expresses not a claim to divine privilege, but an awareness, uniting people of different religious traditions, that our nation is accountable to a power that transcends it. To be in a covenant in this sense does not therefore mean to be elected or chosen by God. It does not mean America is the New Israel or the New Jerusalem. It does not mean America is morally innocent or exempt from the ambiguities and disappointments of history. To live in a covenantal community means that we acknowledge a transcendent authority that grounds the moral truths we hold.

In recalling this feature of our political tradition, Neuhaus was criticized for injecting religious doctrines into political discussion. He encouraged no such thing. His goal was to enrich public deliberation with the moral resources of our historic religious traditions, including those of “living Judaism.” Doing so, he repeatedly and forcefully insisted, required believers to form *public* arguments accessible to those of different faiths or no faith.

From his fellow Christians, Neuhaus therefore demanded that they translate their convictions into a public language that others could understand and evaluate. Examples include the concepts of covenant and natural law, the orders of creation, the imperfectability of man, the

adequacy of human reason for the right ordering of society, and the inherent dignity of every human being. “These concepts point to the ways in which believer and nonbeliever, regenerate and unregenerate, can engage one another in a shared world of discourse.”

Neuhaus was therefore not a “theo-con,” if that means he demanded a privileged status for biblical values that shielded them from public debate. On the contrary, he maintained that such convictions are in no way exempt from the unfinished, and never to be finished, testing of truths that constitutes our civic life.

Part of the service Christians can perform for the common good, in fact, is to provide a moral framework, accessible to all and open to challenge, within which our political order can be defended, improved, and criticized. By offering a “transcendent horizon” for democratic deliberation, Neuhaus thought, Christians also helped to temper democratic passions by reminding us that politics is not the highest activity of life and that our shared humanity and gift of reason make civil conversation possible.

ILLIBERALISMS: CHRISTIAN, SKEPTICAL, SECULARIST

Neuhaus believed, although critics doubted, that he was proposing an inclusive vision of democratic life. “In a republic of free citizens, 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.” He nonetheless held that certain arguments ought to be contested because of the special danger they pose to a liberal political order, raising questions about the limits of his own liberalism.

It is of no small importance that Neuhaus identified a primary threat coming from within Christianity itself. He dedicated one of his earliest essays in *First Things* to the “theonomist temptation,” which imagines that scripture provides a blueprint for the right ordering of society. This is bad politics and worse exegesis, Neuhaus protested, for it not only refuses to engage in public persuasion, it ignores biblical teaching about the legitimacy of temporal authority. The essay’s attack on Christian fundamentalism would not have surprised readers of *The Naked Public Square*, in which Neuhaus had already expressed intense dissatisfaction with “fanatical” Moral Majority types. It is “disastrous,” he counseled the emerging religious right, to believe that public discourse should be governed by the “essentially private and subjective sources” of biblical literalism.

Another threat comes not from faith but from skepticism. Neuhaus identified this danger with philosophies, especially libertarian and postmodern ones, that deny the ability of human reason to order our common life in relation to the good. No genuine community can be bound together solely by the pursuit of material self-interest. In *Doing Well and Doing Good*, Neuhaus acknowledged that the pursuit of economic self-interest could be socially beneficial and even morally virtuous. He stipulated, however, that our common purpose must be defined in avowedly moral terms. A similar error encourages us to regard all moral claims as expressions of power or historical “perspective.” In a spirited debate with literary theorist Stanley Fish, Neuhaus warned that radical skepticism not only turns politics into a naked contest for power, it also impairs human dignity itself. “Respect for the dignity of others,” he wrote, “includes treating them as rational creatures capable of being persuaded by rational argument.”

There is, finally, the illiberalism of secularism. This is the most subversive threat since it speaks in the name of liberalism itself. Secular liberalism is defined by a denial and an affirmation. It denies that our political tradition is founded on freedoms and obligations that ultimately come from God. It affirms that our common life can and should be ordered without appeal to a transcendent point of reference. It translates both into the doctrine that the advance of liberal democracy requires the public retreat and perhaps private weakening of traditional religious faith. Neuhaus associated this view with philosophers like Richard Rorty and John Rawls, who asserted that a liberal order must exclude “comprehensive doctrines” from public debate. He countered that this is hostile to the open spirit of true liberalism. No democracy, he wrote shortly before his death, can exclude from public debate any convictions, “whether drawn from the Torah, Chinese *Analects*, Cicero, the New Testament, or the *Baghavad Ghita*.”

Neuhaus’s genius was to notice that secular liberalism is self-undermining. It shares with fundamentalism a propensity to political “monism” and shares with skepticism an indifference to the sources of human dignity. Monism holds that there ought to be no recognized distinction between the civil and the spiritual. Secularism is a form of monism in that it forbids official recognition of a sovereignty higher than the state.

Neuhaus foresaw the cascading effects of this error. For one, it erodes the First Amendment’s protections of religious liberty. Neuhaus attacked

as spurious the legal reasoning by which the obligation to render free worship to God was turned into a private freedom of conscience, an interpretation that he believed imperils religious liberty by restricting its full exercise. For another, the project of creating a “naked public square” is doomed to tragic failure. As the 20th century proved, the secularist state will inevitably create new and strange gods of its own: “The public square will not and cannot remain naked. If it is not clothed with the ‘meanings’ borne by religion, new ‘meanings’ will be imposed by virtue of the ambitions of the modern state.”

The most serious danger posed by secularist politics, however, is its inability to protect human dignity. At the heart of political liberalism stands a supreme value: the inherent and inalienable dignity of the human person. Neuhaus argued that our political order has its deepest roots in the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the individual, whose rights, freedoms, and dignity our polity seeks to protect. It is man’s “sacredness,” as Murray put it, and not merely his interest, that ultimately obliges respect. Hence any attempt to deny the full and equal dignity of all human beings—no matter their stage of development or dependency—is corrosive of the liberal project itself. And this is a dignity that no state or social contract can create—for what can be made can be denied or revoked. Human dignity comes only from our being “created equal” by the Creator.

Neuhaus did not want secularist thought purged from public life. To the delight of his readership, he relished engagement with it, but also thought it should be properly identified as dissent. Provocatively, Neuhaus did not hesitate to draw the conclusion that atheists could not therefore be fully good citizens. They could be good people, he allowed, and could contribute in countless ways to the common good, but since they did not assent to the proposition that our rights, freedoms, and dignity come from God, they could not take full responsibility, as a good citizen must, for defending the legitimacy of our political order.

This was a claim that once more aligned Neuhaus with a discarded tradition of political liberalism, in this case the liberalism of Hobbes and Locke, who also saw atheism as a threat to the moral foundations of society. Neuhaus nonetheless tolerated, if not quite actively welcomed, such dissent as a part of our own political tradition; it serves to question, in the most radical way, the first principles of our common life. Neuhaus therefore granted that whether the American Proposition will

be fundamentally transformed by dissent or faithfully transmitted by its defenders depends largely on the outcome of public debate. Liberalism takes a risk. As a community of conversation, it risks its own future on the strength of the arguments made in its defense.

LIBERALISM CONTESTED

The tensions within Neuhaus's account of liberalism invited scrutiny from all sides. Critics on the secular left and traditionalist right agreed that he must have trimmed his politics or his faith, the only question being where his compromise lay and how honestly it was made. Although often misplaced, the criticisms were not without merit.

Neuhaus plainly advocated a form of liberal pluralism that required an underlying theological unity. For understandable reasons, this struck not a few opponents as definitional legerdemain, a misuse of terms that inverted the meaning of liberalism. The defining mark of liberalism, they countered, is that it orders political life without appeal to a common creed or morality—that it grounds our politics instead in agreements concerning the mundane goods of peace, order, and material well-being. Neuhaus had an unapologetically flexible view of public argument, and his responses depended on context. To those who thought religion in the public square was divisive, he responded that, in a country where almost 90% of people professed belief in God, it created the widest possible grounds of agreement. To those who thought it coercive, he responded that American religion has more often been a protector of individual freedom and limited government.

Neuhaus could also appear indifferent to the coherence of his vision of liberal conversation. To theologians working in his own Catholic tradition especially, his vision often seemed like a forced attempt to harmonize the voices of Martin Luther King, Thomas Paine, Cotton Mather, and St. Thomas Aquinas—none of whom, they eagerly pointed out, were united in theological outlook. Such eclecticism raised suspicions that what counted as moral discourse in the public square is what could get moral traction in the public square.

At times Neuhaus did beg fundamental questions about the relation between morals and metaphysics, perhaps most noticeably in his efforts, undeniably successful, to craft a language for the pro-life movement that appealed to a wide audience. But for the most part, his response to requests for greater clarity and rigor was to invite his critics

into deliberation about the meaning of the first principles of our public life.

Far from being unaware of these tensions, Neuhaus clearly enjoyed the disagreements they provoked. For him, they represented a tolerance for ambiguity and paradox that informed his experience as an activist and the traditional Lutheran theology that formed him. Neuhaus never pretended to be a philosopher, and he had little patience for abstraction in political deliberation. He thought, perhaps mistakenly, that criticisms were best rebutted not by a superior theory of liberalism, but by the irrefutable fact that such a moral conversation as he proposed did exist. To those who had assented to the alternative consensus—relatively new to our national life, but tragically familiar elsewhere—that biblical religion and liberal politics are fundamentally antagonistic, he pointed to the historically cordial conversation between Christianity and American democracy.

Conversations can end, however, and few are loyal to a conversation even when it's civilized. They are loyal to a history, place, and people that include them as more than mere interlocutors. Neuhaus sought to protect these loyalties by promoting discussion of their evident truth and goodness. If his vision fails, it will not be because it sought a return to the Middle Ages, but because it sought to recreate a liberal consensus that began to weaken in mid-20th-century America.

Our national conversation once took for granted that there was a Creator who established natural laws, including moral laws, that could be known by human reason and enjoyed broad support in popular piety. That consensus slowly unraveled as thinkers, speaking in the name of science and pragmatism, argued that societies created their own laws rather than discovered them in the fixed order of things. The conflict between these two traditions now marks the ideological fault lines of American intellectual life. What happens when the possibility of civil conversation ends? And what if defenders of the older consensus are pushed out of public life? In a 1996 symposium, Neuhaus reflected on that possibility:

Democratic politics means that 'the people' deliberate and decide [the question of how we order our common life together]. In the American constitutional order the people do that through debate, elections, and representative political institutions. But is that true

today? Has it been true for, say, the last fifty years? Is it not in fact the judiciary that deliberates and answers the really important questions entailed in the question, How ought we to order our life together? Again and again, questions that are properly political are legalized, and even speciously constitutionalized.

Neuhaus concluded that, while we have not yet reached a point requiring civil disobedience, conscientious citizens must ask whether they can give “moral assent to the existing regime.” His answer was a cautious yes: We owe the regime moral allegiance so long as both individuals and the institutions of civil society retain the capacity to work effectively for its reform.

LIBERALISM AFTER LIBERALISM

In 1990, Neuhaus was invited by the *Christian Century* to contribute to an ongoing series called “How My Mind Has Changed.” Neuhaus was then 53 years old and a veteran clergy-activist of causes ranging from the radical left to the neoconservative right. He recalled that as a seminarian he vowed he would be “in descending order of importance, religiously orthodox, culturally conservative, politically liberal, and economically pragmatic.” Neuhaus insisted he had remained attracted to that “quadrilateral” but allowed that the disputed meaning of “politically liberal” had put his commitment to the test.

He catalogued his frustrations: the betrayal of the Civil Rights movement by the rise of identity politics; the abandonment of the poor to a failed War on Poverty and the devastations of the Sexual Revolution; the disparagement of patriotism and the natural family; and most worrisome, acceptance of the lethal logic of *Roe v. Wade*. “I experienced the illiberality of certain liberalisms,” he reflected. But if readers expected a political conversion story, they would be disappointed. Neuhaus instead pointedly reaffirmed his commitment to the liberal tradition. Mourning the “lost dignity of liberalism,” he expressed hope that religious believers would remain committed to “modernity’s greatest political achievement.”

This is advice we do well to remember and heed, especially those of us tempted to opt out of the “civilizational circle” by declining participation in democratic debate. The advances of secular liberalism might seem unstoppable, but they are not. They depend entirely on the

credibility of the claim that religion and religiously informed moral judgment are incompatible with open deliberation. Neuhaus dedicated his life, in word and deed, to refuting this assertion. His goal was not to replace liberal politics with political religion. It was to replace an unsustainable arrangement of moralities in conflict with a common morality whose deliberations could draw on transcendent meanings.

Neuhaus did not therefore write to foment the culture wars; he wrote to put an end to them by re-articulating a deeper tradition of American political thought. As to the present state of that tradition, he was under no illusions. “A great chasm has opened between the liberal tradition and what today is called liberalism,” he opined. But, he added, “there is no going back to reconstitute the American order on a foundation other than the liberal tradition.”