**Richard John Neuhaus**

**A Life in the Public Square**

Preface

There was smoke and ash and great singing in the church that night in 1967. The pews were filled with left-wing radicals and their marijuana and cigarettes. They had come over from Manhattan to a broken-down corner of Brooklyn, along with some television cameras and reporters, for “A Service of Conscience and Hope,” an event that yoked prayer and protest over the grave injustice of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. During its signal moment, some two hundred young men solemnly walked to the altar bearing their draft cards, which they deposited in a bowl. This was their symbolic and efficacious means of refusing to join the American war machine: following the service, the cards would be sent on to the Justice Department. The young men walked forward amid much sixties-era atmospherics, but the church was far from silent. The long-haired people on the scored wooden benches were singing with everything

they had, but this time, they were not running through one of their standard angry protest chants, or cooing the latest soft-melt folk paean to peace. They were singing “America the Beautiful,” following

the deep-voiced man of God presiding over the service, thirty-one-year-old Richard John Neuhaus.

He was the pastor at St. John the Evangelist, the thriving Lutheran church hosting the event; he was also one of the founders of a leading antiwar group, Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, and a fast-rising intellectual and activist on the American Left. But this trajectory would never be finally or fully his trajectory. The song he wanted his fellow antiwar activists to sing at St. John the Evangelist indicated as much: as he would later recount, his suggestion was met with silence, even shock. Asking this particular gathering to sing that particular song was basically like asking Billy Graham and Bob Hope to sing Communist anthems at an Honor America rally. Neuhaus, however, was convinced prayer and protest could be joined to patriotism; in fact, at difficult and fraught times in American public life, they had to be, whether to rescue love of country from war-making scoundrels and other ugly conservatives,

or to remind myopic pacifists and other sweet, dreamy liberals that they were citizens called by God and by history to love and help redeem their troubled nation, not hate it and abandon it to its hateful

elements. And so this was why, as far as he was concerned, nothing less than “America the Beautiful” had to sound forth in the church while all the young men said no to what their country was doing in Vietnam. Pastor Neuhaus preached to the hazy protestors in the hazy pews that the song did not describe the United States as it was. He told them it described the United States they all hoped for, the nation they hoped would come into existence because of the very acts of conscientious objection that they were committing together in the church that night. Provocative, contrarian, challenging, persuasive—Neuhaus won them over. What came of it, as New York TV news audiences and newspaper readers learned the next day, and he would observe in one of his many books, “was the lustiest and most heartfelt rendition of ‘America the Beautiful’ I have ever heard.”

Almost thirty years later, amid all the cheering and applause, it was everything Father Richard John Neuhaus could do to stop his admiring audience from belting out songs like “America the Beautiful.”

He was in Washington to speak at the annual “Road to Victory” convention in September 1994, two months before the midterm elections. The event was sponsored by the Christian Coalition, a political

operation dedicated to securing conservative Christian voters for the Republican Party by persuading them to put their electoral trust in the GOP. The three thousand in attendance were certainly open

to the proposition: as far as many conservative Christians in America were concerned, their beloved and God-blessed nation was now run by godless, decadent liberals and, unsurprisingly, going to hell. Public schools taught lefty nonsense and anti-American garbage in place of sound values and strong traditions; popular culture was a sex-encrusted cesspool; you could abort your unborn child and claim it as a constitutional right more easily than you could quote the Bible at a public meeting or put up a crèche at city hall. Something had to be done about all of this—namely, get the right kind of people elected

to public office—and if you were a delegate at a Christian Coalition conference, the right kind of people were Republicans. The coming election, however, would not be easy; the attendees needed encouragement, even blessings, for their effort to turn out fellow churchgoers on Election Day. And who better to do it than the author of the national bestseller *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*? Who better than Father Richard John Neuhaus to praise and inspire the God-and GOP-loving crowd?

He did not deliver the goods they might have been expecting. Instead, he warned his audience, “We can confuse our Christian hope with political success”; furthermore, “there is a danger that we confuse our political policy judgments with the judgments of God.” And the crowd went wild! It went wild to his dismay, as he would observe in one of his magazine columns. Here he was, challenging his listeners to recognize that the call of faith could not be collapsed into an election campaign, that the dictates of the Bible were far greater than any party platform, and yet they were not really listening to his words; they were merely enthusiastically responding to his presence. After all, this was the famously fearsome Father Neuhaus, culture warrior extraordinaire, neoconservative Catholic priest and editor in chief of *First Things* magazine, the heroic and hilarious blade-sharp scourge of silly and soft liberals inside the churches and most everywhere else. But as much as Neuhaus enjoyed the stab-and-spike vitalities of professional opinion-making—and indeed, he enjoyed these—carrying out his vocation as a priest was more important than burnishing his profile as a punchy public intellectual. That was why, that September 1994 day in Washington, he challenged his convention audience to put not their trust in princes, Republican or otherwise. Following his remarks, one of his listeners approached him, someone who had, in fact, heard what Neuhaus had said, and was upset by it. As Neuhaus recalled, the man was holding back tears as he confronted the very priest and commentator whose writings had inspired him to become involved, as a Christian, in political activity, the same priest and commentator who was now telling him to take great care as a Christian involved in politics.

Reflecting on the doubly confused experience of religion in American life that he witnessed and was part of—a convention hall full of Christian Republicans untroubled, indeed energized, by the seemingly mutual supports of their faith and their party affiliation, and one man so suddenly troubled that he wondered if anything could be done in politics as a Christian—Neuhaus wrote, “Christian political engagement is an endlessly difficult subject. Our Lord said to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, but he did not accommodate us by spelling out the details. Over two thousand years, Christians have again and again thought they got the mix just right, only to have it blow up in their faces—and, not so incidentally, in the faces of others. We’re always having to go back to the drawing board, which is to say, to first things. Even when, especially when, we are most intensely engaged in the battle, first things must be kept first in mind. It is not easy but it is imperative. It profits us nothing if we win all the political battles while losing our own souls.”

Richard John Neuhaus’ life and work attests to the endless difficulties, battles, and necessarily imperfect victories of Christian political engagement in modern American culture and politics, whether as a leading clergyman of the American Left in the 1960s and 1970s, or as the most prominent clergyman of the American Right from the 1980s through to his death, in 2009. If Neuhaus always understood himself, foremost, as a man of God, he was regarded by colleagues, collaborators, critics, friends, congregations, parishes, and the national media as a theologian, an intellectual, an activist, an ecumenist, a writer, an editor, a cultural commentator, a political pundit, a political candidate, a policy expert, a religious journalist, a religious leader, a spiritual director, a spiritual father, a teacher, a pastor, and a priest. This multiplicity corresponds to the array of efforts Neuhaus made, over decades, and in any number of contexts, to bring Judeo-Christian concepts of human dignity, worth, and purpose to bear

on every dimension of American public life—meaning, the nation’s leading sacred and secular institutions, its political, legislative, and judicial deliberations, its intellectual milieus and media landscape. For all that he attempted and accomplished, Neuhaus was admired and scorned, closely followed and intensely opposed, and never but taken seriously.

His efforts led to the founding and running of many coalitions, institutes, and magazines, and also to the writing and preaching of hundreds of thousands of words that variously turned on his core insights and governing beliefs about modern religious experience and about American public life itself: That the United States is an incorrigibly if confusedly religious nation. That democracy is the political system that best corresponds to man’s God-given rights and responsibilities for himself and others. That politics is a function of culture, and culture is ultimately a function of religion. That the most important question about religion and politics is not whether religion has a role to play in politics and in broader public life, but instead, what that role ought to be. That the Catholic Church is the fullest substantiation of the church that Christ founded upon the earth before his death and resurrection, and therefore the church Neuhaus was called to join and to serve. That the Catholic Church is likewise the world’s singularly indispensable source of moral authority, guidance, and wisdom, for the right ordering of global affairs and of late Western civilization. That every Christian is first and always a citizen of what Augustine called the heavenly and eternal City of God, and that this citizenship informs how he lives in this fallen, mortal world, the City of Man. That God is not indifferent to the American Experiment. That upon his death, Neuhaus expected to meet God as an American and expected he would be asked to give an account of how he had lived out, and lived up to, the prophet Isaiah’s hope and promise, that “the word shall not return void.” Indeed, Neuhaus measured his life and work against this biblical dictum for the better part of his seventy-three years, from his Canadian boyhood through his schooling in Nebraska and Texas and St. Louis, and onward from there to his life as a Lutheran pastor in Brooklyn and a Catholic priest in New York. The results of his efforts, by earthly standards at least, are attested to by the religious conversions and vocational realizations he brought about through his personal friendships and public witness, and by the outsized figures of Christian example and cultural-historical influence to whom he was compared upon his death—John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, Fulton Sheen, Orestes Brownson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, even Jonathan Edwards. And while a case could be made for any one of these comparisons, none finally captures fully what were Richard John Neuhaus’ distinctive and often controversial contributions to the ongoing story of conflict and renewal in postwar American culture and politics, and likewise to the greater story of conflict and renewal in post-Reformation Western Christianity. What follows is an effort to establish and explore these contributions.

Late nights at his apartment on East 19th Street in lower Manhattan, after dinner and evening prayer, Neuhaus liked to sit and hold forth, his Roman collar loosed, an old plaid shirt keeping him warm, a Baccarat cigar in one hand and a glass of Old Weller bourbon in the other, his eyes twinkling and his mouth set to that lifelong wry grin. Bach would be playing on the stereo and his dog, whether Sammy or his successor, Sammy II, would be sleeping by the fireplace, and when Neuhaus was finally done with his authoritative statements on this and that and everything else that was right and wrong about America and Christianity; when he had stopped telling great old stories of his Canadian boyhood and his hell-raising days as a young man; when he had finished recounting his cherished times on the march with Martin Luther King and his meeting in the Oval Office with this president and dining in the papal apartment with that pope, Richard John Neuhaus would turn his attention to the very first of first things. He would tell his friends that all his life, he wanted to do something beautiful for God.

This is the story of all that he tried, all that he did.

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**About the author**

RANDY BOYAGODA is a professor of American Studies at Ryerson University in Toronto. His latest novel, *Beggar's Feast*, was selected as a New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice, nominated for the 2013 IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize, and has been published to critical acclaim around the world. His debut novel, *Governor of the Northern Province*, was nominated for the 2006 ScotiaBank Giller Prize. He has written for a variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times, First Things*, *The New Statesman*, and *Harper's*. He lives in Toronto with his wife and four daughters.