

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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MARTIN DOBLMEIER is an award-winning filmmaker who has produced and directed more than thirty films focused on religion, faith, and spirituality. The Boisi Center screened his most recent film, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, and held a panel discussion. Doblmeier spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** before the screening.

OWENS: Your new documentary, *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, won't be broadcast for two months or so, but I wonder how it has been received by PBS executives and programmers.

DOBLMEIER: Our station for the national distribution is Maryland Public Television. When I went in originally to talk to them, they hadn't a clue in the world who Reinhold Niebuhr was. We have a long relationship with public television, and we've done many films over the years on religion. There's some credibility we should have.

I'm not going into the Home Shopping Network; I'm going into public television where people are reasonably well-read and thoughtful about these things. I had to convince them that this was actually going to work.

When they saw the final film, I was invited to represent them at the gathering of public television executives to show it to 350 people. We got a very positive response from people who want to broadcast it.

I could not say categorically that they were aware of Niebuhr. In fact, I would probably say they weren't aware. But what they liked was the fact that this is a different lens through which we could go back and look at a really defining time—those

thirty or forty years when Niebuhr was really flying high.

It's an incredibly dynamic period in American history, and to view it through the lens of a theologian provides a slightly different take than they had seen in the past. That's what I think captivated them. Niebuhr's not so off-putting in terms of being a theologian. You can read a book like *The Irony of American History*



and wonder whether this is a theologian, as opposed to a political theorist or a sociologist, who's actually lining all these ideas and arguments up for you. Only occasionally do you get the theology that's underlying all of it.

I try to finesse the film in such a way that we announce right up front that this is a Christian theologian and ethicist, but we ask the viewer to listen to who he is, what he does, how he speaks, and most importantly, to look who has been

influenced by him. We start right with the opening volley of the film to say like him or not, this man is a big influence on Barack Obama, Jimmy Carter, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Important people such as these have turned to Niebuhr in times of reflection and need for defining what their cause and ideas were all about. Maybe you should listen to him as well, or at least spend the next hour exploring who this fellow is.

OWENS: Is your central goal historical awareness of Niebuhr? Or helping to translate Niebuhr for the present?

DOBLMEIER: Every film that I've done over all these years – thirty years, about thirty films – it's all about the same idea. It's about the exploration of ideas in terms of religion, faith, and spirituality, and how it intersects with our lives. That's what I'm most taken by.

Niebuhr is a bit more of a political storyline than we often do. The last film that we had done was a film called *Chaplains*, which was religion meets reality television.

This film is about political theory and sociology viewed through the lens of a theologian—someone who cares deeply about what God has revealed to him and to us in the world. In everything that we do, we're interested primarily in seeing whether we can explain or explore how

people of faith are actually trying to decipher what it is they're called to do, and what they do with it.

The idea for this film was originally proposed to me by Jeremy Sabella and Andrew Finstuen, both of whom were at Boston College at the time. Jeremy was finishing a Ph.D. in theology, and Andrew was working as the assistant director of the Boisi Center. They thought Niebuhr's story was one that held huge significance in this day and age.

OWENS: One of the things that's captivating about Niebuhr's story is that he's on an intellectual and spiritual journey, and he doesn't stay in one place throughout the decades of his life. He has an experience that he relates to, whether it's something such as war or economic hardship, and he responds to it theologically.

How did you decide to address these twists and turns in the film? How do you characterize someone who moves about and is hard to pin down, and establish exactly where he's headed?

DOBLMEIER: In our current climate, there's suspicion of people, especially in the public sphere, who seem as though they change their mind. People oftentimes accuse others who are in the public of being weak and indecisive about certain issues. Niebuhr is neither one of those.

Yet, at the same time, he would be the first one to say, "I had a position, but things have changed. I see it differently now. I continue to use the same lens and application of the same teachings, and I've come to a different conclusion."

We say that most effectively through the voice of David Brooks, who brings a really interesting spin to the film as a political commentator on the issues affecting Main Street, America. He said that oftentimes when you have that kind of an experience, you can upset both the people that you were with and the people that you're coming to be with now. Both of them will see you as betraying the good.

What I find most interesting about Niebuhr is that he doesn't stop. He's not content. He continues to evolve and think about the issues, holding them up against the rubrics of what it is that he believes and cares most deeply about.

One example everybody will talk about is his well-documented change in the terms socialism, liberalism, and pacifism. For your audience, one of the areas in which he actually did evolve was his perception of the Catholic Church. Early on he was rather a strong opponent of the Catholic Church.

“[Niebuhr] continues to evolve and think about the issues, holding them up against the rubrics of what it is that he believes and cares most deeply about.”

By the 1960s, particularly during the period of the Second Vatican Council, he was getting more and more on board. He saw changes happening in the Catholic Church, especially its openness to other faith traditions, and its speaking publicly about the documents produced during the Second Vatican Council. Even though he wasn't necessarily writing about *Re-rum Novarum*, he was aware of Catholic social justice teachings, and they were starting to play some role for him. I think the Niebuhr of the '30s and '40s probably could have had a strong anti-Catholic bent evolved.

If Niebuhr turns toward you at a certain period of time, you think the turning is good and the idea of evolving is good. If he turns away from you, you think maybe change is not such a good thing.

OWENS: For the past eight years, we've had a cerebral president who's been carefully calibrated with a certain kind of Christianity. He's identified Niebuhr as a hero for him, and so Niebuhr seems to be explanatory in a way; Niebuhr is useful in understanding our president. Many of us who think of ourselves as Niebuhrian also think that it helps to imagine the world around us.

But in the new dispensation, we can hardly say that Trump is Niebuhrian in any sense. What's the value of Niebuhr for us today? Has he lost his explanatory value around our leaders, or is it more of a continuing understanding of his worldview that's useful to us?

DOBLMEIER: When some of the ideas were first presented to me, and we questioned if we wanted to get involved in making a film on Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the arguments that was made is there may be a Niebuhrian revival going on now.

Part of that is because of the comments that were made by President Barack Obama. He brought an enormous amount of attention to Niebuhr—who he was and what he studied. I've not read anything that would indicate that Donald Trump holds Niebuhr in high regard or even knows who he is.

Last night at Union Seminary, we were introduced by the president of the school, and she was pretty clear that this new president does not have any idea who Niebuhr is nor seems to have any particular interest. It's going to be important for me, personally, over the next couple of years to see if there's any possibility that we can get every level of this administration to hear some of Niebuhr's ideas.

A man who challenged the notions of American exceptionalism at a time that it was very dangerous to do that, who spoke in terms of humility, as a nation and as an individual. All these things will be important notes this administration could use from the corpus of work by Niebuhr. I think it's going to be very challenging times over the next number of years, and

Niebuhr would have a lot to say to these people.

OWENS: Niebuhr seems, at times, terribly prescient around considerations of the civil rights movement and race relations in this country. But I've heard critics suggest that his peak influence found its home amidst the peak of American Protestant hegemony. In the new world of both striving for moral clarity or certainty from some camps that reject the ambiguity and paradox that Niebuhr represents, but also the much more diverse and pluralistic religious landscape that we live in, that somehow Niebuhr's influence will wane again.

I don't believe, as a theologian, that that's a relevant consideration. But in the realm of politics and social movements, I wonder how it is that Niebuhr can be revived to the audiences that are most important now, the ones that are so definitive of this. A film is a terrific way to do that. Have you had responses from audiences so far that point in one direction or not?

DOBLMEIER: Well, we're just getting going with the film. The first screening last night was a wonderful event. We were at Union Theological Seminary. If we didn't have a great launch, we knew we were doomed, but the crowds came out last night and we packed the room. We were thrilled about what happened.

If you study history, you know that people ebb and flow in their influence. We've had a flow for Niebuhr in terms of having a president who spoke openly and honestly that he was Niebuhrian at heart, but I think we may enter a period of time where that's not going to be the case.

From our point of view, to be able to tell a story and to bring it to a National Public Television audience, there's a couple of things that are at risk here. Number one, President Trump has already announced that money is going to be cut from the National Foundation for Humanities, the National Foundation for the Arts, and from Public Television. I'm not really sure whether this administration will



look at Public Television as a valuable resource. I don't want to have a disillusion that this is going to have a particular impact coming from that kind of direction. He's going to have to hear about Niebuhr from other sources, and we must begin to think about how that's going to happen.

We did not make this film as a lecture or a presentation for Trump. We made this film at the end of 2015 and into 2016. Frankly, when I finished the film around the end of October, I will admit that I didn't think that Trump would be the president. Now it's a whole new moment that's unfolding. We're going to have to think strategically about what this is all going to mean.

Last night we were at the dinner table with people who believe that the Bible instructs them to have a certain sense and stance about what's happening. But the other side will say, "We're no less Christian. We have a stance too, and it's based on the same body of work." This is the great irony going forward that we have to navigate through carefully. These are all people who think that they are operating in good faith and behaving in good faith. Yet, at the same time, they have a different take on the approach that has to happen.

Niebuhr is articulate in every form about democracy, and on what America is

supposed to be. The notion of our human nature and the vulnerabilities that we have, our inclinations, all of these are great lessons for us to learn right now, but they're going to have to be taken a step at a time.

OWENS: Your film is entitled *An American Conscience*. Who is our American conscience today; more than forty-five years after Niebuhr passed away?

DOBLMEIER: I chose that as the title of the film. It came up in one of the first phone calls we had. The people that I was talking to in public television didn't really have any idea who Niebuhr was and, frankly, really didn't care at the time. I kept positioning him as a voice that's based on his knowledge of history, theology, and philosophy. Someone who merged the ancient understandings of who we are as human beings against what was happening in America at the time. "He became," I said, "an American conscience." It seemed to hit. People liked that.

I was with Cornel West last night, someone I have an enormous amount of respect for. In many ways he plays a role as an American conscience. I also admire David Brooks from *The New York Times*, who takes Niebuhr's thinking and infuses it into his column. I respect people such as E.J. Dionne, who is a journalist

essentially, but is actually writing out of a sense of conscience and has a platform and a voice for the country.

Who's going to emerge over the next number of years as the American conscious? I don't know, but we need somebody to step up.

OWENS: What was the most challenging film you've done over the years? You've taken on the biggest thinkers across these movements, but what's been the most difficult for you to wrestle into the format that you're working in?

DOBLMEIER: I know it's the most recent, but this Niebuhr film was quite challenging for me. I had the opportunity over the last year and a half to immerse myself in the study of a brilliant man, and then be with people who, in their own ways, are brilliant too. I was the one who felt, as Niebuhr would say, like the mongrel among the thoroughbreds. These people had spent years immersed in Niebuhr and wrestled with his most complex thoughts – those macro ideas about democracy meeting human nature. It's given me pause to realize that these are the things that we should be wrestling with as thoughtful human beings.

It was a challenge. I was thoughtful about it every day, always anxious about going into every single interview. I wanted to make sure that I could do justice to the Niebuhr studies to be able to ask the right questions. I wasn't the one called on to give the answers, but I was asked to ask the right questions so we could actually frame out a film and deliver it to an audience that knew little to nothing about him, while still satisfying the handful of people who have an appreciation for Niebuhr.

I found that task to be enormously exhausting and challenging at the same time. I would read text and I'd say, "I'm not going to mark it up any more." But then I'd find myself marking great line after great line. He speaks with such eloquence and in such bumper sticker kind of notions. You could spend a whole day

thinking about a single phrase, and what it really means. He phrases his ideas in a way that makes you really understand that he sees the whole dimension of it, and yet at the same time is able to put it down in a phrase that will last.

It was a very humbling experience to handle the material. I have a religious studies background, and I've read some wonderful thinkers, but I have to say Niebuhr is as good and as challenging as any of them.

“Who's going to emerge over the next number of years as the American conscious? I don't know, but we need somebody to step up.”

As you watch the film, you think about what's going on today. What's working today? Who's emerging as public theologians of our day? People like Tim Keller down in New York are good to watch. There are good people out there from different faith traditions.

It's going to be interesting because I'm a bit of a child of the '60s. In the 1960s I was old enough to watch how religion intersected with social issues. How the civil rights movement had such an enormous religion faith-based component to it under Martin Luther King, Jr.

This may be the time that people will take to the streets, and that movements will happen. Movements that are grounded and solid on an understand-

ing of democracy, theology, and faith. That's what we're called to do as citizens of this country. It could be an exciting time when people clarify for themselves what it is they believe and their vision for America.

OWENS: I absolutely agree. As Niebuhr knows more than anybody, challenging times offer opportunities for clarity. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

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