



The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America

Richard John Neuhaus

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Underlying the many crises in American life, writes Richard John Neuhaus, is a crisis of faith. It is not enough that more people should believe or that those who believe should believe more strongly. Rather, the faith of persons and communities must be more compellingly related to the public arena. "The naked public square"--which results from the exclusion of popular values from the public forum--will almost certainly result in the death of democracy.

The great challenge, says Neuhaus, is the reconstruction of a public philosophy that can undergird American life and America's ambiguous place in the world. To be truly democratic and to endure, such a public philosophy must be grounded in values that are based on Judeo-Christian religion. The remedy begins with recognizing that democratic theory and practice, which have in the past often been indifferent or hostile to religion, must now be legitimated in terms compatible with biblical faith.

Neuhaus explores the strengths and weaknesses of various sectors of American religion in pursuing this task of critical legitimation. Arguing that America is now engaged in an historic moment of testing, he draws upon Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish thinkers who have in other moments of testing seen that the stakes are very high--for America, for the promise of democratic freedom elsewhere, and possibly for God's purpose in the world.

An honest analysis of the situation, says Neuhaus, shatters false polarizations between left and right, liberal and conservative. In a democratic culture, the believer's respect for nonbelievers is not a compromise but a requirement of the believer's faith. Similarly, the democratic rights of those outside the communities of religious faith can be assured only by the inclusion of religiously-grounded values in the common life.

The Naked Public Square does not offer yet another partisan program for political or social change. Rather, it offers a deeply disturbing, but finally hopeful, examination of Abraham Lincoln's century-old question--whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

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