Sound Learning Feature for March 2005
From American Public Media's *Speaking of Faith*

 This month we revisit a special from American Public Media's *Speaking of Faith.*

This month, we explore the ideas and present-day relevance of 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, an influential, boundary-crossing voice in American public life. Niebuhr challenged American Christians as often as he consoled them, and was taken seriously by both religious and secular Americans. Exploring his wide appeal, Sound Learning discusses the insights he brings to the political and religious dynamics of today.

The articles in this month's feature are of particular interest to teachers and students of religious studies and civics.

In the following pages, find instructional ideas and study guides intended to aid in the teaching of:

- Listening comprehension.
- Critical thinking.
- Research and writing challenges.
- Key terms and topics.

Segment 1: Introduction to Niebuhr

Listening Comprehension Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the first segment of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:00:00.0&end=00:00:07:02.0

For one observer, what did Niebuhr define for Americans?

1. Where was Niebuhr a pastor in his early career? What issues was he exposed to in this environment?

2. Where did Niebuhr spend most of his career teaching?

3. What term did Niebuhr innovate to describe a middle way between idealism and arrogance?

4. What Niebuhr prayer did Alcoholics Anonymous adapt?

5. List the titles of three of his books that he had written.

Critical Thinking Questions
These activities are based on "Moral Man and Immoral Society, segment 1: Introduction to Niebuhr"

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:00:00.0&end=00:00:07:02.0

Answer the following questions:

1. **Concept: Christian Realism**
   An excerpt of the Serenity Prayer is included in this segment of the radio

program. Listen to the excerpt of the prayer. Why would Alcoholics Anonymous adapt this particular prayer? What does it offer for people who recite it daily? What can we learn about Niebuhr's beliefs from this excerpt?

2. **Concept: Lives of tension**
   Niebuhr's book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, is quoted in this segment of the radio program, ("Man has always been his own, most vexing problem... Human beings live in the tension between nature and spirit, between knowledge of our mortality and our intimations of transcendent meaning. Our highest hope and calling is to live responsibly in this tension.") What lesson is Niebuhr communicating? What tension is being described in this passage? What examples can you find in our curriculum of "humans becoming their own, vexing problem?"

3. **Concept: Niebuhr's style**
   Listen
   Listen to Niebuhr's speaking/preaching style. Why would it be effective? What does he do well? How would you respond to this type of lecturer?

Segment 2: Conversation with Mr. Richard Wightman Fox

Listening Comprehension/Critical Thinking Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the second segment of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:07:02.0&end=00:00:19:40.0

1. **Concept: Responsibility in the world**
   Listen
   Professor Fox wrote about Niebuhr, "He exhorted his readers and listeners to

take responsibility for their world while warning them against the temptation to try to perfect it."

 • What does the Niebuhrian idea of responsibility mean to you? What are the dangers inherent in "trying to perfect the world?"

 • Think of historical situations where you have seen the dangers of "trying to perfect the world" become real. Do you see examples of this in society? In political life? What does "hubris" mean in this context?

 • Have you ever been frustrated by trying to improve something in the world and discovering that you had actually made it worse?

2. **Concept: Paradox in Religion/Morality**
   Listen

This segment introduces the key words of "irony" and "paradox" that play a great role in Niebuhr's work.

 • Analyze the Niebuhrian concept that "doing right will inevitably involve doing some wrong" or that a "certain amount of evil will always be produced by the best people." Do you agree with his observations? What examples can you cite-historical or personal?

3. **Concept: Realism**
   Listen
This segment of the program deals with Niebuhr's approach to moral controversies.

 • After listening to this segment, summarize Niebuhr's approach to racial controversy in Detroit. Cite examples or quotes of that show why Niebuhr is considered a realist.

 • According to Niebuhr, what was the danger in Reverend Helm's approach to imposing racial equality on a Niebuhr's Congregation?

• Have you encountered this kind of arrogance? If so, where? Is there a danger in Niebuhr's "gradualist" point of view?

4. **Concept: Moral Values**
   Listen
   This segment of the program focuses on the use of moral values in political discourse. Niebuhr is quoted, "Religions grow out of the real experience in which tragedy mingles with beauty and man learns that the moral values which dignify his life are embattled in his own soul and imperiled in the world." Listen to the discussion that follows.

   • What rift is being discussed?

   • How does listening to this segment give you new ways to think about bridging our cultural rifts?

Segment 3: Niebuhr on American Society

Listening Comprehension/Critical Thinking Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the third segment of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:22:55.0&end=00:00:25:10.0

1. Why does Niebuhr consider the American historical view of "special providence" to be negative?

2. Find current examples of American culture that still point to the view that Americans see themselves as having "special providence." Find examples in American history of this viewpoint at work.

3. Niebuhr is quoted, "Individuals may strive to be moral, but collectively human beings are compromised and prone to immorality, even evil." Analyze this view. Do you agree with his statement? What connections do you see with the material that we have studied in this course?

4. Niebuhr wrote: "The vigorous pursuit of the highest values by people who are intelligent enough to know that their values are qualified by their interests and corrupted by their prejudices." Reflect on this statement.

Segment 4: Niebuhr on War

Listening Comprehension/Critical Thinking Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the fourth segment of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:25:15.0&end=00:00:31:40.0

1. After listening to Professor Elshtain, do you think Niebuhr's philosophy is relevant to our current world?

2. How does listening to this segment help you approach the current war in Iraq? What questions and cautions does Niebuhr suggest for our current situation?

3. Mr. Hedges comments that Niebuhr understood, "that to make moral choices is not between moral and immoral but between immoral and more immoral…"Listen to the rest of his description. What does this offer for our world today?

Segment 5: Niebuhr and Engagement in the World

Listening Comprehension/Critical Thinking Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the fifth segment of "Moral Man and Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:31:40.0&end=00:00:35:31.0

1. Niebuhr wrote: "Religion is more frequently a source of confusion than of light in the political realm. The tendency to equate our political with our Christian convictions causes politics to generate idolatry"

   • What do you think Niebuhr means by this?

   • What main points does Ms. Elshtain make in responding to this statement?

2. Niebuhr wrote: "Politics is not an ultimate value, it is a relative value. That we should not assume that politics is the ultimate authority. We can never achieve such a standard."

   • What did he mean by that?

   • How does this idea help you think about contemporary political life in America?

Segment 6: Inspiration for Reconciliation and the Need for Tension

Listening Comprehension/Critical Thinking Questions

Read the following questions, then listen to the sixth segment of "Moral Man and

Immoral Society" to find the answers.

http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/speakingoffaith/20050210_niebuhr?start=00:00:45:40.0&end=00:00:53:00.0

1. Listen to Mr. Charles Villa-Vicencio's statement about how Niebuhr influenced his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. How did he find Niebuhr's thoughts useful in the South African context?

2. What do you think Niebuhr means by, "Justice will require that some people contend against us?"

3. According to Mr. Lovin, how does Niebuhr open us up to being more hopeful and less anxious about the conflicted times in which we live?

Research Challenges

1. What impact can one scholar have on the times in which they live? Examine the interactive timeline found on the Speaking of Faith web site. Articulate three major ways that Niebuhr affected the times in which he lived. Use the specific detail found on the timeline to support these larger ideas. This can be presented in an oral presentation, a discussion or in a writing exercise.

2. Select one concept from the list of key terms below. Before you research the term, define it in your own words—take your best guess! Next, research this term/concept and summarize its basic meaning. Listen to the Niebuhr program and investigate how this term/concept can be found in his philosophy. Finally, what role did this concept/term play in American History—can you find examples?

Key Terms and Topics
Terms

From Minnesota Public Radio's Sound Learning (www.soundlearning.org)

- Christian Realism

- Secular Community

- Liberalism

- Social Justice

- Irony

- Paradox

- Christian Paradox

- Theology

- Moral Relativism

- Hubris