

The missing theologians

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



Reinhold Niebuhr, portrait by Ernest Hamlin Baker. [Some rights reserved](#) by [stratoz](#).

It was another dinner party, like all the rest, with a few close friends, an acquaintance or two, a host, and a candlelit meal seasoned with lots of small talk and laughter. But eventually the conversation made its way to something more substantial. A woman mentioned an article she'd read in the *Atlantic* about our educational system, and others began tentatively to chime in with their perspectives. The conversation was civil, careful even, but it was clear that not everyone had the same opinion.

The same thing happens when two guys in a delivery truck stumble into a conversation about politics. The driver mentions that his daughter is having a baby. "Thank God for Obama," he says, "because she now has insurance." But his helper in the passenger seat says he's probably paying for the daughter to have that baby, and he doesn't understand why it's his responsibility. Since they're stuck with each other in the truck they have to talk this through the best they can.

There are some very important national conversations taking place these days over issues like affordable health care, community policing, the inequitable distribution of wealth, immigration, sexual identity, and a national election.

But for some reason few people are thinking anything that is grounded in theology. The church, of course, is wired to think this way, but I'm not sure how much of society is listening to the church's best thinkers.

Society knows what the politicians think, and what columnists, movie stars, bloggers, and dinner party guests think. So why don't they know what theologians think?

I hang around religious scholars for a living. I'm impressed by their insights, and they're very clear that the gospel is about the renewed flourishing of all creation. But seldom does the *New York Times* dial them up to get their take on a public debate.

There was a day when the thoughtful public and even the president paid attention to Reinhold Niebuhr. The theological depth of his writing on topics like power, democracy, and political realism made him compelling to the intellectual leadership of the country.

The typical response to this observation is to claim that today we live in a different, post-Christendom society, one without a sacred canopy. Got it. But there is more to the social marginalization of theology than that.

When we dismantled the sacred canopy, we also removed the notion that there was any compelling vision that could unite society. We didn't just give up the notion; we burned it as being inherently oppressive. Particular social visions may in fact oppress a minority group, and often do, but it's not inherent in them. It's hard to find oppression in Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Maybe the bigger problem is that we no longer believe in ideas that emerge out of a coherent system of thought. We've read too many tweets, and believe that every idea has equal legitimacy.

When my daughter was in high school, the head of her school said to an assembly of parents, "Here we tell our students there is no such thing as a bad idea." That went down pretty easily until I began to think about it. No bad ideas? Actually, there are some terrible ideas, and telling a bunch of teenagers that there are no bad ideas is one of the worst I've heard. Every brutality against humanity began as "just an idea."

Theologians have been trained in a deep history of thought about the nature of our life with and without God. It is possible to disagree with their perspectives on our society, and they certainly disagree with each other. But we dare not dismiss the depth of their thinking by assuming religion is no longer a significant player in our

life together.

Those who massacre people in clubs and hotels are religiously motivated. So are many of those who devote their lives to caring for the poor. And whether they realize it or not, so are those who find themselves in a conversation about public policy at a dinner party or in the cab of a delivery truck. Religion is a major player in our actions, for better and worse, and it makes no sense to sideline the best theological thinkers.

We desperately need their help if we are to untangle some of the complex problems before us, including those caused by religion itself. They draw from a deep well of biblical thought that promises redemption is always possible. That's the hope we need.

T. S. Eliot claimed that contemporary characters in literature no longer have great ideas that either inspire or conflict them. Instead they have nervous reactions. This remains a prophetic statement for a society that assumes it's postreligious. Without the input of great theological ideas, we are destined to bounce nervously back and forth between political correctness and seething reactions.

Let's bring the theologians back to the table.