

Citing Reinhold: Niebuhr's legacy

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

Now and then we play a game: "Which four figures would you nominate to be included in a Mount Rushmore of American religionists?" Jonathan Edwards and Martin Luther King Jr. make most lists right off. After that there is much debate. Shouldn't we include a Catholic? A woman? But usually one of the remaining spaces is reserved for Reinhold Niebuhr, inarguably the most influential American theologian of the century past (though academic theologians might prefer his brother H. Richard Niebuhr, who lacked the public influence).

To the young'uns, Niebuhr may seem a relic of the Middle Ages. Yet when people get serious, most of them come back to him. If you want an introduction or a refresher on Niebuhr, you can hardly do better than to consult the discussion organized by public radio's Krista Tippett, host of *Speaking of Faith* (speakingoffaith.org/programs/niebuhr/). Says Tippett: "Reinhold Niebuhr has been cited as an influence by more of my guests than any other figure past or present, and on a vast and vivid range of topics. "

Tippett's comment led me to use Google to see how many appearances the theologian makes when search-engines have done their work in cyberspace. I typed in "Reinhold Niebuhr" and "2005." In September that turned up 173,000 references. Hardly less forgotten in the earlier years of this millennium, his name shows up in 136,000 references connected with the year 2004; 121,000 with 2003; 119,000 with 2002; and 116,000 with 2001.

This method of counting and accounting is manifestly imprecise, but with such evidence it is hard to say that Niebuhr is being neglected.

Yet as notable a historian and public scholar as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. just wrote an article in the *New York Times Book Review* (September 18) with the headline, "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr: Why has the supreme American theologian of the 20th century dropped out of our religious discourse?"

Schlesinger is too good a historian not to make some points. It's true that much of the public religious discourse today is from the religious right, where Niebuhr has seldom been a referred-to figure, at least in positive terms. And Schlesinger ends with a question that many of us also ask, or are asked: Where are the Reinhold Niebuhrs of this century?

The first thing to say is: there was but one in the previous century. Only Paul Tillich comes close in the citation-game, and he had a different agenda and influence. The second thing to say is that Niebuhr was a genius, and one does not find geniuses under every bush. I'd add a third thing: the culture to which Niebuhr spoke is gone. The constituencies are dispersed. He gained a hearing in the last few decades, or minutes, of an era in which there were coherent audiences and readerships for a religious thinker. It was certainly the last round for a broad mainstream Protestantism. Niebuhr spoke out of and to and through that cohort to the larger public, which included Catholics, Jews and secular folk.

Today, postmodernism by whatever name has replaced that intact modern world. Whether labeled "Catholic," "Protestant" or "evangelical," the religious canopies these days are full of individual booths, and people in one booth pay little attention to any other. There is no point in looking for a new Niebuhr. There is definitely a point in summoning our gifted figures who work in niches to speak up and to link up with others to spread messages of judgment and hope. Odds are, they will sound a bit like Niebuhr. But they won't match him.