

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments February 2009

Richard John Neuhaus, 1936–2009

In memoriam.

It is with sadness and a sense of general loss that we acknowledge the passing last month of Father Richard John Neuhaus, the Canadian-born, Lutheran-turned-Catholic founding editor of *First Things*, prolific writer, and tireless ambassador on behalf of an invigorating species of orthodox ecumenicism. Over the course of his bustling career, Richard Neuhaus (who was 72 when he died on January 9) devoted himself to building bridges of fellowship: between Catholics and evangelical Protestants, between Christians and Jews, between the religiously committed and what we might call faithful unbelievers, men and women of no church but a humanity wide enough to register the promptings of transcendence. The homilist at his funeral noted that one of Richard's favorite words was *convivium*: a feast, an entertainment, a banquet whose root in the idea of living with one another underscored the ineluctable fellowship that is our common destiny. Richard was both intensely convivial and wholeheartedly in earnest. It was part of his wisdom to understand that conviviality and earnestness, far from being in opposition to one another, were natural allies.

Conversation was central to Richard's vocation as a public intellectual, and he pursued conversation in all its manifold forms. He was a ferociously articulate and witty speaker: illuminating on the lecture platform, gratifying (to his friends) in debate, entertaining at the dinner table. But he understood that conversation can be effectively pursued on paper as well as *viva voce*. Richard covered a lot of paper. When he started *First Things* in 1990, he quickly established it as the premier journal of "religion and public life," as its cover advertised. What soon became clear is that *First Things* was also a sort of reservoir for Richard's literary fecundity. He often wrote essays and reviews for the magazine, but his *pièce de la résistance* was The Public Square. Month in and month out, Richard populated this capacious section of the magazine—it often ran to twenty pages or more—extolling, cajoling, or animadverting as the case required. With an astonishing fluency and perspicacity, Richard strode over the issues, personalities, and contretemps of the moment, moving with ease from arcane theological disputes to the demotic hurly-burly of the culture wars. It was an extraordinary performance.

Richard was also the author of a shelf of important books. Among the most influential was *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (1984), which dramatized with awful

clarity the Chestertonian truth that the forces of radical secularism, abetted by an activist judiciary, will regularly transform a civilization that championed freedom *of* religion into a culture whose gospel was freedom *from* religion. Richard wrote and spoke about this and other matters with a rare authority, grounded in faith, burnished by a logical tidiness, broad range of reference, and generous humanity that made his writing as wise as it was informative and engaging.

Irving Kristol famously quipped that a neoconservative is a liberal mugged by reality. In the 1970s, Richard experienced that ambush. The cosh-wielding bandit was called *Roe v. Wade*, but he was abetted by a large and unlovely host of co-conspirators, eager recruits in what we now call “the culture wars.” Like many so-called “neoconservatives,” Richard never stopped being a liberal, in the true sense of the term, i.e., someone who champions genuine liberty and rejects the many ensorcelling counterfeits that would consume it. Russell Kirk said that he was conservative *because* he was a liberal, a formulation whose patina of paradox should not distract us from the deep truth it expresses. In the inaugural issue of *First Things*, Richard devoted the first part of The Public Square to discussing the virtues, and some enemies, of democratic conservatism. His reflections are at least as pertinent now as they were nineteen years ago. In 1990, a frequent topic of debate was the future of the “conservative coalition” forged by Ronald Reagan. Richard warned against “the little band of conservatives who declare themselves the keepers of the flame and seem to be declaring a nasty little war against those whom they view as imposters.”

Democracy is their *bête noir*, and they vent their animus most specifically at “neoconservatives.” ... In the way they tell it, the American story is one of almost unrelenting decline. With Henry Adams a century ago and Gore Vidal today, they believe that modernity and her rapacious consorts, democracy and capitalism, have sold American into bondage to immigrant newcomers who, in their grasping vulgarity, know nothing of republican virtue. The paleos quietly seethed while Ronald Reagan championed a conservatism of democracy, capitalism, and progress, but they’re not going to take it any more.

Nineteen-ninety or 2009?

Richard was a stalwart and articulate general in the *Kulturkampf*. But he was much more than a polemicist. In the February 2009 issue of *First Things*, his thoughtful essay casts condign doubt upon the rationalist conviction that the progress of modernity entails the retreat of religion. He concludes the issue, as he had done for the previous nineteen years, with a miscellany of observations about various matters religious, cultural, and social. In his last note, he mentions that he is battling cancer. Reflecting on “the package deal that is mortality,” he assures his readers that “I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much that I hope to do in the interim.” It was an interim far more abbreviated than Richard’s many friends had hoped. But that which he accomplished in the meanwhile, he enjoyed. R.I.P.

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