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Lutheran Life Lecture

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Social Dreaming and the Impudence of Preaching

In one of Albert Camus's novels, he tells of a man who regularly visited a bar in Paris.¹ The bar was frequented by free-thinking atheists. The man would enter, order a glass of wine, and wait for a brief break in the conversation around him, then he'd let fly a forbidden expression: "My God!" he'd say, or perhaps, "Thank God!" Silence. He stopped the conversation cold until, inevitably, there was an explosion of outrage. The story captures the problem of preaching in North America circa the millennium. The context is semi-secular, so talk of God borders on impudence. Let us begin by remarking the impudence of preaching in a strange broken semi-secular age.

I

Do we have to argue that for the past fifty years we have seen a spread of secular mind? Secularism — probably a by-product of the Protestant Reformation — secularism gathered steam in mid-nineteenth century as a social movement and, enlarging, has emptied churches in Europe and North America ever since.² Church attendance is around 3% in Great Britain, 5% in Lutheran Europe, 20% in Canada, and, lately, may have tumbled under 25% in the United States. Secularism. We are not speaking of anything awfully reflective. No, secularism in North America seems to have been a practical atheism. People appear to be getting along quite well, thank you, without God, and in particular without churches that claim to represent God. Our secularism is not convictional; after all, Who cares? Sunday brunch at a fashionable restaurant and leisure with the New York Times crossword puzzle sounds rather pleasant doesn't it — even to clergy? So what about ultimate meaning? Well, except for crises moments when tragedy sneaks up and belts us one, we manage to do without. These days most North Americans live in a chain of short term purposes — I will finish school, I will buy a car, I will find a job, I will make money, I will get married, I will raise a family, I will start a retirement account — one short term purpose

after another fanned by advertising amid remarkable prosperity. Paul Tillich used to argue that we are justified by doubt as by faith because at least we're preoccupied with God. But, nowadays there isn't much of either, doubt or faith. The nonliturgical cry of the age, "I haven't got a clue!" Like lost sheep people are simply wandering off, nibbling on prosperity, until they no longer remember shepherd or flock. Ours is a semi-secular age.

So can we argue that God-talk, real God-talk, in the midst of practical secularity is a form of impudence. Nowadays God-talk can stop almost any conversation, particularly God-talk that drops into conversations naturally as if God were involved in our everyday lives. Suppose we could import a group of Christians from rural parishes in African or Asia and, among us, listen to the way they speak of God: "God told us to build a church down by the river." "God sent us to meet other Christians in Capetown." "God found a minister to lead us." The language is so basic, so actual, yes, so real as to startle us all. We wisened-up semi-semi-secular people hear them speak and, strangely, we are embarrassed. Are they merely primitive? Is their faith a borderline mental illness? Or could they be right and we be the losers? Listen, it is an index of how we mainline religious types have been ravaged by our secular culture; we are as embarrassed by such conversations as secular neighbors. Yet, there's something about such artless conviction that gets to us, doesn't it? A contemporary poet tells of riding in a New York City subway car and studying the face of a nun seated across the aisle from him, "her quiet eyes of faith." The poem ends harshly, "I wish to God I had some religion."³ In our North America, honest God-talk will stop the swirl of social conversation. Sheer impudence!

Of course, be careful. If the age is secular it is no longer monolithically secular. Lately there have been cracks, wide cracks in the secular veneer.⁴ Have we begun to wish to God we had some religion? Secularism is breaking down largely because of the shifts in population. Three decades into the coming twenty-first century the population in North America will be a huge mix of African American and Spanish speaking peoples with a substantial population increase from the Far East and the Middle East. These are traditions that in their language embrace symbols of faith. So religious consciousness may be moving in on America. In addition there are seekers,⁵ disaffected folk, dropping out of credit card/corporate culture, fed up with unnourishing meaningless upfront activity. Have they read Kathleen Norris writing of God in *Dakota* and so sense that behind Bible

talk and busy churches there is something mysterious, some unseen shimmering presence?⁶ So we live in a threadbare, leftover secularism. There are movements of the Spirit riffing the surface of the age. Call our moment, semi-secular.

II

Now let's sidestep the subject temporarily to look at options. What can we do with a semi-secular world? As religious people, how do we respond? Obviously we can evade responsibility for the world. We can hang up a sign "Resident Aliens" on our church doors and keep busy preserving our biblical selves. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willomen, both of Duke University, seem to regard our times as exile, or perhaps as a new "Dark Ages" in which Christians must preserve Christian culture and biblical heritage, over against corrosive secularism — "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"⁷ Our North American churches have loved their message for it has blessed parochialism. Remember the famous bishop who when asked what he did during the turbulent French Revolution, answered sweetly, "I survived!" So here we are in an awesome time of social change and our mainline churches seem to be dedicated to nothing more or less, then self-preservation — "survival!" We forget that Jesus of Nazareth did say, "Those who would save their lives will lose them," words that should be posted in denominational headquarters everywhere. In one of his last speeches, Paul Tillich described European Churches in the eighteen eighties. Churches had lost touch with the Proletariat. "Ministers thundered against the atheistic masses," said Tillich, "but the masses...never came to hear them."⁸ The description cuts too close to the mainline Protestant problem. Our churches, mostly peopled by the middle class, may have become socially isolated. Think of middle class people in America imagining that they are suffering in exile. The image is ludicrous.

Look, when will we realize that the church to be church must be in the world, not of, but decidedly involved in and, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *for, for* the human world as well? After all, we are God's people and, remember the signs you see held up during TV football, "John 3:16," — "God so loved the world." God loves the world, indeed, loves the secular world, and we may not turn away. And, just lately, have you noticed? There seems to be a turn toward the world with what might be termed apologetic enterprise. Exhibit A: Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian with sturdy Barthian credentials, writes a book,

Why Christian?, subtitle, *For Those on the Edge of Faith.*⁹ And Nick Wolterstorff, an intricate orthodox person up at Yale, in a book entitled *Divine Discourse*, launches a philosophical defense of the idea that God actually talks to us through human conversations, including the peculiar conversation we call preaching.¹⁰ There's an impudent notion! And at Vanderbilt University, theologian Edward Farley writes a systematic theology inquiring into the appearance of redemptive life amidst idolatry; a systematic theology, without recourse to the usual scriptural starting point.¹¹ Perhaps we are beginning to realize we must converse with "cultured despisers," or better, the culturally indifferent and not merely clutch our Bibles on the way to church. For the better part of the twentieth century we have engaged in a dialectic "Word of God" theology seeking to separate faith from culture, particularly worn-out Enlightenment culture. But in so doing, we may have made ourselves dispensable. Preaching is not merely an in-house activity, a biblical program for the baptized, but an evangelical calling in a world God loves. So here's the question, How can theology once more be part of public discourse? How can the impudence of preaching address an estranged yet wistful semi-secular age?

III

Now, to the problem at hand: After the telegraph was invented, someone proposed that soon people in Texas would be able to converse with people in New England. Henry David Thoreau, a wry New Englander, asked the blunt question, "Will people in Texas have anything to say to the people in New England?" — a question we in the States may be asking in the next presidential election. But applied to our subject, the remark has deeper import. Is there any basis for public conversation between religious people and the secularized culture in which we live? How can we talk of God when secular folk have no Bible, no tradition of God-talk, and only a vague Woody Allen residual memory of ritual practices? Will Christians and practical secularists have anything to say to one another? Is there any "point of contact," any common ground between talk of God and the culture?¹² Years ago Karl Barth shouted "Nein!"¹³ He insisted there was no commonality between God and world, no built-in readiness for the Gospel, no "analogia entis," no predisposition for God's word because after all we are sinners, and sin has smudged the image of God in our humanity. So our hearts are not restless for God. We do not automatically home in on "ultimate

concern.” Because the world is sinful, the word of God is always *extra nos*, from beyond us. Thus theology must be dialectic, or so Barth argued. The result of Barth’s position has been either a kind of biblical arrogance — here is what the Bible says whether you’re interested or not — or an exclusive pulpit preaching Bible to the in-church faithful with little interest in a wider, if often anguished world.

By contrast Paul Tillich ventured a theology of correlation, arguing that Christian Faith addresses human being, indeed correlates with existential structures of being-in-the-world.¹⁴ Thus human being *per se* is the question and news of God is an answer that offers meaning to existence. Now Tillich did not allow the human world to determine the agenda — he has been so accused. No, for after all, he defined the Protestant enterprise as a “critical principle.”¹⁵ Instead, Tillich supposed that the message of Jesus Christ as the New Being was an authentic answer to questions of human being in the world, an answer that addresses human estrangement, guilt, anxiety, and the threat of non-being. The trouble with Dr. Tillich’s method of correlation was that inadvertently it tipped the Gospel message into a therapeutic personalism. His famous version of justification, “You are accepted,”¹⁶ became a smiling bright yellow God-loves-you-button while, at the same time, huge depersonalizing forces in the world enlarged. For we live not merely within our own troubled self-awareness, but in a world dominated by “powers that be.”

So again, the question: Is there any point of contact? Is there any point of contact that is neither a cultural sell-out or a church growth con job? Or will preaching God always be a form of impudence? Here’s a modest suggestion. Let us meet together in the midst of social dreaming! Look, there are always constants in every age — not just “death and taxes” (in Canada, taxes and death!). Yes, there is the fact of dying. A Pulitzer Prize work, *How We Die*, rehearses the reality with medical honesty.¹⁷ Dying we manage, but having to die is the problem, a problem Christians addressed in early centuries when the average life span was probably in the twenties. And guilt, is guilt still a problem or was it merely a medieval pathology now erased by an “I’m OK” society? Maybe. But these days there are self-help books, so many the *New York Times Book Review* has a separate chart to calculate their sales, books that promise to make us neater, sweeter, thinner, smarter, more successful and, above all, better looking. Apparently we not sure how “OK” we are. So though guilt may be banished we still cannot seem to enjoy our own company. Primal human problems! There are always primal human problems that a Gospel message addresses. But, now widen focus: in

every age, there are also different dominations that disfigure human life. Good heavens, the first century did not cringe at the thought of nuclear weapons or worry over the possibility of anthrax warfare. And earlier centuries never had to untangle the ethics of downsizing or deal with the power of multinational corporations. And, please notice, there is no mention of AIDS in the Bible. In every age prophets have spoken and in every age people, particularly oppressed people, have dreamed a better, brighter human world. Social dreaming. After all, remember, the prophet Jesus of Nazareth came preaching God's new social order, *basileia tou theou*, a kingdom of God. Social dreaming, the inchoate shape of God's great salvation in human consciousness.

IV

Before we go further we must stop and acknowledge the protests of the Niebuhrs, H. Richard and Reinhold. Does the message of the kingdom of God sidestep sin and neglect the cross? Is H. Richard's condemnation of thinned-out theological liberalism justified?

A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.¹⁸ Perhaps. But times have changed. Now after a great depression, two world wars, the terror of the dead stacked like cord wood at Auschwitz; plus, how many non-declared U.S. wars? — Korea, Vietnam, not to forget a continuing every day a rain of death on Baghdad. Progress is *not* our most important product; apparently, these days, death is! We are good at death! Does any one suppose we are capable of building God's new society on our own, or by cooperating with grace, even if such cooperation were possible of sinners? Good heavens, how can human nature build glory when the blueprints are skewed, the contractors corrupt, and materials sub-standard? So, if we dream God's brighter world, we dream in the midst of social nightmares, we dream as desperate, fearful folk. Turn of the century religious optimism has vanished. Nowadays the problem is not an overconfident religious ambition, but terror, yes, and social despair. Nowadays we know that if God's social order comes, it can only come by death and resurrection. The context has changed.

Now what about the other Niebuhr, Reinhold: Reinhold Niebuhr viewed the message of the kingdom as a dangerous form of utopian thought.¹⁹ Early Christianity, he argued, embraced a perfectionist "interim ethic," altogether impractical in our more modern world. Social dreaming, Niebuhr argued, could divert religious people from a wised-up "Christian

Realism.”²¹ Maybe. But Niebuhr’s “Christian Realism,” a strategy of compromise, seems to have been designed for people in power. If we are among the poor of the earth, “Christian Realism” can be a counsel of despair or even an inadvertent support of “status quo.” When, if ever, does Christian Realism turn into Christian Resistance? Christianity as compromised life is not exactly attractive, is it? Look, Christian social dreaming is not utopian. Utopias are celebrations of human enterprise, these days utopias are apt to be Silicon Valley pretensions. A still more modern utopia, the managed world, is even more oppressive — a Dilbert nightmare! Utopias are all chrome and glitter, bubble cars and glass buildings, but new people? There are no new people. Utopias crumble in the chaos of sin; they are always reconstructed Babels.

No, let us claim our heritage: Social dreaming has a long history in the Hebrew/Christian tradition. Social dreaming is the embodiment of covenant, the dream of Zion. All you have to do is to leaf the pages of the Bible. Remember Isaiah’s vision: A peaceable kingdom where Tomahawk missiles are traded in for field tractors; and combat fatigues, Pentagon issue, are burned up in a heap because, “We ain’t gonna study war no more.” Not bad, huh? Or how about old Zechariah, dazzled by a dream of future Jerusalem, where old folks, men and women, can lean on their canes sunning themselves in city parks while kids on skate boards whiz around filling the air with laughter. What are we going to do with those incurable liberals, Isaiah and Zechariah? Or what about the last chapters of Revelation. Old John, a salt-rock political prisoner, dreaming a city of God, descending from the heavens. Shall we tell the old man to get out of the sun and read Reinhold’s Niebuhr’s *Nature and Destiny of Man* so he can learn something about sin? The genius of the Hebrew Christian tradition is that it dreams dreams, God dreams, dreams of the covenant fulfilled.

V

Preaching, particularly at the rag-tag end of the century, can paint pictures of God’s promises, can speak Oracles of Salvation to borrow a term from Claus Westermann. Oh, they will be old as time because they reverse the perennial tragic order of things — there will be “no more death or pain or crying” announces the Book of Revelation. At the same time, they will be up to date, enlarged by social dominations that disfigure our immediate 1999 world. We can begin with the visions in the Bible; they are unframed pictures of God’s promised kingdom, but you can

add to the visions, that's why they've been left unframed. Think of God's new world where there are no more nations — remember the only way nations could enter the Holy City, new Jerusalem, was by offering tribute and dropping their emblems. What a blessing — no more patriotism! Patriotism has never been a Christian virtue. Or how about dreaming a multicolored city — black and yellow, red and pale-faced white — breeding golden boys and girls for the future of God. Or maybe a world where the walls we've been building lately, enclaves so the rich can live with the rich in "Gated Communities," will have tumbled down; how can God's world be anything but classless when you're talking about brothers and sisters. Listen, you're even allowed a touch of fancy — salvation has always been an improvisational doctrine! Can you imagine NATO generals on an Easter Egg Hunt. Or a gay and lesbian picnic being held in the midst of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition! Salvation isn't personal, that's an old, old heresy. No, salvation is a world. We are to picture the promises of God for us all. In doing so, we will draw together the broken fragments of our contemporary society, for everyone will find their features in a wide wondrous social dream.

By the way, stop and think, there are special benefits to envisioning. Pictures of God's promised kingdom will let you be prophetic without getting into too much trouble with frightened middle class congregations. Picture God's world at peace and you can lift a prophetic eyebrow over the we're-number-one military mentality that seems to have swept North America. Or depict a world where the mere idea of denominationalism is a knee-slapping, whoop-it-up-joke, and you can be critical of our little competitive churchiness. See it's much better to argue from the future, than from the past to the present. Whenever you try to be prophetic from the past to the present you end up in law, law or moralism. Luther knew, and in a way Luther was quite correct. But if you speak from the unfolding future of God, a future filled with wonders, you will sweeten your words. You can be prophetic. You can be socially critical, and for God's sake, literally, for God's sake in North America today you better be. So, picture God's great salvation and you will be able to address cultural dissonance — a double impudence. You will name God into the semi-secular world and, at the same time speak prophetically as the voice of God.

Now, here's another blessing: From a dream of God's future, you will be able to see where God is at work in the human world. For wherever and whenever people are working together toward God's promises, however ineptly, however confused, however sinstruck, there the Spirit

of God is active. Yes, you can stand up in a pulpit and say, "Look what God is doing now!" To take an example, wasn't it splendid a few years ago when an organization called Greenpeace, sailed a boat into the nuclear bomb testing area in the Pacific ocean. Yes, the gesture was ineffective, a bravado in the face of military power, a kind of nuttiness, perhaps. But the Bible is quite clear God intends a peaceable society, Shalom on earth. Therefore, however, nutty the gesture, God was involved. As surely, hasn't God been with in the great South African trials and mercies. Think of a procedure that documents outright wickedness and then absolves the truth uncovered. Can such a plan be anything but the stirring of God's Spirit among us? Ministers are often afraid to name God into what's going on, because after all, most social movements are ambiguous. But to Calvinists, what else is new? God, our God specializes in making alliance with ambiguous sinners. If we do not dare to name God in the world, we are turning congregations over to a still lingering secularity.

VI

We live now in one of those huge moments in human history. The world is whirling through a time of traumatic change. "Behold," cries the voice of God, "Behold I am doing a new thing, now it will spring forth, do you not see! Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." The world is being shaken up. Dark continents are waking and working and changing. There is world-wide social ferment. Like the breakdown of the Greco-Roman world, or the collapse of the Medieval synthesis that brought about the Renaissance/Reformation. Nations are dissolving into economic blocks. Other religions are moving into Main Street, North America. People are frightened. How does the Bible put it?

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,
and on the earth distress among nations....People will
faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon
the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken
(Luke 21:23-24).

In such a time, when people seem paralyzed, the pulpit must once more paint pictures of the world God intends, bright images of what Jesus termed the realm of God. Perhaps beckoned by the brightness of hope our land may come alive again. For most of the twentieth century,

we have turned back. We preach the biblical past to the present. But now God speaks: "Do not consider the things of old." Says God almighty, "See I am doing a new thing!" Once more we must preach the future of God. How else can our continent repent and be renewed?

Every now and then, a poem, a passage of fiction or a film gets to you. A metaphor perhaps of all you believe. As a kid in first year of high school I read Joyce Carey's wonderful novel *The Horse's Mouth*.²¹ If you've never read it, go chase down a used copy on the Internet and be dazzled. The book is all about a crazy artist named Gully Jimpson. Jimpson drinks too much, beds down a bawd named Sara, but is inspired by poetic visions of William Blake. Well, Gully Jimpson gets hold of a condemned rickety old boathouse and starts to paint a mural of God's new creation. "Walls," he shouts, "walls have been my salvation. Walls and losing my teeth young, which prevented me from biting bus-conductors and other idealists."²² "Walls," cries Gully Jimpson who paints murals based on biblical faith on any walls he can find. Finally police and the politicians show up to tear the building down. So there's Gulley on a wobbling scaffold trying to keep on painting the new creation on a condemned wall. Listen, with sermons we paint images with words. In a condemned tumbledown end of an era, we are called by God to paint pictures of the new creation, so, though modern world may fall apart and it will, visions of the realm of God will shape faith for the future. Ministry is a visionary vocation. In a falling-down world, we paint pictures of God's great salvation.

Notes

- ¹ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957) 93.
- ² Franklyn L. Baumer in *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1960) has provided a comprehensive history of the rise of secularism. More recently, Stephen L. Carter has analyzed the systemic nature of secularism in *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
- ³ I have been unable to locate the quotation.
- ⁴ Lately sociologists, including Peter Berger, have been questioning the secularization theory; see the survey provided by Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, "Recent Developments and Current Controversies in the Sociology of Religion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews Inc., 1999) 363-94.

- ⁵ Wade Clark Roof argues that so-called baby boomers are “transforming America’s religious landscape,” *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993) chapter 9.
- ⁶ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993).
- ⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).
- ⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) 205.
- ⁹ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?: For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ¹¹ Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990) and *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).
- ¹² Years ago James E. Sellers produced a fine study of the problem in his *The Outsider and the Word of God: A Study in Christian Communication* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961).
- ¹³ Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” by Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary Press, 1946).
- ¹⁴ In particular see, Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume II: *Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) in which he correlates modes of human estrangement with “The New Being in Jesus the Christ.” On the “Method of Correlation,” see also *Systematic Theology*, Volume I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 59-66.
- ¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); see chapters 11-15.
- ¹⁶ Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948) 153-63.
- ¹⁷ Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
- ¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988 [1937]) 193.
- ¹⁹ For a recent analysis of Niebuhr’s position, see Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); chapter 3, “Christian Realism: The Niebuhrian Turn.”

- ²⁰ For example, "When Will Christians Stop Fooling Themselves," *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D.B. Robertson (New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 40-6.
- ²¹ Joyce Carey, *The Horse's Mouth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).
- ²² *The Horse's Mouth*, 310.