

Discussion of religion's relevance surfaces at mainstream seminary

By KURT JOHNSON, SR.
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At a commencement address at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, senior pastor of the Lutheran Church of St. John the Baptist in Brooklyn, New York, said, “Religion has a future in America. But it appears to be a future increasingly dependent upon the most obscurantist and regressive forces in society.”¹

That statement sounds like a well-considered beginning of an interesting analysis regarding contemporary issues involving the relationship of religion to some complicated social, cultural and political dynamics the country is facing in 2009, doesn't it? While the statement is relevant today, it actually was made in May of 1968 at the commencement exercises.

Neuhaus would later leave the Lutheran ministry and become a Catholic priest, becoming a prominent writer for the journal, *First Things*, which he founded. He moved away from his strong social-action perspective he promoted in the 1960s and morphed into neoconservatism, promoting the “public square” approach to ethics as a replacement for social action. He died in January of 2009.

Nonetheless, Neuhaus had a vibrant crystal ball in 1968 and was able to identify the wane of conservative confessionalism as a vibrant force in religion. And, in light of the difficulties being faced by mainstream denominations, including serious declines in membership, it's clear that Neuhaus was right about the trend. He was quoted further as saying that, as ministers of religion, “It is hard when we are not needed and even harder when we are not believed. Yet religion will not quickly disappear. Perhaps a majority of Americans will maintain religion as a way of hedging their bet that they can manage their destinies by themselves.”²

1 “Inauspicious Moment' for Ministry, Seminarians Told”, in *LSTC Epistle*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 1968).

2 *Ibid.*

He also is quoted as saying, “We may protest that the virgin birth, the existence of hell, and the literal accuracy of the miracle accounts are not the cardinal points of orthodoxy, but the fact remains that these and similar ideas make up the belief system that has been the glue holding together the religious enterprise. Careful studies indicate that the glue is no longer holding. And there is nothing in sight to restore its adhesive strength.”³

The replacement Neuhaus suggested at the close of his commencement address was “integrity”, which he identified as faithfulness to a transcendent point of reference, the coming of the Kingdom of God.” He is reported to have said, “Let us resolve to proclaim and demonstrate the the possibility of life liberated from the fears and petty preoccupations which inhabit the living and constrict the vision of so many of our contemporaries.”⁴

And now, over 40 years after that commencement address, religion continues to struggle with being relevant. The answer provided by the televangelists is that of making a financial deal with God in which people give money to religion (sowing a seed) in order to receive the blessings which return in the form of salvation, physical healing, and financial fortune. This answer, which appears to be a manipulative process by which the vulnerable are exploited, is worse than no answer all. It is unfortunate that mainstream religion, Catholics and Protestants alike, don't do more to debunk it. On the other hand, they have to be careful in offering any criticism in light of the fact that they have their own fund-raising to do.

The answer suggested by Neuhaus as focusing on “the coming of the Kingdom of God” also has been misused by the wingnut televangelicals (pre-millennialists and dispensationalists) and others, but despite the absurdity, these fringe groups continue to prosper in their own niche. Alternatively, the mainline Protestant denominations are racked with inner turmoil—the tug and pull between conservative confessionalism and being relevant amid the human challenges of the moment. It's not a problem which will be resolved in the near future.

Organized religion, and the various enclaves of organized Christianity in particular, seem to function under the premise that if the Pope or a majority vote of a biennial assembly can make a theological declaration, then it must be embraced by God as being true (if it is not true already). One of the problems with this methodology is that there always will be those within the fold who need a better reason to embrace it.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

It's seems true enough that many people are still seeking to find the “glue” referenced by Neuhaus, and some, in desperation, think they have found it in one of many theological propositions.

In light of these notions, it is clear that the greatest theological growth occurs within continuing dialogue and study which are intellectually and existentially honest. The word “doctrine” is a root word of “indoctrination”, and understanding that fact alone should go a long way toward stimulating the existential quest for that elusive glue.