

“Thinking Theologically: About Pluralism”
The First in a Summer Series on Theology
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
June 8, 2008 - the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

This is the first in a series of sermons titled “Thinking Theologically: About...,” and then some topic I think we should be thinking about. Feel free, by the way, to alert me to topics you’d like to think about. I collected some from the appeal I made in the May *Carillon*, but, as I trust you will soon appreciate, theology is more like a conversation among friends than a pronouncement by a solitary individual. Indeed, I had considered doing this series as a conversation—as an exchange, that is, right here in the middle of the service—but I was advised against it. Too much like a classroom, one person said; keep it a worship service. And there, right there! There was theology in action. And I thought, well! I had better listen to these theologians who are already carrying on the conversation. Get busy with the sermons!

There are two things I’d like to do today: 1., I’d like to say something about what it means to be a theologian, and 2., I’d like to say something theological about pluralism—in less than twelve minutes. But first, I feel compelled to issue a warning: Thinking Theologically May Be Bad for Your Health! Your spiritual and your physical health. It is possible to spend too much time on this stuff. I have visited theological blogs on the Internet—the latest incarnation of the conversation—and I do find them interesting and even challenging, but I can also tell you the day will disappear in bleary-eyed stupor if you’re not careful. If you *want* the day to disappear in this way, then truly, you are a full-time theological thinker and you should think about getting paid for your labors. But there shouldn’t be too many such creatures, and certainly not gathered in one place. In the words of Kim Fabricius, whose “Ten Propositions on Being a Theologian” I have happily cribbed for this sermon (the link is in your bulletin: faith-theology.blogspot.com/2007/03), “Theologians are like horse manure: all in one place and they stink to high heaven; they are best spread around.”

So what does it mean to be a theologian? Well, you might think it means writing big books that, if you’re lucky, seminarians will read in decades and even centuries to come. There is something to that—theologians do write books, some of them very big, but really, in the words of Kim again, “It is not the theologian’s job to think about God for us, it is the theologian’s job to help us think about God better, so that we may believe, pray, live and die better. Dorothy Sayers said that ‘Christians would rather die than think—and most of them do.’ [But] the theologian is out to make Ms. Sayers a liar.”

A few other observations about what theologians do: just because someone uses the word “God” does not make him or her a theologian. Theology is not primarily an academic exercise. It is “holy speech” (John Webster). It is *fides quaerens intellectum*,

faith seeking understanding. It begins with faith and, if properly done, ends with worship, and along the way it makes much use of prayer and confession. It's true it is hard to get the exact words right. After all, God will not be tied down by our efforts to understand him. And we might well ask, why bother? Wouldn't it be enough to do the will of God and let it go at that? The answer is, theology can help us make sure we're doing God's will and not someone else's. Think of it this way: our impulse is the exact opposite of God's. God is forever moving about doing the new thing; we are forever building monuments to the old thing God did once, but is now on to something else. Theology helps us to see that something else. As I like to quote in another context, unless we learn to think differently than we now do, think theologically, we'll not learn to think, theologically, at all.

So what can theology say about pluralism?

Well, first of all, *why* I chose pluralism—because it is *the* subject that has stymied *our* development. It's true. Our fear of being intolerant regarding other faiths has effectively blocked all progress we might make in our own faith. Pluralism is the belief that there are other religious truths out there besides the Christian truth, and because we serve Truth, capital-T, first, and its manifestations, including the capital-C, Christian version, second, we must not judge they say and do. They've got their way of doing things and we've got ours, and both are true, so we must be ... tolerant. We must do what's right—everyone's got to do that—but regarding truth, we must let sleeping dogs lie.

I hope it sounds strange to think of the Christian faith as a sleeping dog. It's true that the name “Fido” comes from *fides*, Latin for “faith,” but not because Fido's asleep. Fido is fully awake and on high alert. It's a dog's loyalty to his master and his eagerness to protect him that marks the dog as a faithful companion. Even so when Fido's master seeks understanding: Fido / faith keeps him from falling into error and worse.

The project of what to do about other religions, then, begins with faith, with our faith, and not with some idealized realm called Truth from which we may make objective statements about the religions, including our own. There is no such realm. The thought that there might be such a realm is itself a faith statement, faith in reason. In the middle of the 17th century, the religious wars that had overrun Europe came to an end. People were appalled at the senseless violence that had taken place. If you want to get a sense of how bad it was, look at the prints of Jacques Callot, an artist from the period who had the misfortune of living in the region most caught up in the madness. He did a series titled “The Miseries of War,” in two versions, no less—the large “Miseries” and the small “Miseries.” The madness in the name of religion that has taken over our day has nothing on the religious madness known as the Hundred Years War.

So, people began to champion the use of reason over faith. In Immanuel Kant's famous essay of 1784, “What Is Enlightenment?” we read

Enlightenment is Man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without

being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* [which is Latin for “Dare to Know!” They used a lot of Latin back then] Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

It was a very useful motto. The use of human reason alone gave rise to a resolute and optimistic desire to discover, study, describe, and ultimately harness the universal laws of the created order. This was the period of the great naturalists, and geologists, the *Encyclopédistes*, as they were known in France, Newton, John Locke, Darwin, the rise of modern medicine, and the beginnings of the history of religions. It is no accident that the word “pluralism” first appeared in 1818. Prior to this period, or so many thought, there were only warring Protestants and Catholics. During it, the religious horizons expanded greatly, culminating in a “World Parliament of Religions” that took place in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition of 1892.

Pluralism began when faith in reason took up the challenge of codifying the world’s faiths. It was not a disinterested exercise in classification. It was an interested exercise in understanding all the faiths, the better to practice an above-it-all faith called modernity. Pluralism was the belief that there were all these religions out there, and, if you were knowledgeable enough, you could pick and choose among the best of them—or none at all, if you so desired—and come up with a religion unsullied by history and tradition. No more wars between Protestants and Catholics, or any of the world’s religions, for that matter, only enlightenment. The great embarrassment of this time was the backwardness of practicing a particular faith. Oh, the denominations thrived in this era. They did some exploring of their own. But among the enlightened, confessions steeped in a particular tradition seemed to miss the point. Progress was the order of the day. We were advancing towards a—sorry about this—a metahistorical truth, a truth that transcended all particular truths.

And then came post-modernism. Two hundred years after Kant’s essay, Michel Foucault wrote another essay titled, appropriately enough, “What Is Enlightenment?” In it, however, he demolished the Enlightenment’s cheerful optimism that we were living in the best of all possible worlds. We were living, he said, in a time when the very idea of a permanent body of knowledge that was accumulating—that idea was in disrepute. It has not made us more mature, quite the contrary. It has only served to mask our own conquering ambitions. So, Foucault said, we should adopt not an over-arching critical theory, but a certain

attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. [Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment ?” (“Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?”), in Rabinow (P.), ed., *The Foucault Reader*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50]

A life devoted to exposing the limits of our grand enterprises, in an almost archaeological

sense, a sense of digging up dirt (sometimes the genealogical metaphor is used as well, the idea that we must trace back the origins of our ambitions), that is what post-modernism aspires to. De-construction. Construction..., well....

Construction is what I want you to aspire to this morning. Contrary to what some might say, construction is not only possible, it is required in our post-modern age. For the great issues of our day do not demand less critical thought, they demand more, and they do so in the form of confession, of *fides quaerens intellectum*—there's that Latin again—faith seeking understanding. We cannot begin from nowhere, from an abstraction called reason that does not exist except in the minds of despairing enlightened few. We have to begin from somewhere, from a place that we know and love and that has served us well. I mean our faith, the faith we grew up in, the faith that nurtured us—some nurturing better than others—when we could not look after ourselves. We began in the household of faith, and that is what we should freely and happily confess: that there are good reasons to believe, even if there are many who use the name of Christ to champion their own personal agendas. Faith has given us this community, this hope, this love in Christ. And that is what we must confess. I do not believe this means we have entered a new era, an era we might call post-post-modernism. We have simply picked up where our ancestors left off: we are still seeking understanding, but we are doing so in the company of the many friends who are carrying on the conversation much as it has been done all along.

What consequences does this have for other faiths? More dialogue, with better informed participants, certainly on our part. For we will now engage others with some awareness of what we bring to the conversation. We are not bereft of having something to say. We have, or rather, we follow one who claims to know God fully, even Jesus Christ our Lord. This may seem like the height of folly in our age when we know so much about similar claims and all the destruction they have wrought. But compare the results! Jesus did know something about God, and he knew it in a way that brought life, not destruction.

This confession is worth making, even in a pluralistic age. I hope that it is one we will all undertake together. As theologians. Twelve minutes from when we first began.

Amen.