Preaching As Though We Had Enemies

Stanley Hauerwas

I am just postmodern enough not to trust "postmodern" as a description of our times, for it privileges the practices and intellectual formations of modernity. Calling this a postmodern age reproduces the modernist assumption that history must be policed by periods. Just as modernity created the "middle ages," which we all then knew could be safely left behind, "postmodern" is far too comforting since it gives the illusion that we know where we are—in contradiction to the postmodernist's epistemological doubt that such knowledge is available.

Modernity was created by a deliberate rejection of the past, but ironically modernity is now our past. Accordingly, as J. Bottum puts it ("Christians and Posmoderns," FT, February 1994), "postmodernity is still in the line of modernity, as rebellion against rebellion is still rebellion, as an attack on the constraints of grammar must still be written in grammatical sentences, as a skeptical argument against the structures of rationality must still be put rationally." Or as Reinhard Hutter observes, "It belongs to the ironies of modernity that exactly those who are most modern increasingly claim postmodernity as modernity's most recent advance."

I confess I take perverse delight as a theologian in the controversies surrounding postmodernism. Modernity sought to secure knowledge in the structure of human rationality, and relegated God to the "gaps" or denied Him all together. Modernity said that God is a projection of the ideals and wants of what it means to be human so let us serve and worship the only God that matters—that is, the human. Postmodernists, in the quest to be thorough in their atheism, now deny that the human exists. Postmodernists are thus the atheists that only modernity could produce.

I do find it puzzling, however, to watch theologians, both conservative and liberal, come to the defense of the human, the rational, objectivity, the "text," "moral values," science, and all the other conceits the modern university cherishes in the name of "humanism." It is as though Christians have forgotten that we also have a stake in atheism. Christians do not believe in the "human"; we believe in God—a God we believe, moreover, who intends to kill us all in the end. So we Christians do not oppose nuclear weapons because they threaten to destroy "mother earth," but because the God we serve would not have one life unjustly taken even if such a killing would insure the survival of the human species. Indeed, it is not even clear that we Christians know what the human species is or what status it may have since we have surer knowledge that we are creatures than that we are human.

Christians, therefore, have little stake in the question of whether we live in a postmodern time. For us, any divide in history, the way we tell the story of how we have come to the place where we are, requires a reading of God's providential care of God's creation through the people of Israel and the Church. Israel and the Church are not characters in a larger story called "world," but rather "world" is a character in God's story as known through the story that Israel is the Church. Without them there is no world to have a story. From my perspective, "postmodernism" merely names an interesting set of developments in the social order that is based on the presumption that God does not matter.

The imperialistic character of these claims for the significance of the Church does not mean that it is unimportant for Christians to understand the peculiar development called modernity. Rather, as I just suggested, we must narrate the modern story on our

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terms. That, I fear, is what we have not done in modernity. Christians' attitudes toward modernity have primarily been characterized by a sense of inferiority. As John Milbank observes, "The pathos of modern theology is its false humility." Our preaching and theology has been one ceaseless effort to conform to the canons of intelligibility produced by the economic and intellectual formations characteristic of modern and liberal societies.

Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel. Desiring to become part of the modernist project, preachers and theologians accepted the presumption that Christianity is a set of beliefs, a "worldview," designed to give meaning to our lives. In the name of being politically responsible in, to, and for liberal social orders, the politics of Christian discourse was relegated to the private realm. We accepted the politics of translation believing that neither we nor our non-Christian and half-Christian neighbors could be expected to submit to the discipline of Christian speech.

Ironically, the attempt to make Christianity intelligible often sought support from those philosophical and literary theories that attempted to protect discourse from translation—the most prominent example being New Criticism. Under the influence of New Criticism, some thought that Christianity could be conceived as a beautiful poem that is its own justification. Such a poem, of course, could and should illumine the human condition, but exactly because the poem provided such illumination, all attempts to make the poem "do something" must be condemned as crass. Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, in quite different ways, gave theological warrant to the high humanism intrinsic to the powerful set of suggestions associated with such formalist theories. What could be more comforting to modern consciousness than to discover that "ultimate concern" and "sin" are essential and unavoidable characteristics of the human condition? You do not even need to go to church to learn that. Reading Shakespeare will do just as well if not better.

The humanistic presumptions of New Criticism nicely fit the aestheticism of the middle class that dominates Christianity in America—at least the Christianity that produces intellectuals like us. That is why I take it that contemporary preaching is still dominated by formalist presumptions even if preachers think they have theoretically left such theories behind. New critical habits are hard habits to break because they fit so well the class interests that dominate the seminary cultures in which many of us are located.

In particular, new critical assumptions hide from us how our theological presumptions are shaped by class interests. Frank Lentricchia, in his *Modernist Quartet*, makes the fascinating suggestion that the modernist writer defined himself against the standards of the mass market by becoming the champion of radical originality and the maker of a "one-of-a-kind-text." He observes, however, that "the modernist desire in Frost and Eliot—to preserve an independent selfhood against the coercions of the market, a self made secure by the creation of a unique style—is subverted by the market, not because they wrote according to popular formulas, but because they give us their poems as delicious experiences of voyeurism, illusions of direct access to the life and thought of the famous writer, with the poet inside the poem like a rare animal in a zoo. This was the only commodity Frost and Eliot were capable of producing: the modernist phenomenon as product, mass culture's ultimate revenge on those who would scorn it."

In like manner, the preaching and theology shaped by new critical presumptions to illumine the human condition hid from us that the human condition we were illuminating was that of the bourgeoisie. That is why the sermon meant to illumine our condition, which is often eloquent and profound, is also so forgettable and even boring. Insights about the human condition are a dime a dozen. Most days most of us would rightly trade any insight for a good meal.

The high humanism of contemporary theology and preaching not only hid the class interest intrinsic to such preaching, but also reinforced the presumption that Christians could be Christians without enemies. Christianity, as the illumination of the human condition, is not a Christianity at war with the world. Liberal Christianity, of course, has enemies, but they are everyone's enemies—sexism, racism, homophobia. But liberal versions of Christianity, which can be both theologically and politically conservative, assume that what it means to be Christian qua Christian is to have no enemies peculiar to being Christian. Psalms such as Psalm 109, which ask God to destroy our enemies and their children, can appear only as embarrassing holdovers of "primitive" religious beliefs. Equally problematic are apocalyptic texts that suggest Christians have been made part of a cosmic struggle.

"Cosmic struggle" sounds like a video game that middle-class children play. Most of us do not go to church because we are seeking a safe haven from our enemies; we go to church to be assured we have no enemies. Accordingly, we expect our ministers to exemplify the same kind of bureaucratic mentality so characteristic of modern organizational behavior and politics. I sometimes think that there is a conspiracy afoot to make Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the manager in *After Virtue* empirically verifiable.

That the manager has become characteristic of liberal politics should not be surprising, but I continue to be taken aback by the preponderance of such char-

acter types in the ministry. Of course, I should not be surprised that a soulless church produces a soulless ministry devoid of passion. The ministry seems captured in our time by people who are desperately afraid they might actually be caught with a conviction at some point in their ministry that might curtail future ambition. They, therefore, see their task to "manage" their congregations by specializing in the politics of agreement by always being agreeable. The preaching such a ministry produces is designed to reinforce our presumed agreements, since a "good church" is one without conflict. You cannot preach about abortion, suicide, or war because those are such controversial subjects—better to concentrate on "insights" since they do so little work for the actual shaping of our lives and occasion no conflict.

I confess one of the things I like about the Southern Baptists is that they have managed to have a fight in public. Fundamentalists at least believe they are supposed to have strong views, and they even believe they are supposed to act on their convictions. The problem with most of the mainstream churches is that we do not even know how to join an argument—better, we think, to create a committee to "study the issue."

If postmodernism means anything, it means that the comforting illusion of modernity that conflict is, can be, and should be avoided is over. No unbiased viewpoint exists that can in principle insure agreements. Our difficulty is not that we have conflicts, but that as modern people we have not had the courage to force the conflicts we ought to have had. Instead, we have comforted ourselves with the ideology of pluralism, forgetting that pluralism is the peace treaty left over from past wars that now benefits the victors of those wars.

One hopes that God is using this time to remind the Church that Christianity is unintelligible without enemies. Indeed, the whole point of Christianity is to produce the right kind of enemies. We have been beguiled by our established status to forget that to be a Christian is to be made part of an army against armies. It has been suggested that satisfaction theories of the Atonement and the correlative understanding of the Christian life as a life of interiority became the rule during the long process we call the Constantinian settlement. When Caesar becomes a member of the Church the enemy becomes internalized. The problem is no longer that the Church is seen as a threat to the political order, but that now my desires are disordered. The name for such an internalization in modernity is pietism and the theological expression of that practice is called Protestant liberalism.

In contrast, I am suggesting that our preaching should presume that we are preaching to a Church in the midst of a war—a position you may find odd to be advocated by a pacifist. I hope the oddness, however, might encourage you to reexamine your understanding of Christian nonviolence—which, if you are like me, was probably shaped by Reinhold Niebuhr. Who more than the Christian pacifist knows that Christians are in a war against war? Moreover, as a pacifist, I do not need something called the human condition illumined when I am preparing to face the enemy. Rather, I need to have a sense of where the battle is, what the stakes are, and what the long-term strategy might be. But that is exactly what most preaching does not do. It does not help us locate our enemy, because it does not believe that Christians should have enemies. In the name of love and peace, Christian preaching has reinforced the "normal nihilism" that grips our lives. We have a difficult time recognizing the wars that are already occurring or the wars that should be occurring because we think it so irrational that some should kill others in the name of "values."

James Edwards has argued in his *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in An Age of Values* that nothing characterizes the nihilism that grips our lives better than the language of "values." Nihilism is not a philosophical conspiracy designed by Nietzsche and some French intellectuals to undermine the good sense of liberal Americans—indeed Nietzsche was the great enemy of nihilism. Rather, nihilism is now the normal condition of our lives to the extent that we all believe that our lives are constituted by what Edwards calls "self-devaluating values." All our values are self-devaluating because we recognize their contingency as values. As Edwards puts it, "Normal nihilism is just the Western intellectual's recognition and tolerance of her own historical and conceptual contingency. To be a normal nihilist is just to acknowledge that, however fervent and essential one's commitment to a particular set of values, that's all one has: a commitment to a particular set of values."

Normal nihilism is not, however, a condition that grips only intellectuals, but rather forms everyone in liberal social orders. Edwards, for example, suggests that one could not want a better exemplification of normal nihilism than the regional shopping mall. In the mall, one not only sees alternative values tenuously jostling one another, but our very participation as consumers means we also indirectly act as the creator of those values. "In air-conditioned comfort one can stroll from life to life, from world to world, complete with appropriate sound effects (beeping computers; roaring lions). Laid out before one are whole lives that one can, if one has the necessary credit line, freely choose to inhabit: devout Christian; high-tech yuppie; Down East guide; great white hunter. This striking transformation of life into lifestyle, the way in which the tools, garments, and attitudes specific to particular times and places become commodities to be marketed to anonymous and rootless consumers: they are the natural (if also banal) expressions of our normal nihilism." Nihilism is the result of having so

many compact discs from which to choose that, no matter which ones we choose, we are dissatisfied because we cannot be sure we have chosen what we really wanted.

The moral threat is not consumerism or materialism. Such characterizations of the enemy we face as Christians are far too superficial and moralistic. The problem is not just that we have become consumers of our own lives, but that we can conceive of no alternative narrative since we lack any practices that could make such a narrative intelligible. Put differently, the project of modernity was to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they have no story. Such a story is called the story of freedom and is assumed to be irreversibly institutionalized economically as market capitalism and politically as democracy. That story and the institutions that embody it is the enemy we must attack through Christian preaching.

I am aware that such a suggestion can only be met with disbelief. You may well think I cannot be serious. Normal nihilism is so wonderfully tolerant. Surely you are not against tolerance? How can anyone be against freedom? Let me assure you I am serious, I am against tolerance, I do not believe the story of freedom is a true or good story. I do not believe it is a good story because it is so clearly a lie. The lie is exposed by simply asking, "Who told you the story that you should have no story except the story you choose when you have no story?" Why should you let that story determine your life? Simply put, the story of freedom has now become our fate.

Consider, for example, the hallmark sentence of the *Casey* decision on abortion: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." This is exactly the view of freedom that John Paul II so eloquently condemns in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. A view of freedom like that embodied in *Casey* assumes, according to John Paul II, that we must be able to create values since freedom enjoys "a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom."

In contrast, John Paul II, who is not afraid to have enemies, reminds us that the good news of the Gospel, known through proclamation, is that we are not fated to be determined by such false stories of freedom. For the truth is that since we are God's good creation we are not free to choose our own stories. Freedom lies not in creating our lives, but in learning to recognize our lives as a gift. We do not receive our lives as though they were a gift, but rather our lives simply *are* a gift: we do not exist first and then receive from God a gift. The great magic of the Gospel is providing us with the skills to acknowledge our life, as created, without resentment and regret. Such skills must be embodied in a community of people across time, constituted by practices such as baptism, preaching, and the Eucharist, which become the means for us to discover God's story for our lives.

The very activity of preaching—the proclamation of a story that cannot be known apart from such proclamation—is an affront to the ethos of freedom. As the Church, we stand under the word because we know we are told what we otherwise could not know. We stand under the word because we know we need to be told what to do. We stand under the word because we do not believe we have minds worth making up on our own. Such guidance is particularly necessary for people like us who have been corrupted by our tolerance.

The liberal nihilists are, of course, right that our lives are contingent, but their account of contingency is unintelligible. Contingent to what? If everything is contingent, then to say we are contingent is simply not interesting. In contrast, Christians know their contingency is a correlative to their status as creatures. To be contingent is to recognize that our lives are intelligible only to the extent that we discover we are characters in a narrative we did not create. The recognition of our created status produces not tolerance, but humility. Humility derives not from the presumption that no one knows the truth, but rather is a virtue dependent on our confidence that God's word is truthful and good.

Ironically, in the world in which we live if you preach with such humility you will more than likely be accused of being arrogant and authoritarian. To be so accused is a sign that the enemy has been engaged. After all, the enemy (who is often enough ourselves) does not like to be reminded that the narratives that constitute our lives are false. Moreover, you had better be ready for a fierce counteroffensive as well as be prepared to take some casualties. God has not promised us safety, but participation in an adventure called the Kingdom. That seems to me to be great good news in a world that is literally dying of boredom.

God has entrusted us, His Church, with the best story in the world. With great ingenuity we have managed, with the aid of much theory, to make that story boring as hell. Theories about meaning are what you get when you forget that the Church and Christians are embattled by subtle enemies who win easily by denying that any war exists. God knows what He is doing in this strange time between "worlds," but hopefully He is inviting us again to engage the enemy through the godly weapons of preaching and sacrament. I pray that we will have the courage and humility to fight the enemy in Walter Rauschenbusch's wonderful words, with "no sword but the truth." According to Rauschenbusch, "such truth reveals lies and their true nature, as when Satan was touched by the spear of Ithuriel. It makes

injustice quail on its throne, chafe, sneer, abuse, hurl its spear, tender its goal, and finally offer to serve as truth's vassal. But the truth that can do such things is not an old woman wrapped in the spangled robes of earthly authority, bedizened with golden ornaments, the marks of honor given by injustice in turn for services rendered, and muttering dead formulas of the past. The truth that can serve God as the mightiest of his archangels is robed only in love, her weighty limbs unfettered by needless weight, calm-browed, her eyes terrible with beholding God." May our eyes and our preaching be just as terrible. Indeed, may we preach so truthfully that people will call us terrorists. If you preach that way you will never again have to worry about whether a sermon is "meaningful." FT

The Bede

(Bedford, Bedfordshire)

Baeda, at times, made his monastic plod from
Wearmouth to Jarrow, from Jarrow to Wearmouth
to Jarrow, but not a foot south of York, no-
where north of Lindisfarne, never a step out
of Northumbria. Baeda kept his travels brief
to reason time in Jarrow, where Thrimilchi
is three months before Weodmonath and the cows
need milking and the weeds grow rankly. What did
he know, untraveled, living in the closets
of Northumbria, to begin *Historia*
Ecclessiastica Gentis Anglorum,
"Britain is an Island lying
in the ocean . . . a considerable length
from the coasts of Germany, Gaul, and Spain?" What
more did Baeda know of Anglorum than "I
have passed the whole of my life within the walls
of some dank monastery?" He was only
a monk from Wearmouth.

Yet what convert
of Baeda's baptized in the stills of the Ousse
another convert (a convert unknown to
Baeda) in a river basin he never
knew, now named in baptismal veneration,
Bedford? And what baptismals and converts of
converts are in the Bedfords, Bedfonts, Bedmonds,
and Bedlingtons around the world Baeda never
knew—on more shores than Germany, Gaul, and Spain,
miles from York, Wearmouth, Jarrow, and Lindisfarne?
And on what shelves rest how many translations
of his *Ecclesiastical History*
of the English People? And where are you, now?
And where is the name of the Venerable Bede?

Jere Odell