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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
“Beyond Its Use - By Date? Pondering the Future of Faith”

presented on July 14, 2018 by
Reverend Richard Lennan

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Dr. Colleen Griffith: Good morning.

Participants: Good morning.

Dr. Griffith:
human experience deeply, and shape historical agency. One who seeks truth in this way does so best by abiding in it, which is why life in the Spirit is the heart of the vocation of the theologian.

The 20

th century spiritual giant, Evelyn Underhill, has lots to say about life in the Spirit. She identifies interior dispositions and habits to be cultivated that characterize it. Focused attention, singleness of heart, openness to patterns of contemplation, adoration of God as one's interior bearing, and cooperation with God's creative Spirit in the world.

Our speaker this morning approaches the theological task formed by these very d.6()-11.48.6(l)-1()0.6(f)eTc QgT w 193(teaching, and preaching inspire, challenge, and give reason for hope.

Richard Lennan, a priest of the diocese of Maitland - Newcastle since 1983, is professor of systematic theology in the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. His principal fields of research and teaching are ecclesiology and the theology of ministry. He has particular interest in the theology and spirituality of Karl Rahner.

He holds a master of philosophy degree from the University of Oxford and a doctorate in theology from the University of Innsbruck. He is the author of two books, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* and *Risking the Church: The Challenge of Catholic Faith*. He's the editor of five others, most recently, *The Holy Spirit: Setting the World on Fire*, which he co-edited with Nancy Pineda -Madrid and published with Paulist Press in 2017.

Prior to moving to Boston, Richard taught theology for 15 years at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, and had wide involvement in ecumenical activities and pastoral planning in

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Australia and New Zealand. He is past president of the Australian Catholic Theological Association, and serves currently as an editorial consultant for theological studies.

Richard is a most respected scholar, teacher, a trusted leader, and an esteemed colleague in our school. He has served as chair of the Ecclesiastical Faculty and is presently coordinator of the Systematics area and director of the STL program.

Those of you who have encountered Richard firsthand, know of his concern for his students and colleagues alike, expressed in countless generous actions on their behalf. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome to this stage somebody that we celebrate regularly at the STM and do so especially today. Richard Lennan, addressing "The Future of Faith."

[APPLAUSE]

Rev. Richard Lennan: Good morning.

Participants: Good morning.

Fr. Lennan:

I am so delighted to be here. And for that, I particularly thank Melinda and the people with whom she works, for the invitation and for the care that they took in organizing all the details for this morning. I thank Jackie Regan and Marcia Ryan for organizing the alumni gathering earlier. And I'm most grateful to Colleen for that very gracious introduction. And thank you all for being here. I appreciate that. Giving up a sunny Saturday morning in the middle of summer is not done lightly, so it's wonderful that you're here.

Do you support the use of torture? This question featured in the recent confirmation hearing for the nominee to head the CIA. While the brutality of waterboarding would seem to leave no room for equivocation, the nominee was evasive. Sidestepping the demand for a yes or no answer, she would say only that "the CIA acted within the law."

While fruitless if measured by the light shed on the nominee's values, the exchange established at least one thing indisputably: direct questions do not always receive direct answers.

By now you may be ahead of me, wondering whether "Beyond Its Use - By Date?", itself a direct question, will receive a direct response. In fact, you may already be anticipating an hour of ducking and weaving along the lines of, well, look, it all depends on what you mean by "beyond" — [LAUGHTER] — by "use - by," and come to think of it, perhaps

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"Pondering," I'd want to underscore —and here's an instance of a distinction —differs from

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Rowan Williams. Since Johnson and Williams are academic theologians, they may be concerned that their analysis will be remote from the everyday life of faith.

Academic theology, however, is at its best when it has its roots in and complements the everyday life of faith. Both Johnson and Williams epitomize this ideal. They write as members of the community of faith, the church, as believers facing, along with the rest of us, the issues that gave birth to doubts about the sustainability of faith in our time.

Engagement with the questions addressed to the possibility of faith is not reserved to the academy, but is open to all who wonder about faith or desire to deepen it. To this shared enterprise, academic theology brings specific resources to support the community of faith as it takes up its current challenges.

These resources come from a reflection on the enduring wisdom embedded in the history of faith and from dialogue with the contemporary wisdom emerging from various strands of the humanities and sciences. Through these contributions, the work of theology can be a means by which the Holy Spirit enables the community of faith to navigate questions of the present with an eye to the future.

Underpinning faith and theology is the God who exceeds our grasp. Paradoxically, the revelation of God does not enable us to know God exhaustively, as if God were an object. Revelation, rather, makes plain the difference between God and us. It opens our eyes to the otherness of God. As Elizabeth Johnson expresses it, "Revelation enables us to recognize that the reality of the Living God is a mystery beyond all telling. The infinitely creating, redeeming, and indwelling Holy One is so far beyond the world and so deeply within the world as to be literally incomprehensible." the

God, then, is not a mystery, such that God could be classified within a group. But God is Mystery, the one who eludes every containing category. Even the word God, then, is not one that defines and delineates. Indeed, Karl Rahner assesses that word to be almost ridiculously exhausting and demanding, as he confronts us with the reality that we will never control.

Authentic talk about God must avoid any reduction of the incomprehensible God to something more manageable, to an idol, malleable to our desires. While idol may conjure up images of golden calves and so appear to be oddly quaint against the backdrop of the digital age, the term captures an aspect of human behavior applicable to every era: namely, our tendency to confine God within the boundaries of our preferences. A God who is neither an idol nor the same as us is automatically a challenging God. But faith, as we shall see, can embrace that truth as a liberation rather than an affront.

Rowan Williams takes up what the reality of the incomprehensible God means for the life of faith, and especially for the work of theology. "Theology," he argues "will probe those aspects of religious practice which pull in the direction of ideological distortion, those things which presuppose that there is a perspective that leaves nothing out. It will also challenge the notion that these are the terms in which God is to be imagined."

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Since God always remains "Other" than us, our talk about God, no matter who we are or what our convictions, can never say the final word about God. Even less can any of us assert legitimately that we've said the only possible word about God.

Taken together, the ideas of Johnson and Williams suggest the need for humility in24(h)0.5(e)0.6(9i 421.2 2.5(0.6(f)4)-11

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As a step towards providing the light and shade that will enable a fuller portrait of faith and its possibilities for the future, I'll move to the second part of this paper, which will review the contemporary context of faith. ew

As I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, the issues influencing the state of faith in the present day are many and intricate. In addition, what applies in one part of the world might not be significant in others, so it would be more accurate to speak of multiple contemporary contexts of faith. Both of those factors have influenced how this section will develop. Rather than list individual issues, I'll analyze three sets of influences significant for the prospects of faith in today's world, sets that I'll gather under one overarching idea.

Although this material will reflect the prevailing situation in North America, it will have resonances in other settings as well. My approach will make everything far more neat and orderly than reality can ever be, but it enables an overview of all that the practice in theology of faith face today and perhaps tomorrow. t and

The thesis of this section is that the three sets of influences I'll discuss —the cultural, spiritual, and ecclesial —all illustrate that dislocation is the primary feature of the present moment of faith. Dislocation as the overarching experience of today is an idea I'm borrowing from *The Unmoored God*, the recently published book of the American Jesuit theologian Paul Crowley. Crowley's argument is that dislocation, which involves a sense of homelessness and loss of certainty, is as evident in matters of faith as it is in many other areas of contemporary life.

At first hearing, dislocation conveys a negative impression. But like many challenges, it contains the seeds of opportunity. In fact, dislocation is only irredeemable if we think that the way things used to be was as good as they ever could be. That fear, to repeat an idea from Elizabeth Johnson, is likely to reflect faith as a minuscule rock, even an idol, rather than what grows from trust in the expansiveness of the incomprehensible God.

Perhaps the best way to summarize cultural dislocation, the first influence, is to say that all that once seemed settled and certain about our world is now in flux. Various theories would locate the roots of this dislocation in the Reformation, the French Revolution, the First World War, the development of nuclear weapons, the emergence of the global economy, the proliferation of digital technology, or sundry other events, movements, or individuals.

Whatever its precise origins, cultural dislocation has shattered predictability and rendered opaque the contours of the future. Manifold forms of dislocation have shaken social and political systems in many parts of the world, prompting a variety of efforts to paper over I and

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traditional communities do not foster spiritual development, and ironically, may even be inimical to it, especially in relation to sexuality and gender.

The perceived demand for exclusivity in matters of faith, a demand that conflicts with the appeal of religious pluralism, can also reinforce the desire to shed religious belonging in its inherited forms. Deconversion gives rise to the God-shaped gap emblematic of spiritual dislocation.

We can strive to fill this gap in a range of ways, including by absorption in what the late Irish theologian Michael Paul Gallagher refers to vividly as the "enoughness" of everyday life, which can smother openness to transcendence. While this option is generally available only to those able to rely on material security, its effects, Gallagher suggests, is to render Christian faith "not so much incredible as unimagined and even unimaginable."

In a different way, but perhaps to the same effects, the many variants of new atheism, often recycling much of the scientism and rationalism of earlier eras, proffer a vision promising that human intelligence will ultimately answer every question.

In light of these developments, Crowley acknowledges, that "the God who was once familiar

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church of the people. That failure fuels the sense that the Church is a remote institution, committed to its own continuance and the privilege of its leaders rather than to being a venue for an encounter with the merciful God, an encounter in which all believers can share unconditionally.

When these obstacles to a Church able to reflect the expansiveness of God are compounded by the pettiness and mediocrity to which clericalism is prone and by the impact of clerical sexual abuse, a cascade of ecclesial dislocation results. Equally, since that change in the Church is unlikely, even impossible, tends to harden ecclesial dislocation, leaving little hope for the future.

More could be said about the dynamics of ecclesial dislocation, but 25 -

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a playground, and the children who had a fence around them were more likely to explore outward than the children who were placed in the playground without a fence. So they huddled together and kind of stayed in their own confines. So my question is, especially with regard to the ecclesial dislocation and being a9.6(i)()0-ite r9(,)6(9.68 re f* /C(i)-(e)2(k.6c)(()0.J 0.004wD5)2.6(n)-1 [(c

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Now whether —because as Catholics, we had this sense of what we used to be like, but that doesn't mean that that was necessarily a good thing. We have to learn to see our past not as black and white, but full of all sorts of complexities, just as our future will be and just as our present is.

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institution that we grew up with, and the history and the culture and everything that makes us who we are minus the things that we want to leave behind.

So I guess I just ask in the tension of belonging: belonging, suffering, enduring, and being prophetic. It's a tough combination, and I would just like to hear what you have to say about that.

Fr. Lennan: Okay, thank you. First, I wouldn't in any way minimize the difficulty. I recognize the struggle that you're describing, and I recognize that that's a struggle for many, many people in our Church. And in a very particular way, for women in our Church. No question about that.

I think it's got to be something more than sheer endurance, because that's hardly life giving. It's hardly a reflection of what the Spirit is enabling. The great big picture is that what enables us to continue to hope for change, for that discernment of hearing voices of