

Trinity Presbyterian, Charlotte 2014 Retreat at Montreat

Giving “Religion” a Facelift:

Why God Really Matters to Our World Today

Cynthia L. Rigby, Austin Theological Seminary, presenting

“Religion” is not very popular, these days. More Americans than ever before say they are “not affiliated” with any religious tradition. But many of these “nones” also say they are “hoping, someday, to believe in God.” What they want is a God who is not strict, but who “laughs.” What they want is religion that opens them to the world, rather than closes them off from it. In our weekend together, we will explore how the God Christians know as “Father, Son, and Spirit” IS a God who laughs, a God who is with us, a God who invites us to enjoy the world. We will rescue what we believe from rigid understandings of “religion” and brainstorm how we can share it with the world.

Friday Night:

Introduction: The Problem with “Religion”

Part One: “Why Do We Believe in God? (see Psalm 139)”¹

There are some, these days, who say anyone who believes in God is delusional. There are others – often identified as “Nones” – who say they don’t believe in God yet, but are hoping to someday (see, for example, Eric Weiner’s essay at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/americans-and-god.html?_r=1&ref=ericweiner). As Christians, our vocation is to witness to the difference God makes in our lives. We should be able to say something about why we believe in God, even if we can’t explain everything about why we believe. Our faith and testimony rest not in our capacity to explain, but in our “firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Calvin, *Institutes*).

¹ In this section I may show material you can access at the following links: (1) New Atheism images:(a) http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2009/01/06/article-1106924-02F6286B000005DC-556_468x224.jpg (b) <http://openparachute.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/in-the-beginning-web.jpg> (c) <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/us-getting-its-own-atheism-bus-campaign-15040> (2) Eric Weiner on PBS. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZvX6DKilmU> (4:30 - 7:00) (3) Christian Wiman on Bill Moyers. <http://billmoyers.com/segment/poet-christian-wiman-on-love-faith-and-cancer/> (0:52-4:18) (4) Christian Wiman on Bill Moyers. <http://billmoyers.com/segment/poet-christian-wiman-on-love-faith-and-cancer/> (9:45-10:58)

We believe in God because God has claimed us as God's children before the foundation of the world. This God is not satisfied to love us from afar, but wants to exist in real relationship to us. As Psalm 139 suggests, this God ardently pursues us. God loves us matter what, but it really matters that we are cognizant of this love. Until we know the reality of God's love for us, God's love cannot change us (Barth).

Saturday, session one:

Part Two: "Who Is This God We Believe In?" (see Acts 17:22-28)

(1) The sovereign One who invites us to claim our identity as God's children.

God's power looks very different from what we might expect. To realize (for example) that the baby in Mary's arms is the one without whom the world was not created (John 1) is to know that God's power includes weakness, and that weakness somehow makes power stronger. **Not only does God laugh; God cries!**

(2) The incarnate One who includes us in God's very own life and work.

God does not simply "do things for us." God *is* with us and for us. The difference between "doing things for" and "being for" is the difference between a contract and a covenant; between a transaction and a relationship. **Not only does God get things done, God works with us! ("highly interactive"!)**

(3) The interceding One who sustains us on our way.

God stays with us and strengthens us in our lives and in our work, enabling us to participate in what God does, which is "greater than anything we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). When we doubt and cannot pray, God in the person of the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with groans and murmurings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). **Not only does God help us survive what is, God helps us imagine what can be!**

Saturday, session two:

Part Three: "How Does Believing in God Help the World?"

(see I Jn. 1:1-4 & Mtt. 5:13-14).

According to Karl Barth, the church "is a parable and a promise of the Kingdom of God." He writes: "We are in the world not to comfort ourselves, but to comfort others. Yet the one and only genuine comfort we may offer to our fellow human beings is this reflection of heaven, of Jesus Christ, of God himself, as it appears on a radiant face. Why don't we do it? Why do we withhold from them the one comfort of mutual benefit? Why are the faces we show each other at best superior looking, serious, questioning, sorrowful and reproachful faces, at worst even grimaces or lifeless masks, real Carnival masks? Why don't our faces shine?" (Barth, *Prayer and Preaching*, 123-124).

(1) Our belief helps the world not because it leads us to sin less, but because it offers a remedy to sin, to despair, to helplessness.

(2) Our belief helps the world because it enables us to claim what God has promised in such a way that God uses our life, witness and work to bring God's Kingdom "to earth as it is in heaven." Here's how it might work: As those who believe, we create space (worship, prayer, Bible study) to begin imagining what it is that God desires. Imagining the Kingdom, we begin to enact it. And in enacting it, we participate in the very work of God – bringing it to fruition. When we gather around the communion Table, for example, we are "playing" the Kingdom of God. Engaging in such serious play before our sovereign God, the Kingdom becomes an actuality (in the here and now) as well as the reality.

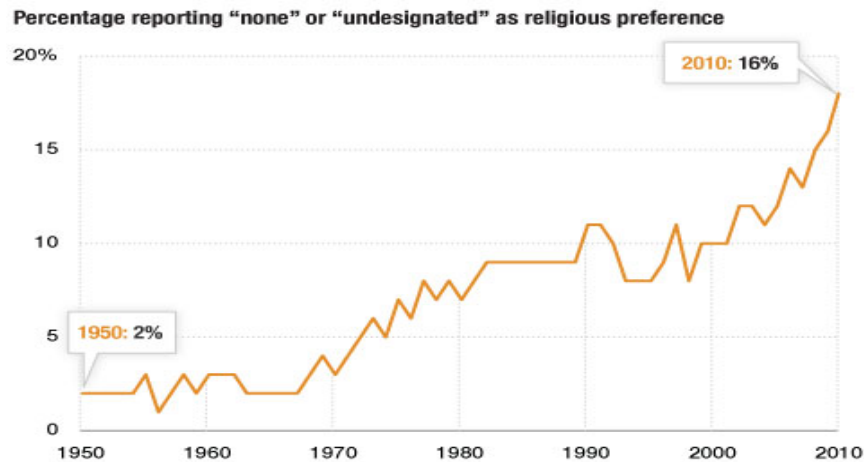
(3) The place for public theology, and what it might look like.

Addendum: Supplemental References (Cindy may draw on these in the course of our time together)

(1) Promoting the New Atheism (e.g., Dawkins): Bumper Sticker Ad



(2) Some Data on the Rising Number of "Nones"



from NPR site, accessed 2.17.13: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/14/169164840/losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones>

(2) Some Quotes On God (Being Always Bigger) and Our Belief in God (Being True, Real *and* Ever Growing)

Alain de Lille (12th century): “God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”

John Calvin (16th c): divine sovereignty/created world as the “theater of God’s glory”/invisible/visible church distinction.

Pascal (17th c): “The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it. We may enlarge our conceptions beyond all imaginable space; we only produce atoms in comparison with the reality of things. It is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. In short, it is the greatest sensible mark of the almighty power of God that imagination loses itself in that thought.”

C.S. Lewis (20th c): “Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. “At last.”

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* The Chronicles of Narnia (1951, this edition Harper Collins, 1994) 141.

(3) One Way Belief in God Might Help the World (longer version of quote from K. Barth)

“Look up to him and your face will shine!” What an announcement! What a promise and assurance! People, very ordinary human beings, with illumined faces! When a person, any one of us, obeys this imperative and looks up to him, to Jesus Christ, a momentous change takes place in him or her. The greatest revolution is unimportant by comparison . . . Such a person experiences joy in the midst of his sorrows and sufferings . . . Such light and joy and laughter are ours when we look up to Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes us radiant . . . Dear brothers and sisters, why is it then that our faces are not bright? If they were, we would feel fine, would be glad to live uprightly and contentedly in spite of adversities, wouldn’t we? Just because we would feel fine, we would be radiant. But something more important has to be considered here. If the light, the joy and the laughter of God’s children really pressed for outward manifestation and became visible, our fellowmen and women around us would notice it in the first place. . . It would be a sign that there are different and far better things in store than they are wont to see. It would give them confidence, courage, and hope. They would be relieved . . . Why relieved? Because such a bright face would be the reflection of heaven on earth, of Jesus

Christ, of God the Father himself . . . We should get the simple truth straight, dear friends. We are in the world not to comfort ourselves, but to comfort others. Yet the one and only genuine comfort we may offer to our fellowmen and fellowwomen is this reflection of heaven, of Jesus Christ, of God himself, as it appears on a radiant face. Why don't we do it? Why do we withhold from them the one comfort of mutual benefit? Why are the faces we show each other at best superior looking, serious, questioning, sorrowful and reproachful faces, at worst even grimaces or lifeless masks, real Carnival masks? Why don't our faces shine?" (Barth, *Prayer and Preaching*, 123-124).

(4) For an essay by Cindy on how to think/what we have to offer to the “Nones” titled “Knowing Our Limits and Laughing with Joy: Theology in Service to the Church Invisible,” see http://issuu.com/austinseminary/docs/windows_summer_fall_2012?mode=window

(5) If we believe in a God who laughs, we may want to take a more play-full approach to the work of theology itself. Here is a chart that can help us get started:

<i>“Thy Kingdom come!”</i>	Claiming the Kingdom: The Space for Play	God’s Promise ↓	God’s Grace ↓	God’s Love ↓
<i>“Thy will be done.”</i>	Imagining the Kingdom: The World of Play	Do Justice ↓	Love Mercy ↓	Walk Humbly with God ↓
<i>“On earth as in heaven”</i>	Creating the Kingdom: The Work of Play	Bread (all eat)	Forgiveness (all are reconciled)	Deliverance (all are free)