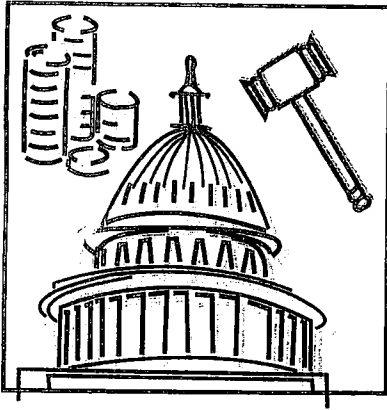


A LIFETIME'S PURSUIT OF FAITH AND REASON

Robert D. Benne



The gift came when I was about twelve, though I didn't consider it a blessing at the time. Our town's most prominent woman employed me as her gardener. Tending her petunias one day, I overheard her tell a friend that she thought that Bobby Benne would make a fine pastor. I almost fell on my trowel. Mrs. Hasebroock had just transmitted the voice of God to me. I knew it was the voice of God because becoming a pastor was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to become a coach, since my life was so caught up in athletics. But from that moment I was hooked. I knew what I had to do. To quote Dag Hammarskjöld from his famous *Markings*, I said "yes" to that summons and "from that moment on I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal."

Indeed, I think a sense of calling from a transcendent source—from God—is perhaps the most powerful "proof" of the existence of God. At least I have wagered my life that the call was authentic. Of course we have more than one calling in life, at least two of which are more important than our calling to a certain kind of work. One is our calling to marriage and/or family life, which has far more effect on the world than our intellectual contributions. The other is our calling to life in the church, which has eternal ramifications. We are also called to citizenship, but those three other callings are not what I am talking about today.

I grew up in an all-German town where you were either Lutheran or Catholic; I didn't see a live Presbyterian until I went off to college. If you were Lutheran you likely went to the nearby Lutheran school, Midland College, especially if you were going to prepare for the ordained ministry. Education at Midland was pretty much memorizing what the text and professor said. But two things led to a lively intellectual awakening. First was an incredible gathering of bright students who engaged in late-night bull sessions on every topic imaginable. Conversation in class never came close to the vitality of those night-time forays. Most of my conversation partners became professors, doctors, and pastors. The other influence was a newly minted Ph.D. from Hartford Divinity School, who had us read Reinhold Niebuhr in Christian ethics and Emil Brunner in Christian theology. Both were required courses.

I was blown away. In his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr relates Christian ethical norms to economics, politics, and culture. He sharply criticizes conservative and liberal theological ethics and develops his own version of Christian realism. I was so excited that I took honors courses from the new prof in both Niebuhr and Kierkegaard. I picked up enough firepower in those courses to impress the Fulbright Commission and Woodrow Wilson Foundation and went off—right after marriage in August of 1959—to Germany to study theological ethics.

What a time to study that subject in Germany, which was still recovering from the horrendous collapse of humane ethics and politics in Nazi Germany. A couple of my teachers had been under house arrest. During that time I got to hear and meet Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Paul Althaus, among other great worthies. An irony of my life is that I met and heard in person some European "greats" who had little influence on me, while those Americans who really did influence me—H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr—I never got the chance to meet in person.

Then off to the University of Chicago Divinity School in the fall of 1960. The Div School had just established what it called "dialogical fields"—ethics and society, religion and personality, religion and art, history of religions, along with the traditional fields. The school was loaded with bright and intellectually passionate students as well as a world-class faculty. I have never since experienced such consistent intellectual excitement and vitality as in those years. Not only was the intellectual life bracing, but society was in an idealistic upswing touched off by the election of John F. Kennedy and the sense that America could rather soon overcome its problems of racism and poverty. The civil rights and community organization movements were electrifying Chicago. My teachers were activists; I was an activist. I shook Martin Luther King Jr.'s hand and participated in his marches, open housing movement, and Operation Breadbasket, an effort led locally by a young Jesse Jackson to get blacks a share of the Chicago economic pie.

But it was the intellectual life that captivated me and bent my calling from the ordained ministry to becoming a Christian teacher and writer. I entered the M.A. and Ph.D.

program in Ethics and Society, a field in which we had to master at least two major theological ethicists and to focus on a secular field in the university so intently that we could reach the M.A. level of competence in that field. I chose Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We had to get so inside their minds that we could think the way they thought. It was a great exercise in close and intensive reading.

Then of course we were to relate that internalized theological perspective to many fields of inquiry and issues. We had ample chance to do that since we had to pass seven comprehensive exams even to get into the Master's program. So we had much practice in relating our theological perspective—in my case, Lutheran/Niebuhrian—to psychology, literature, sociology, and political science. Doing such faith–reason engagement was necessary to pass the comps. My Ph.D. thesis was a theological critique of the concept of responsibility in three theories of mass society—Hannah Arendt, William Lloyd Warner, and William Kornhauser. It remains unread in blessed obscurity. It was pedantic and turgid, but it was a disciplined exercise in faith and reason.

So I got my faith–learning engagement from the liberal Protestants at the University of Chicago Divinity School. In that time I also had to come up with what I meant by faith and reason. Let's take "faith" first. Like a good Lutheran ought, I hold that faith has two dimensions, the vertical (before God) and the horizontal (before humanity in the realm of history). In the first sense, a Christian has faith that God has acted decisively in Christ for our salvation. Moreover, since Christ makes sense only in the context of the Old Testament (God the Father) and in the ongoing life of the church (the Holy Spirit), Christian faith is trinitarian faith, the decisive revelation being given in Christ. Human reason is very important in trying to understand the revelation and actions of the Holy Trinity in the drama of redemption, but it is not the

starting point; the revelation of the triune God is. If reason tries to ascend to God, it becomes a whore.

However, faith also has a horizontal meaning. It has practical relevance to our historical existence, including our life in the academic world. As a Christian I have faith that the long reflection on the meaning of God's revelation of Himself in that drama of redemption has built up an intellectual tradition of amazing wisdom and power. *Reason has been used to understand and extend the meaning of revelation in ways that make it supremely relevant to the academic endeavor.* So faith employs reason to understand revelation and to amplify and extend its meaning.

Faith-informed reason addresses the central questions of life—where we come from, where we are going, what our nature is, what our predicament is, how we are saved, the nature of nature, the nature of history, how we should live, what purposes we have in this life. Not only is faith-informed reason central, it strives toward comprehensiveness. The thoughtful Christian tries to extend the Christian canopy of meaning over politics, society, culture, all fields of secular inquiry.

It would be idiotic to believe that the Bible or theology can fill in all the spaces below that canopy. The secular fields supply the required material for theology to use as it strives toward comprehensiveness. It engages political science, economics, literature. It works at finding convergences and divergences. Part of its work is analytical, discovering and critiquing the underlying principles and methods of the secular field it is engaging. That is, it aims at discovering the underlying faith—unprovable assumptions—upon which the secular field is based. It knows that in every field of secular inquiry there are faith assumptions. So secular reason is also based on a certain kind of faith.

Theology—and in my case, theological ethics—engages the secular fields in lively interaction. One could say that one faith engages another, both using a lot of reason. Some psy-

chologies, for example, cannot fit at all well with Christian convictions about human nature. Others are more compatible. In this engagement I tend to follow the Lutheran tradition that does not expect a full integration of faith and reason in this life. Both Reformed and Catholic traditions tend toward integration. Lutherans aim at that integration but are more willing to live with a lot of uncertainty. "Engagement" is a better word for a Lutheran to use than "integration" in the interaction of faith and reason.

Nevertheless, I believe that the Christian vision—its theological articulation—makes a truth claim that is unsurpassable for me. There is a lot of messiness and uncertainty in the whole scheme, but I hold the Christian claim to be true. The liberal Protestants I trained with were less likely to hold to the unsurpassability of the Christian vision. Many of them thought that Whiteheadian philosophy was more compelling than the Christian vision, and therefore they altered their interpretation of Christian theology dramatically. Some accommodated to existentialism so much that many of the central claims of Christianity had to be given up. This still is a tendency of liberal Christianity: viewing Christ through the prism of contemporary thought so thoroughly that Christ is irretrievably altered. Christ is accommodated into high intellectual culture.

Well, you can see that with that sort of training, I would go on to teach and write in ways that featured a vigorous engagement of faith and reason. Indeed, this engagement became my calling—relating the Christian religion to various facets of society. One could call this enterprise "practical theology." The first facet of that calling was teaching. I was lucky enough to get a job teaching in a seminary—the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago—right out of graduate school when I was twenty-eight. I was brim full of intellectual energy and enthusiastic social activism. In my first year I convinced the vast majority

of the senior class at the seminary to enter into urban ministry even though most were not fit for it. I had no nervous first steps in my teaching career; I came on like gangbusters. I peaked early.

I did well enough as a temporary hire that the seminary called me to a permanent position at the seminary. By this time I had come to the conclusion that the ordained ministry was not for me, but rather I was called to be a lay Christian teacher, to “equip the saints for ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). I spent seventeen years at the seminary teaching Christian ethics, church and society, Christianity and economics, Christianity and film. Many courses were dialogical. I remained at the seminary in Chicago until 1982, when I went to Roanoke College.

My teaching at the college also focused on the basics of the field: Christian ethics in both their personal and social expressions. Indeed, I found the need to teach the basics so compelling that soon after I got there I wrote a text on the Christian life, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life*. But my teaching was also characterized by this engagement of the Christian intellectual and moral tradition with “secular” fields. Bobbye Au and I developed and taught a course called Religion and Contemporary Literature. Ben Huddle and I did Scientific Milestones and Millstones in the whammo Honors Curriculum we developed in the mid-1980s. Ned Wisnefske, Hans Zorn, and I did Formative Visions, a combined religion and philosophy course in that same curriculum. I taught religion and film, business ethics, capitalism and justice, in which I used the text I wrote before I came to Roanoke. The Values course, which we taught for many years, was full of such engagement.

However, teaching was only part of my calling. I thought I had ideas to share in articles and books. While I never purported to be a creative theologian or an original ethicist, I was good at relating the Lutheran/Niebuhrian ethic to lots of different

worldly topics. I am pretty good at practical theology. I lecture widely and often develop the lectures into books. Then I lecture more about the topics I have written about.

I have written eleven books and only two of them are straightforward explications of Christian theological ethics—the already mentioned *Ordinary Saints* and *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*. But even in those I couldn’t resist sketching a context for the Christian task that relied on the work of Robert Bellah, a social philosopher. The rest relate the Christian vision to other fields of learning, often taking a polemical tone. I took up the debate that raged in the 1980s concerning capitalism in a book called *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism: A Moral Reassessment*. I worked harder on that book than any other I have written because I had to absorb a lot of economic material as well as the theory of justice of John Rawls. It got the most reviews of any book I have written (fifty-some) and made something of a splash—I was featured in Time and Newsweek—because I challenged the overwhelming tendency of my fellow Christian ethicists to assume that socialism was the only economic system compatible with Christian ethics.

Other books dealt with American culture—*Defining America: A Christian Critique of the American Dream*; film—*Seeing is Believing: Visions of Life Through Film*; Christian higher education—*Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions*; the culture of the 1960s—*Wandering in the Wilderness: Christians and the New Culture*; and religion and politics—*Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics*, which was published last year.

I have written hundreds of articles, columns and op-eds, mostly having to do with a Christian “take” on all sorts of worldly topics and activities. Just recently I had op-eds in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, one a synopsis of my book on religion and politics, which brought a spirited, sometimes vitu-

perative, response from the newly militant atheists of America, who fervently believe that Christians should keep their values out of the public sphere. Another op-ed dealt with the problems that emerge when universities get into the mass entertainment business via big-time sports. After the Penn State debacle, I rest my case. I will continue this sort of writing, and I have a major project for my retirement years at Roanoke College. I hope to complete a book on the college’s relation to its Christian heritage throughout its history by the time of its 175th birthday in 2017. That is also the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and my 80th birthday. All of this depends on the providence of God, of course.

In addition to teaching and writing, I have had the chance through Roanoke’s Center for Religion and Society to invite umpteen dozen speakers on topics that involve faith and reason, religion and culture. This Faith and Reason series is one of the initiatives of the Center.

Besides doing what the Lord called me to do, the main thrust behind my teaching and writing is a search for wholeness. Truth is one, yet worldly claims are many. A Christian who believes in the centrality, comprehensiveness, and unsurpassibility of the Christian vision seems obliged to try to make sense of the whole, to be a whole person, to fit things together as much as possible. Doing so is an end in itself; it is internally satisfying. I’ve never lost my desire and interest in the project. As far as I’m concerned, students can listen in to what I am thinking. But this means the engagement of faith and reason. It also seems to me that all faiths—including non-religious ones—ought to have the same sort of drive toward wholeness and integrity. That is why I have been motivated to run a series on Faith and Reason as an important activity in the intellectual life of Roanoke College.

The most interesting part is yet to come. I have had two major transitions in life that have altered dramatically

my sense of who I am existentially but also who I am as a teacher and writer. Both transitions had a painful and an uplifting side to them.

The first transition was a stupendous one. I entered teaching in 1965 at the apex of what I call "liberal idealism." We were part of a great movement that seemed poised to eradicate poverty and racism, to rebuild the American cities. My doctor-father wrote a famous book called *The New Creation as Metropolis*. I vigorously taught and wrote out of that exciting Social Gospel perspective. I started teaching on the sleepy campus of the Rock Island branch of the Lutheran School of Theology and for two years basked in the excitement of being the young "house radical." I was very persuasive, even to myself. I've never again been so exhortative in my teaching as I was then. I was a true believer and I didn't have any compunctions about sharing that truth with my students. That liberal idealism continued the first couple of years at our new campus adjacent to the University of Chicago. It was wonderful. What a stroke to the ego to be on the "cutting edge of history."

Then came the 1960s, which is really the decade from 1965 to 1975. Everything blew sky-high, especially in that center of the 60s revolution, Chicago. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in one horrible year, 1968. The Chicago Democratic Convention of the summer of 1968, urban riots, Black Power, the anti-war movement, the student revolution, the rise of feminism, gay liberation. In this fiery crucible the liberal idealism that I was wedded to disappeared; real radicalism took its place. The Chicago Seven, whom I invited to our campus, operated in our neighborhood. The Weathermen did too, but I didn't invite them. Jesse Jackson's Operation Breadbasket became the all-black PUSH. Malcolm X—with an escort of sunglassed heavies—often walked by our apartment on the way to the Black Muslim mosque down the street. I heard him lecture at the University of Chicago where he warned

of the fire to come. Students—full of bad conscience because they were on the lam from the draft—flooded our seminary and demanded that it be as radical as the overheated political atmosphere.

I kept moving to the left to keep up my reputation but found it more and more difficult to do that, as the left kept moving further toward extremism. I have vivid memories of cognitive and spiritual dissonance. I went to an anti-war rally in Washington only to find out that the majority of marchers actually hated America and wanted the Viet Cong to win. The area around the Washington Monument was a tent-city replete with big jugs of wine, marijuana smoke wafting to the sky, and fornicating couples on the lawn. Wow. This was not what I had in mind. This was not what I believed. Who was I really?

One night I went to a rally in Hyde Park (the University and seminary neighborhood) and protester after protester got up to harangue and summons us to revolution, ending each exhortation with "Power to the People." Walking home that night I realized two things. One, if power really were given to the people at that point in history, the first casualty of people power would be the protesters. At the very least, they would get Richard Nixon instead of revolution. But the other realization was personal: the role I has been trying to play was not what I believed. I felt dishonest and phony. On the way home that evening I decided to tell my dean the next day that he would be hearing some strange things from me in the following months because I was going to "call them as I saw them" honestly.

So I did start calling them as I saw them. It was very painful. Students and faculty were shocked and angered. I found myself repeatedly on the wrong side of history. I found great comfort in reading the neo-conservative intellectuals that were emerging: Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus. I found their thinking much closer to

what I was thinking. I began to write in the neo-conservative vein. I wrote a measured defense of capitalism, which made the students so angry that they boycotted a class I was offering in Christianity and capitalism. Though I had few allies in the seminary—most were embarrassed by me—I felt a lot better about myself. It was good to get external actions and internal convictions in sync, even though I might be wrong.

In all this I began using different themes from my Lutheran/Niebuhr perspective even as I reaffirmed my adherence to classical, orthodox Christian faith. So, much of my writing—though not so much of my teaching—has issued from a conservative Christian theological and political perspective. While I am not bashful in teaching classical Christian ethics in the classroom, I am much more circumspect in the classroom about my political opinions. I know Christians of good will and intelligence can disagree about them. Students need room to disagree. In my writing I don't feel as constrained.

Perhaps I came out of this transition too consistently conservative, but I comfort myself in the belief that students and readers do not take us all that seriously after all. And in a few years our little outpourings will be lost in the dustbin of history. So we might as well "sin boldly" now, while we have the floor. We live in hope that our teaching and writing contribute to the kingdom of God in some hidden way.

In all this I have conceived of myself as a lay Christian exercising his calling in practical theology. I have never pretended to—nor wanted to—speak for the whole church, though I would not object to Lutheran churches affirming and using my basic Christian ethics texts. An irony of life is that the LCMS pays much more heed to my work in basic ethics than the church to which I have belonged. As far as my more polemical or "political" works, I am content to offer them up as the reflections of a lay Christian intellectual. I write for pastors, educated lay folks,

students, and the public. I am far too aware of the many steps an argument takes when moving from core convictions to public policy to claim too much for my views. So I contribute to a larger conversation, though it is hard to see where I may be wrong.

The great 1960s transition in time had enormous effects on the church in which I grew up and taught for many years. Beside the general tendency of religious traditions to accommodate to culture over time, the Lutheran Church in America and then the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have been dramatically affected by the liberationist themes of the 60s, which did indeed make a "march through the institutions." Anti-imperialism and religious pluralism have undercut evangelism, especially pioneer evangelism among those who have never heard the gospel. The ELCA left the great tradition of Christian sexual ethics under great pressure from feminist and gay liberationist movements. What is worse, they left it without compelling biblical or theological reasons; that, in a church that has prided itself on having a rich theological heritage. Multiculturalism and feminism cast suspicion on the theological enterprise itself, sentencing it to the margins of the church. The church sounds and acts like one more declining liberal Protestant denomination. My alienation from that church is pretty complete and I feel like a Lutheran in search of a church, though I continue to find a fine home at the parish level.

Back to the other major transition, which was not as wrenching. Moving to Roanoke College after teaching at a seminary for seventeen years altered the trajectory of my life and work dramatically. One of the delights of Roanoke College was that it was not politicized in the way the seminary was. There was no college party line, which I found very liberating. (I fear this is slowly changing, but it has not yet reached an alarming level.)

The first thing I noticed was that

students had little background in Christian theology or ethics, so I had to focus more on the basics. I began planning to write an introduction to the Christian life, which I did on my first sabbatical in 1985–86. In the introductory Values class we had to work on the basics, too. 90% of classroom teaching is helping the students understand what the text is saying. But I do not have contempt for that sort of teaching. That's essentially what we are about. Yet one has to find outlets for more expansive and creative efforts in thinking and writing. So we have to read and write, and that connects with all that I mentioned earlier about the engagement of faith and reason.

Coming to Roanoke also altered the course of my intellectual interests. The difference between the church-related college of the 1950s (Midland) and that of the 1980s (Roanoke) was an incredible stimulus to think about the secularization of religious colleges and what could be done to stave it off or, if it had happened, to find significant ways to reconnect with its religious heritage. I have spent much time writing in this area and consulting with many church-related colleges that want to maintain their soul. This has been another exercise in the engagement of faith and reason.

A passion for the engagement of faith and reason has to have some anchoring in a particular faith. In my case, and in the heritage of Roanoke College, that is the Christian faith as construed by the Lutheran tradition. One of the disturbing things I found upon my arrival in 1982 was that the faith that had created Roanoke College and conditioned its history was disappearing rather quickly in the educational life and ethos of the college. Norm Fintel, college president from 1975 to 1989, recognized that trend and recruited me to come help. So the concern for faith-reason engagement took on an inescapable institutional dimension for me. It wasn't enough to carry on that project in my private time. Of course, I was not the only

one with these concerns. Some others were too and we began efforts to reconnect the college in a meaningful way to its Christian heritage, knowing full well that we could not become a robust, thoroughly religious college such as, for example, a Wheaton or a Calvin. But we could get a place at the table, a voice among many others. Indeed, I have come to call our strategy at Roanoke College "intentional pluralism," which is yet something of a partially realized vision. Part of that strategy has been to recruit Lutheran donors for endowed chairs and other religious functions—the chaplaincy, for example.

Thus, the Christian vision has a place at the Roanoke table and it has been expressed to a gratifying degree, at least in my reckoning. Some of the best teaching, public arguments, and productive scholarship issue from those with Christian convictions, and they are here by conscious selection. Some, though, are here by coincidence, or perhaps by divine providence—we had little to do with them popping up here at Roanoke. I do believe the college has to attend to some sort of affirmative action for Lutherans, however. If we claim to honor our Lutheran heritage it will seem odd to have no Lutherans to embody it. On the other hand, Lutherans in particular and Christians in general certainly do have a place at the table, and that makes the conversation more lively for all concerned. The engagement of faith and reason at Roanoke will continue.

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