ENGAGING AN ALIEN WORLD

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***American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* by Richard John Neuhaus (New York: Basic Books, 2009) To order call 1-800-343-4499 or order online atwww.perseusbooksgroup.com**

In the late Father Richard John Neuhaus's *American Babylon*, the author cites his friend, the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, whose funeral at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Fr. Neuhaus, suffering his last battle with cancer, barely made in December. The Dulles story was about the cardinal once speaking at a Catholic parish which had a huge banner outside that read "God Is Other People." Cardinal Dulles had wished he had a black marker because he very much wanted to add a comma after "Other."

Someone at that Catholic church was "mistaking the creature for the Creator," Fr. Neuhaus explains. God, for them, "is *useful* for achieving other purposes." (The good news is that even with more than a few bestselling atheist tracts, there is a lot of religiosity in the air. The bad news is it's not always all quite right.)

I don't know if that banner is still up there but I do know that these men of truth are now gone. They're not the only ones we've lost. And they won't be the only ones.

We're left without these wise men to call for advice, whatever's going on in the news today. But, this is, of course, exactly what's supposed to happen. They weren't living to be in this world forever. They were living for Someone and somewhere else. With His truth.

That's what *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* is all about. It's an acknowledgement that we live in a flawed world. But it's a world to be actively engaged in, on our road

to eternal salvation. We won't spend perpetuity here, but we have work here before we go.

Neuhaus belonged in this world for his 72 years, always with another destination in mind. (Friends tell how, in his last days, if he couldn't do much, praying the Office would be his priority; when a mutual friend told me he would wake up in the morning and read, among other things, *National Review Online*, another friend, a priest, quickly corrected my pride: Fr. Neuhaus's breviary was his beginning and end.) And it is fitting then that Fr. Neuhaus's parting work is written for those who belong; "for those who accept, and accept with gratitude, their creaturely existence within the scandal of particularity that is their place in a world far short of the best of all possible worlds. This world, for all its well-earned dissatisfactions, is worthy of our love and allegiance. It is a self-flattering conceit to think we deserve a better world. What's wrong with this one begins with us. And yet we are dissatisfied. Our restless discontent takes the form not of a complaint but of hope. There is a promise not yet fulfilled. One lives in discontented gratitude for the promise, which is to say one lives in hope."

That, of course, is a "hope" of another world, not that which we hear so much about in the political sphere.

American Babylon—and living with that hope—is about "a way of being in a world that is not yet the world for which we hope. This means exploring the possibilities and temptations one confronts as a citizen of a country that is prone to mistaking itself for the destination. It means also a cultivated skepticism about the idea of historical progress, especially moral progress, when that idea defies or denies the limits of history upon which our humanity depends." It also means not moving into a ghetto. Engagement is a crucial ingredient in this world; "engagement with some of the more troublesome, and more interesting, citizens of this present Babylon."

At the same time, Neuhaus is an avowed fan of both his adopted country (he was born in Canada) and city (he confesses to "being something of a chauvinist about" New York City, something this New York native can appreciate!). "America," he says, "is the most successful political experiment in human history." It's "our homeland, and, as the prophet Jeremiah says, in its welfare is our welfare. America is also—and history testifies that this is too easily forgotten—a foreign country." The U.S. is "for better and worse, the place of our pilgrimage through time toward home." Just remember, "it is still for the time being."

So how do we live as Christian Americans, never forgetting while we're full citizens of one, we're aiming for another? For one, "through our tears, sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land." Because there will be tears.

Neuhaus warns: "We should at least be open to the possibility that we are today witnessing not moral progress but a dramatic moral regression. While, as we have seen, practitioners in the hard sciences express a new humility about the limits of their knowledge and control, many who work in the field of ethical theory and practice exhibit an extraordinary self-confidence, bordering on and sometimes crossing the line into the vice of hubris."

By hubris he means, for instance, Peter Singer, the infanticide defender on the faculty of Princeton University. The most important thing to realize about Singer—and Neuhaus reminds us of this—is that he is "no marginal figure in our intellectual culture." For one thing, he authored the main piece on the history of ethics—15 pages worth of "ethics" (scare quotes are mine not Father's)—in the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Neuhaus writes, "From Confucius and Aristotle, to Maimonides and Aquinas, through David Hume and Kant to Peter Singer, the article traces the liberation of moral theory and practice from any truths that pose an obstacle to our will to power and control. The gist of it is

caught in the title of Singer's 1995 book, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*." Singer welcomes the collapse and the Brave New World he's rushing us toward, one impressionable young mind at a time.

Considering Fr. Neuhaus died not long after Christmas, the timing of the book is perfect for us. He demonstrates some prescience, writing: "Among the most glaring indications that we are in exile is the necessity of contending for the most basic truth of the dignity of the human person. If we don't get that right, we are unlikely to get right many other questions…."

His book was released around the same time that President Barack Obama lifted the ban on federal funding of embryo-destroying stem-cell research. And here we are, in the month of President Barack Obama's commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. Notre Dame struggles with the "American Babylon" dilemma as much as any individual. The nation's most prominent Catholic university should consider itself a South Bend exile, a training ground in being good citizens on the road to the City of God. Instead, they're flirting with becoming just any other institution, one where truth is a debate, rather than a reality.

Notre Dame should exist to live in communion with the truth. That's "the life of the Church," living "in communion with Christ, who says of himself, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'" There, "we experience a foretaste, a prolepsis, of the community that is to be." The Eucharist is the key to that, in which "we experience the genuinely 'new politics' of the new polis that is the City of God. But, still surrounded by "the ruins of Babel," that is "only a foretaste that whets our appetite for, and sacramentally sustains us on the way toward, that final destination."

The solution to the Notre Dame problem is in *American Babylon*. They have the Eucharist. "As Christians and as Americans, in

this our awkward duality of citizenship, we seek to be faithful in a time not of our choosing but of our testing…never tiring in proposing to the world a more excellent way…[as] through our laughter and tears, we see and hail from afar the New Jerusalem and know that it is all time toward home."

As dual citizens, we aspire to excellence, but not at the expense of the most excellent. At the end of the semester, Notre Dame must ask itself, "what is our final destination?" Is it White House affirmation or the New Jerusalem? There's nothing wrong with the former, but it can never be at the expense of our quest for the latter.

Shortly after *American Babylon* hit bookshelves, New York's new archbishop, Timothy Dolan, was installed. An Associated Press write-up of an interview declared that Dolan "will challenge the idea that the Roman Catholic Church is unenlightened because it opposes gay marriage and abortion." He, in other words, won't change his values because of what a court, party, or even consensus has decided is their truth. To these developments, believers must remain firm. As Neuhaus puts it, "There is considerable truth in the observation that politics is primarily a function of culture, that at the heart of culture is morality, and that at the heart of morality are those commanding truths typically associated with religion. I expect it is true in every society, but it is certainly true in this society, that politics and religion can be distinguished but never separated."

Or, as Dolan put it to the Associated Press: "Periodically, we Catholics have to stand up and say, 'Enough,'" he said. "The church as a whole still calls out to what is noble in us."

One imagines Fr. Neuhaus, a former Lutheran pastor who came to love the Catholic Church, warmly greeting Archbishop Dolan, offering him a drink, and applauding his call to humble nobility. It's the call Neuhaus answered in his journey

through this world. Neuhaus can't offer the new archbishop a drink, but the existence of *American Babylon* will make Dolan's job just a little bit easier.

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