

Book Review by Robin Morgan

“Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11”

Bruce Lincoln, University of Chicago Press, 2003

Some of you probably saw the review of this book in “The Christian Century” – that’s where it caught my eye and sounded like a piece worth reading. I’ll give you a basic overview of Lincoln’s work and then I’ll discuss how his analysis might be particularly useful for those of us who are law/gospel theologians.

Lincoln, Caroline E. Haskell Professor of Divinity at the University of Chicago and a historian of religions, offers his readers six chapters. Chapter one, “The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment,” lays out his basic analytical matrix. He begins by quoting Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion which has been taught to a generation of grad students: “A religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Lincoln follows this with Talal Asad’s critique of Geertz. First, Asad observes that Geertz’s definition focuses on interiority (symbols, moods, motivations, conceptions) while leaving “embodied practice, discipline and community” outside the pale. Asad says that this works well for Protestantism, but marginalizes Catholicism and Islam, for example, because of their orientation toward action rather than belief.

Secondly, Asad attributes Geertz's mistake, not to individual error, but to the whole project of defining religion, which "presumes a discrete object that can be identified in contradistinction to others [which] implies a model of 'religion' that emerged only with the Enlightenment." Lincoln goes on to say that the Enlightenment was essentially "the long struggle against the regime of truth that was centered in and championed by the medieval church."

It's from these two points of critique that Lincoln develops his view of the two basic ways religion gets lived out today. The first is the maximalist perspective, which sees religion permeating all aspects of culture. The second is the minimalist perspective, which comes out of the Enlightenment and relegates religion to "an important set of (chiefly metaphysical) concerns, [thereby] protecting its privileges against state intrusion, but [also] restricting its activity and influence to this specialized sphere."

Inside these two points of view about religion are four domains in which any religion functions. The first is a discourse, which is concerned with transcendent issues and claims some degree of transcendence for itself. "Discourse becomes religious not simply by virtue of its content, but also from its claims to authority and truth." Second is a set of practices, which grow out of the above discourse. Though no practice is inherently religious, it becomes religious by being imbued with meaning from the discourse. Third is the community, which develops around the discourse and the practices: people worshiping, living and working together. Even in their disagreements, they share a common set of assumptions about life that set the boundaries around their conversations and practices. Fourth is the institution, which helps perpetuate the religion from one generation to the next through formal and semiformal structures and officials.

From these basic building blocks of understanding, Lincoln goes on in chapters two through six to analyze a variety of situations on the political screen today. In chapter two he looks at the speeches of Bush and bin Laden on October 7, 2001 the day U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan. Using the above tools, Lincoln shows the similarities between the basic structure of their speeches and how they each used religious language to make the point that their cause was of God: in bin Laden's case overt maximalist language, in Bush's case overtly minimalist, but covertly maximalist for those with "ears to hear."

Chapter three, "Jihads, Jeremiads, and the Enemy Within" illustrates a Christian version of the maximalist approach to religion with a particular focus on Jerry Falwell's comments on the 700 Club on September 13, 2001. He blamed the events of 9/11 on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the ACLU and People for the American Way. All of these people "have attempted to secularize America, [and] have removed our nation from its relationship with Christ on which it was founded."

Chapter four expands on the two approaches and how they play out in a culture. According to Lincoln, in the maximalist society, religion is the central focus of culture, permeating and stabilizing all aspects of it. Religious authorities are responsible for keeping order. For the minimalist society, the economy is the central focus of culture and religion is relegated to the private sphere and metaphysical concerns. Here cultural preferences are a matter of fashion or market fluctuations and economic expansion leads to wealth and power. For the maximalist, the minimalist is seen as powerful and intrusive. For the minimalist, the maximalist is seen as a quaint throw back or as a threat capable of reactionary counterattacks.

Lincoln addresses the consequences of the minimalist approach

which has been adopted by Europe, North American and Japan: "Chief among these [consequences] were the expansion of economic wealth, state power, and industrial technology facilitated by diminished religious constraints on greed, violence, and scientific inquiry. Their increasingly minimalist stance toward religion was hardly the sole factor that enabled the Euramerican powers to colonize the rest of the world, but it is hardly insignificant. And where they did establish control, liberal as well as Marxist regimes attempted to disseminate minimalism as a – perhaps the – constitutive feature of 'modernity' and the necessary precondition for 'progress.'"

The last two chapters, "Religious Conflict and the Postcolonial State" and "Religion, Rebellion, Revolution," build on this understanding of imposed modernity and the way in which post-colonial states as well as marginalized groups within Euramerican cultures fight against minimalism and the modern world's moral malaise. For many colonized people the imposed minimalism seemed merely a matter of dismantling their indigenous culture rather than as a tool to build a modern society. In cultures that have never experienced the European wars of religion, which tore apart the continent, the population in general "saw no need for minimalizing initiatives, which they experience as a Western imposition threatening to the stability, dignity and integrity of their culture."

I find Lincoln's categories of minimalist and maximalist useful in thinking about how we, the church, function in this political climate, which is so highly charged with religion. The first way I find his categories to be useful is in raising awareness that religion is playing a huge role in the politics of the day. Those of us steeped in western minimalist thinking may not expect to find religion in the public square quite the way it's being presented these days. We may not know how to respond, but I am convinced that it's critical that we do. Especially those

of us who live and work using the law and promise hermeneutic as our primary theological touchstone, can't afford to stay only inside the functional structures, which have served us in the past. The academy and the congregation have ongoing importance to us, but we need to be willing to take our hermeneutic "to the streets." Though our intra-Lutheran theological arguments are important, I believe that the future of our tradition is in engagement with the world.

Many people, from a variety of faith traditions, are looking for moral and ethical shape to their daily lives; they are embracing a maximalist approach to religion in culture. Whether you have trained in one of Al Qaida's camps or sit in your living room watching CBN, people want guidance in making decisions about all aspects of their lives. Our minimalist penchant for claiming article seven (the church "is the assembly of believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel...this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.") and leaving everything else in life to other institutions and individuals has given us a variety of labels, "quietist" being the first that springs to mind. Though I'm as loathe of prooftexting using Luther and the Book of Concord as I am of prooftexting using the Bible, it seems to me that even a cursory reading of Luther's life shows a man fully "Christ-intoxicated" and yet fully engaged in the world as well.

Why is it that Lutherans who are passionate about theology tend to ignore social justice issues and Lutherans who are passionate about social justice issues tend to ignore theology? Is justification tainted by justice? Is justice undermined by justification? Though the technological and economic advances of modernity have caused unprecedented strides in drawing our world together, now that we are so interconnected, how will we live

together? We know that it's neither the maximalist nor the minimalist approach to religion that will effect the changes that need to be made. Jesus Christ's work on our behalf, in spite of our sinfulness, is what will, in the end, bring about the peace and security we all crave. And if those of us who have some understanding of God's law as well as God's mercy in Christ don't wade out into the muck, how will this amazing good news we've been given become part of the mix that is the political scene today? Of course we're going to disagree, so what? I am more likely to get some insight into why anyone could think George W. Bush is doing a good job from a brother who shares my faith in Christ and basic theological understanding, than I am from another person with whom I don't share that faith and theological bond.

It's going to be messy. There will be times when we are theologically confused and even vulnerable as we try to make sense of what's going on around us and how we fit or don't fit in. If keeping our theology pristine and invulnerable to attack is our goal, then this is not the course for us. If sharing the good news of our Lord with the world and carrying out our responsibilities as human beings charged by the Creator with the care of creation is what we're about...sin boldly.