

The American Myth

Colleagues,

Theology is suddenly up for discussion again in the old public square. By “old,” I mean the square as Richard John Neuhaus conceived it when he wrote [his famous book about its nakedness](#). Since then a new square has been imagined and built under names like Facebook and Twitter, the public flocking there en masse to say its unconstrained piece. Theology has frothed and bubbled in that setting from the start. In the older one, where editorial gatekeepers remain on mostly useful patrol, the god-talk has continued to languish. That’s been my impression, at any rate, and nothing more than an impression. Substantiating it, perhaps, is the series of surprises I’ve had over the past year and a half on seeing thoughtful essays about matters religious popping up in venues like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. It’s as if the gatekeepers have grasped that if they want to stay relevant they too have got to grapple with the God-thing again, however gingerly. Good for them. And since they continue for the most part to keep the gates with careful intelligence, good for us all.

All this is prelude to two pieces that surfaced in the old square this week, one via the *Post*, the other via the *Times*. Both merit the attention of odd ducks like us who still think that theology is the most relevant of all the disciplines. [In the first](#), the Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues against the grain that the new 45th president of the United States operates with deep religious convictions. Not that Professor Hauerwas admires those convictions. I say this by way of warning to those of you who want their fellow citizens to cut Mr. Trump some slack. Hauerwas does not. He finds in him a version of the American national theology that also goes by the name “American

exceptionalism," the idea being that God has chosen this land and this amalgam of conquering immigrants to carry out a redemptive project in the world. This notion has long been wildly popular. It gets venerated in churches that dare to wrap themselves in the American flag. Hauerwas calls it idolatrous. Years ago he combined with William Willimon, then a colleague at Duke University and later a United Methodist bishop, to write a jeremiad on that topic entitled [*Resident Aliens*](#), which is still a good read. Under the subtitle "Life in the Christian Colony," they insist that Christian identity is inherently counter-cultural, with ultimate Christian loyalties belonging exclusively to Christ. Both these ideas, of course, are being vividly reinforced in these present weeks of post-Epiphany, as the lectionary hauls us once again through the opening salvos of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

[*The second piece*](#), appearing even as today (Feb. 2) slides into tomorrow, is a nuanced musing on competing national theologies by columnist David Brooks. That's how I describe it to you, at any rate. Brooks, for his part, stays away from the word "theology" and speaks instead of national myths, beginning with the one he happens to treasure, as Hauerwas does not. Parenthetically, were I instructing a class of neophyte theologians on the meaning and function of "myth," I'd want to feed them this essay. Brooks captures it with the succinct lucidity that makes him one of the few columnists I'll pause to read whenever his latest effort comes out. Thus, "Myths don't make a point or propose an argument. They inhabit us deeply and explain to us who we are. They capture how our own lives are connected to the universal sacred realities. In myth, the physical stuff in front of us is also a manifestation of something eternal, and our lives are seen in the context of some illimitable horizon." Here is my translation of that: myth is theology embedded in the gut. As Brooks sees it, this deep-down

stuff is of the essence to America's future as a nation. Roiling the present moment is the question of which myth will rule. Will it be the good one, the genuine American myth as articulated for the Massachusetts Bay Colony by John Winthrop and refreshed at Gettysburg by that master of succinctness, Abraham Lincoln? Or will it be an alien import, reeking of Russia, that appears in Brooks' view to have seized the souls of Donald Trump and his advisor, Stephen Bannon? Here the meaning and greatness of America is absolutely at stake. Again to quote: "We are in the midst of a great war of national identity. We thought we were in an ideological battle against radical Islam, but we are really fighting the national myths spread by Trump, Bannon, Putin, Le Pen and Farage." Yes indeed, theology matters. Thus Mr. Brooks.

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If you haven't paused yet to read the essays I mention, let me urge you at this point to go back and follow the links. Of the two, Brooks' is the more important, I think. Sure, the theology embedded in my own gut puts me in much closer agreement with Hauerwas; but Brooks is the one who nails what the Crossings crowd refers to as "tracking." That's where you dig beneath the surface of an issue you're wrestling with to identify those matters of faith and heart that are driving it. Brooks excels at this. In the present instance he leaves me, for one, recalling why and how I've sometimes been proud to be American, and at other times not so much. In either case the myth Brooks celebrates has played a key role, now driving the pride, now exacerbating the embarrassment, the latter arising less from the myth itself than from the country's failure to live up to it. It is, let's face it, an attractive, compelling myth, so compelling that it once caused American flags to sprout in almost every chancel in America, Lutheran ones included; and if those flags have since been pulled from some of those chancels (and always with much weeping and gnashing of congregational teeth), the

driving reason for that will not have been the contradicting theology, centered on the cross, that churches exist to celebrate. Instead someone will have sensed that the myth was being betrayed and was eager to make a statement about that. "America is sinning, not against God so much as against its own animating idea—or is it?" Thus the contention that, since Vietnam, has done much to push the country onto competing carpets of red and blue, with churches dutifully lined up on either side in accordance with the way the powers that be in any given assembly or jurisdiction have answered the question.

Still, as Brooks points out, there's more at work here than an argument about the one myth. Amid the swirl of spirits competing for American hearts are those "alien myths," those other conceptions of what "makes America great." It would be fascinating to see what Brooks might do with this idea were he to expand his column into a 10,000 word essay, or even a book. I imagine him tracking the competition of mythologies through the sweep of American history, with useful reflections on how "the true myth," as he calls it, has managed to endure.

What Brooks wouldn't and couldn't do, I suspect, is to push his analysis still deeper, to the question that a confession Lutheran, say, is obliged to ask. Where is the real God in all this? That's "real God" as opposed to the "providence" or the "universal sacred realities" or the "something eternal" that Brooks restricts himself to talking about. Those of us who stand with St. Paul and his apostolic colleagues in knowing this God as God-in-Christ will immediately suspect that real-God is not amused; or if we don't intuit that, we should. This Sunday we will hear Jesus speak the words that John Winthrop repeated: "You are the light of the world," "the city set on a hill." Presumably Winthrop the Puritan was faithful enough to recognize this as a statement of Christian identity. Would it have grieved him to see it turned into a definition of American identity? I'd

like to think so. In any case, the hijack happened; and these days it falls to those of us who know real-God to remember with penitent humility that the "true American myth," as Brook calls it, rests on a fundamental fallacy. Can America at its best be a blessing to other nations? Well, of course. So can England at its best, or even Zimbabwe at its best, I suppose, though that poor land has been trapped in its worst for ever so long. The point is that even at its best America is not, never has been, and absolutely cannot be the light that Christ is talking about as he sits on the hilltop introducing fresh disciples to the new world that God is busy making in and through him. Of course I take this to be obvious to those of you who read this. It will not be so obvious to lots of people you go to church with. Will their preachers startle them this Sunday with the observation that the light Jesus is talking about is not an American light, but a distinctly Christian light, the one that shines through people who trust that real-God is at work in Jesus, forgiving sins and drilling like a laser through the heart of death? Blessed be they if that should happen.

In the meantime, we also do well to recall Luther's great distinction between God's "alien" work and God's "proper" work. I don't suppose that David Brooks, for all his insightfulness, would think to imagine that God in his alien mode is behind the swirl of "alien myths" that, in Brook's view, are tearing the country apart. On the other hand, those of us with ears to hear will recall the words: "He brings down the mighty from their thrones." "He scatters the proud in their conceits." How more conceited can a country be than to fancy itself as the light that Christ alone is? Yes, that American myth, the fraying of which Brooks mourns, is compelling and attractive. It is also untrue. And if that's the point that God is making at the moment, then may God have mercy on us all even as he makes it.

With that I quit, leaving gobs to be said and good news not

discussed. More on that next time, perhaps, with some thinking about the great Matthean phrase, "the kingdom of heaven." So much the better if all of us can hear some good news this Sunday. After all, Christ is Lord. The pretenders are not, a point our liturgies are designed to drive home even if the preachers don't.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce