

Sermon for 29 May 2011  
Easter 6, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

It is rarely comfortable when the simple reading of scripture challenges some theological opinion we've spent a great deal of thought arriving at. St. Paul's sermon to the crowd gathered at the Areopagus did just that to me. Let me explain, and I do apologize about giving you some history of my own intellectual development, but I think it helps to make an important point.

Back when I was an undergraduate I was introduced to a couple of rather avant-garde texts in the field of religious studies from the last decade: *The Invention World Religions* by Tomoko Masuzawa and *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* by Russell McCutcheon. Both Masuzawa and McCutcheon criticized the assumption made by

scholars of religious studies that *religion* is a valid anthropological category. Put more plainly, most people assume that just as Christianity is a religion, so Hinduism and Buddhism and sun worship and a whole host of other practices are religions, too. This new movement of critics has questioned this assumption, suggesting that anthropologists have lumped a whole bunch of obscure cultural practices discovered during the period of colonialism together and called them *religion*, assuming them to be analogous to Christianity and Judaism in the West, simply because they didn't know how else to categorize weird anthropological phenomena.

I latched on to this line of thinking, perhaps because it seemed so counter-cultural (at least in terms of what passes for "counter-culture" today, which is in many ways opposite what would have been called counter-cultural forty years ago). Though Masuzawa and McCutcheon have rather post-modern

sensibilities (particularly in that they lay the blame for the invention of the myth of world religions on colonialist projection), their argument could sound awfully politically-incorrect and I loved that about it. There is nothing more radical on an east-coast college campus than to deny religious pluralism, to say that if my religious convictions are correct someone else's must be wrong. I still believe this to a degree (and there are those here who will disagree with me on this, which is fine). I've never been of the opinion that all religions were just paths up the same mountain, because I believe with all my heart that Jesus Christ is not only the fullest expression we've ever seen of godliness, but that he was and is none other than God (full stop). But these new critics of religion helped me take it one step further (a step which, you'll see, I eventually took back. It seemed to me the most elegant means of achieving the social trespass of

anti-pluralism was to deny other webs of conviction the status of "religious" from the outset, and Masuzawa and McCutcheon helped me justify this argument.

But then I encountered Paul's sermon to the Athenians. I'd read it before, of course, but never quite closely enough, and never in the light of this question about the nature of religion. "Men of Athens," he says, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious." Of course, he could be speaking ironically, and no doubt "religious" meant something very different in Greek- and in English before the nineteenth century, for that matter. Still my opinion stood firm. But then he uses a several Greek words which my argument could not withstand. They're all translated poorly in our English versions, a testament to the fact that the act of translation is always an act of interpretation. "[I] observed the objects of your worship" the RSV says, but in Greek it's "I beheld

your σεβασματα" that is "devotions". The RSV says "what therefore you worship as unknown", in Greek is "what ignorantly you ευσεβειτε" or "being devout to". While the RSV gives a weak translation "served by human hands", the Greek uses a word with stronger religious significance: "θεραπευται" meaning something like "attending to".

Devotion and attendance. These are the actions of sincere worship. This is the language that would have been used for priests of God's temple in Jerusalem, and they are still used (if, sadly, less often) to describe what we do in church. They are words implying a response of love and commitment and genuine conviction.

Now the problem with the Athenians was that their love and commitment and conviction was misplaced. They were devoted to objects unworthy of devotion; they attended to pagan idols rather than to the ministrations offered to the God of Israel. They are not being let off the hook. Nonetheless,

Paul's language acknowledges what might be fairly called religion. There is in the Athenians this nascent desire to reach out to what is greater and truer than their pedestrian lives. In other words, they have an inherent disposition to religion, and it's more a matter of directing that devotion and attendance to its rightful recipient. Paul even goes so far as to suggest that some have felt inklings of this truth before having heard the Christian Gospel: "Even some of your poets have said, 'For we indeed are his offspring.'"

The new critics of religious studies with whom I was so enamored suggested that "religion" was not a category into which we could place the various paganisms outside Christendom. What Paul suggests is quite the opposite. The seeds of faith, of true religion, may well be innate. It gets to what that good Anglican priest John Wesley called prevenient grace. We are disposed to worship the one true God

and to worship Him rightly, we just need to be told about the Way.

This is good news for we who are called to labor in the fields. The fields are more ready for harvest than we might have imagined, because God has given all His children a keen disposition to seek Him out even before they know his name. When we, like Saint Paul, share the hope that is in us, when we point to the statue of the unnamed god and say "I know his name, it is the blessed name of Jesus, which has been exalted over every name", then we may well be surprised to find an audience open to the possibility. We may well find an audience that has been eagerly waiting for that Good News without even having realized it.

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Amen.