

## EXCURSUS III

### *Richard John Neuhaus on The Hartford Appeal and the Salvaging of Stereotypes*

The big news in religious thought, it would seem, is the continuing response to the "Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation" issued in January, 1975. The latest instance—generously reported by *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and the religious media—is "The Boston Affirmations," drafted and signed by Preston Williams, Harvey Cox, Max Stackhouse, and eighteen lesser known religious thinkers belonging to the Boston Industrial Mission Task Force. "When we read the Hartford Appeal," Harvey Cox wrote to news editors on December 22 last, "we decided to work on a statement of our own, not a reply to Hartford but an independent affirmation." Whatever "independent" may mean in this connection, the resulting Boston statement is an important response to Hartford and deserves careful study. We are therefore pleased to publish it in this issue.

It would be unfortunate were Boston viewed as *the* response to Hartford (if for no other reason than that we should be past the day when such great issues are settled by New England divines, or even by divines gathered in New England). In truth there have been much more incisive and provocative criticisms of Hartford. Some of them—by such notables as John Bennett, Gregory Baum, and David Tracy—have appeared in the pages of this journal.\* With the appearance this month of *Against the World for the World* (Seabury), essays by Hartford participants elaborating the original Appeal, a lively discussion will no doubt become yet livelier. The Boston statement has a significant place within this larger debate. Boston proclaims, somewhat portentously, that in this debate "the struggle is now joined for the future of faith." The debate is not likely as crucial as all that, but it undoubtedly will have some bearing upon the future of American religion and its social influence.

For those with very short memories the Boston statement may appear to break new ground. Others, more nostalgically inclined, may savor its rerun radicalisms of the sixties. But as one participant in the Hartford Appeal, I believe the Boston statement must be seriously faulted on several scores. Theologically it is eccentric and confused. The social and political program it espouses is either vacuous, or misleading, or presumptuous, or all three. And it is finally unresponsive to the challenge posed by Hartford.

Taking the last point first, Hartford was radical in throwing into question the conventional but now

obsolete ways of speaking about "conservative" and "liberal" in American religion. It indicted both "left" and "right" for having succumbed to surprisingly similar cultural captivities. The Boston statement seems regressive in that, rather than addressing the challenge of Hartford, it simply reiterates the old liberal-radical pieties and, for the ten thousandth time, equates them with God's will for the world. Whereas Hartford calls for a revitalized social engagement on a more solid religious foundation, Boston is an effort by those who were "radicalized" in the sixties to revive the stereotypes dividing the good guys from the bad. It is perhaps significant that the Boston statement was circulated, with what appears to be something like an endorsement, by the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches. It fits smoothly into the prevailing thought slots of the National Council. The more abrasive Hartford Appeal, with its adventuresome goading of diverse oxen, was, quite understandably, a less likely candidate for endorsement by ecclesiastical establishments.

In its religious and theological assertions Boston is especially vulnerable, since, unlike Hartford, it claims to be an affirmation of the Christian faith. Hartford did not intend to draw up a new ecumenical creed, but stuck to the more modest task of addressing some "false, pervasive, and debilitating" ideas currently distorting the relationship between the Church and the general culture. Boston is in this respect more ambitious. The eccentricity and confusion mentioned above begin with Boston's selection of truths to be affirmed. There are some classical themes such as "Creation," "Fall," "Exodus and Covenant," plus some less usual themes such as "Prophecy," "Wisdom," and "Church Traditions." (The last gives, apparently against the signers' intentions, a distinctly "churchy" flavor to the statement.) Some themes that would seem to be inescapable in affirming the Christian faith have been allowed to escape. Missing are final judgment, hope beyond death, baptism, eucharist, revelation and authority, prayer; there is no mention, at least no explicit mention, of either cross or resurrection. If this is indeed an affirmation of the faith, one cannot help but wonder which faith is being affirmed. Jesus Christ is mentioned once, never to appear again in the statement. After a brief appearance he is dropped in favor of "suffering love," which presumably is the same thing as Jesus Christ. This seems especially curious, since, in *Worldview* and elsewhere, Harvey Cox attacked Hartford for not being centered in a clear Christology.

A few additional confusions might be mentioned. God is affirmed as the "one source" from which all humanity springs. At the same time, it is said that "humanity...is not ultimately governed by nature or history," thus presumably setting God apart from nature and history. In a statement that wants to address historical tasks with "eschatological

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\*The *Worldview* symposium on Hartford is still available for one dollar.

urgency," it is affirmed that "*Beyond domination and conflict* God hears the cry of the oppressed and works vindication for all" (emphasis added). This suggests an ahistorical view of God and his work, which is precisely what Hartford repudiated as "false transcendence." God, Hartford affirms, works *within* domination and conflict and all the other messy stuff of history, not beyond it. To be sure, at other points Boston could hardly be more historically specific. For example, "the transforming reality of God's reign is found today" in the struggles for women's equality and a national health program. One suspects that the apparent contradiction between a dehistoricized God and the apotheosis of particular social programs results more from carelessness or confusion than from a studied appreciation of paradox.

Hartford also criticized the kind of false ecumenism that shows little respect for different and conflicting truth claims. Boston, in its grandly universalizing affirmations, is rich with stunningly facile syntheses of differences. Everybody in "the heritage" that Boston affirms and articulates "authentically represent[s] God." Aside from agreeing with the Boston group, the criteria for being an authentic representative of God remains unclear. In any case, by imaginative revisionism and historical sleight-of-hand, Boston does come up with some remarkable agreements. "The Monastics," for example, were liberated proponents of "freedom from familial and sexual stereotyping." If the latter phrase means what it usually means today, Benedict and Francis would no doubt be surprised. Thus also we are told "the Scholastics engaged secular culture." The "secular culture" engaged by Thomas Aquinas was, one must suppose, that of antiquity mediated through Islam. And of course the Christians of the sixteenth century Reformation period, from Thomas M  nzer to Martin Luther, are all part of "the heritage" affirmed. It seems they need not have bothered fighting over their alleged differences, since, in wondrous unity with the Boston Industrial Mission Task Force, they all form a single "company of the committed."

"The experience and lore of all cultures and groups bear within them values that are of wider meaning. Racism, genocide, imperialism, sexism are thus contrary to God's purposes and impoverish us all." Thus? The connection is elusive. The Boston group might want to reconsider the ease with which it affirms both the universal and the particular. It might be, for example, that some cultures and groups bear within them values that the Boston group would deem racist, genocidal, imperialist, or sexist. Perhaps such thoughts were dismissed lest they offend against what Boston affirms as "the transforming drive for ethnic dignity" among all cultures and groups.

The nature of the ecumenism affirmed is also relevant to the social and political program espoused by Boston. Here the reader must make a hard decision. It may be that the social and politi-

cal affirmations are entirely vacuous, merely warmed-over platitudes from the late relevancy cult. In support of this interpretation is the fact that words like justice, liberation, commitment, love, equity, mercy, and other good things are all affirmed without even a gesture toward defining what they might mean. In that case, the statement could be subscribed to by everyone from William Buckley to Gustavo Gutierrez. One suspects that is not what the drafters had in mind.

An alternative decision is that the fine things affirmed do indeed have content but are stated in misleading fashion. In that event, it would seem altogether better and more useful to the continuing discussion were the drafters to come out of the closet, so to speak, about their presuppositions. For instance, at least some of them have been very outspoken in promoting the Marxist "scientific analysis" connected with sundry liberation theologies. Is "the struggle" that is affirmed a struggle for a socialist society in a socialist world, or are we simply left to speculate about the hidden agendas behind the statement's lofty phrases? Surely today we should be liberated enough to say what we mean.

While there are elements of vacuity and evasiveness in the Boston statement, it is, I am led to conclude, most unhappily marred by elements of hubris. This is most clearly present in the extraordinary statement, "The transforming reality of God's reign is found today:"—followed by a list of the causes favored by the Boston group, including a global future of "economic democracy of equity and accountability," whatever that may mean. There are no qualifiers such as "we believe" or "in our considered judgement" the transforming reality of God's reign *may be* found today. This is unqualified "Lo, her, lo, there" sighting of the presence and purpose of God (Matt. 24:23). These are, we are assured, the "current struggles" in which "the living God is active...to bring a Reign of Justice." Unless the affirmations are more vacuous than I think they are, the gospel according to Boston is that anyone who votes for Ronald Reagan—or maybe even Henry Jackson—cannot enter the Kingdom of God. (One assumes exceptions might be made for victims of what theologians used to call "invincible ignorance.")

To the extent, then, that the Boston affirmations are vacuous they will simply bore most Christians and other Americans. To the extent that they are evasive or misleading they will intensify the already widespread suspicion with which most church people view such   lite pronouncements on social and religious issues. To the extent that they presume to define who does and who does not belong to "the company of the committed" most sensible Christians will respond with outrage or with pity at such pretension.

Boston correctly warns against the church being "transmuted into a club for self- or transcendental awareness." One might additionally warn against a "partisan church" transmuted into a club of the

enlightened few who are unbelievably well briefed on what God is up to at the moment. It is important that the Hartford debate continue. One looks forward to the further participation of diverse members of the Boston group and of other critics who will advance the discussion rather than attempt to salvage the shopworn stereotypes from radicalisms of the past.

## QUOTE/UNQUOTE

### CIA and Culture

Not in my wildest dreams could I have expected that my "dream festival" [of the Congress for Cultural Freedom] would be supported by America's spying establishment, nor did I know that the fare for my delightful first-class flight to Paris was being paid by the CIA via the labor union's European representative....And soon, very soon, that the same spy mill of the American government would be establishing a network of "consenting" or "passing" foundations to pump money to such groups as our Cultural Committee, to American colleges, to refugee orchestras, and whatnot.

In retrospect, it is very funny to remember, for instance, the silhouettes of two Russians, a thin, long one and a short, stocky one. The thin one was the Secretary General of the Union of Soviet Writers, the short one an odious SOB called Yermilov, a nasty little party hack. They were standing in line to receive their *per diem* and travel allowance from...the Congress for Cultural Freedom...(Mr. Yermilov, turn in your grave: *you have taken CIA money!*)

—Nicolas Nabokov, onetime head of the Congress, in *Bagazh: Memoirs of a Russian Cosmopolitan* (Atheneum, 1975)

### 1976: Our Millennial, or In the Beginning Was America

"The American people were whipped up to a white heat," John J. Wilson, attorney for H.R. Haldeman, the former White House chief of staff, told the judges. A few minutes later, he added:

"This is the greatest, the largest, the most virulent publicity situation that ever existed in America from the beginning of time."

—*New York Times*, January 7

### Busing

Busing is, in important ways, the Vietnam of the 1970s. It is a quagmire; a lost cause....

Most black neighborhoods were, hardly a generation ago, among the most solidly built and desirable in the Northern cities; restored, they would be far more valuable—as investments—than the flimsy modern housing of workingclass suburbs. Under improved economic conditions, a black middle class and working class will integrate with whites as economic, social, cultural, and educational equals.

Economics first, education second. A cardinal principle both of Marx and of capitalism cannot be all wrong.

—Michael Novak in *The Wall Street Journal*

### The Most Potent Motivating Factor

Wherein lies the explanation for this dramatic change [the 1973 Supreme Court ruling on abortion]?...It is probable that a major factor here, as in the case of contraceptive birth control, is the taxpayers' revolt against rising welfare rolls and costs....(A study made by New York City's Health Services Administration in 1973 indicated that without the State's liberalized abortion law there would have been 24,000 additional children on the city's welfare rolls.)...Proponents of liberalization of antihomosexuality laws lack the most potent motivating factor possessed by the abortion reform movement, the economic factor.

—Leo Pfeffer in *God, Caesar, and the Constitution* (Beacon Press, 1975)

### And for the Lebanese...?

War in Lebanon a strain for journalists.

—*New York Times* index listing, December 18

### From Matthew, Mark, and Luke to Peter, Paul, and Mary

In 1902—the year Marconi signaled the letter "A" across the Atlantic, six years after Hearst and Pulitzer each printed one million newspapers in their Manhattan plants, the first such massing of a mega media audience in history—a survey of U.S. children aged seven to fifteen asked them to name a person they knew, or of whom they had read or heard, that they would "most wish to be like." Nearly a third of the boys, and half the girls, named a parent, relative, friend, or neighbor; those ten years old or older drew more often on idealistic fiction, history, religious literature, or public life.

By 1925 a survey of 1600 English youngsters showed a drop of roughly a third (to 20% for boys, 37% for girls) in those choosing as models acquaintances or historic, religious, or public figures.

By 1965 Megamedia Man was on the loose. A repeat survey of 284 London school children aged