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FASHIONS OF ATHEISM

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A lecture for Bob Inyster

CHAPTER ONE: MANY LANGUAGES

I

1

...perhaps the simplest way in which I can explain what I have to try to do here.

When I say why I asked our friend to let me speak in different ways, before different audiences.

The Greeks and the ancients had many gods. And we call them "*polytheists*" for this reason, forgetting that, of course, when they prayed to their gods, they spoke to them in unison. The Olympic gods are all together. When one is invoked, the other is not omitted.

But modern man has dismissed polytheism as something you are not concerned. You are far too educated. You go to an American college where nobody believes anything.

2

So we have also a way of dismissing the problem of the unity of our life, which is after all the question of our God.

We have different milieus. You speak to your wife in one way, and the minister speaks in church in another way, and at the military you speak another way again. And the New York Times has its own jargon.

And we are all polytheistic, perhaps not. But we have many ears.

So probably we are rather asinine.

3

It is quite a concern that I feel the older I grow, that one person says one thing to one person, and one thing to a hundred persons, and one thing to a million people. And if you would follow this through, you would be surprised how many lies you'll say according to your own judgment.

If you speak as an American to the rest of the world, you say one thing. You try to explain why you are in Vietnam; or when you are a hippie in San Francisco, you have quite a different jargon of speaking about Vietnam.

And you must, because people must be told different things about it.

4

So I think we all have many tongues today. And if anything is to be achieved by our talk, I think we would have to try, at least, to simplify one and the other jargon.

Perhaps it is possible to speak on Sundays in church, even in the same way in which you speak to your best friend, alone. If two people could speak of God in the same terms as the minister speaks to the whole congregation, there might be some faith and some relevance here.

Otherwise I wouldn't believe either one.

And that's the whole problem, today, that you cannot believe these jargons -- and they are jargons, and I can't get out. I'm in the same boat as you are. We all speak about important things to one person quite differently than we speak to all, let alone all the degrees in between.

II

1

Probably is this the mystery of our faith. And the one thing we could perhaps admit from the very beginning: our faith is mysterious.

Nobody can speak in such a way of his real faith, that all people can agree, or that there is one language to all.

2

And most harm in the 19th century has been in stoning of heretics, and the burning at stake of the heretics has all to do with the strange idea that you must speak about the most important things in one language to all people.

And I think that's just nonsense, utter nonsense. It's the dogma of this country. But it's a wrong dogma.

3

And perhaps this may interest you: everybody in this country tells me that he's not dogmatic. I wish he was. It would be much better if you would allow me to believe in this dogma, that people are dogmatic.

That is, they pretend that they have the power to speak the truth to all people in one language, which is utter nonsense.

With children, you know it. Nobody can tell the deepest truth to a child in the same language as he can speak to the adults. And yet he can speak to the child full truth. It's not true that you have lie to a child, but you cannot say it in the same manner as you speak to these strange adults, who have long given up thinking at all.

4

This is for a man who has to speak as myself professionally now, for a long life. I began teaching when I was 12, so I don't hope my sins can be forgiven me.

This is very serious. We all are in a crisis of credibility.

The credibility gap is not just with President Johnson, but with all of you. You lie just as much as the president. Everybody does.

III

1

So I thought that if we could go through the experience how to go through the same questions in a small circle, and in a larger circle, it's at least an attempt to break through this self-betrayal, this self-cheating that you think you are able to tell the truth on important things in one and the same language to everybody.

2

If you were, you were God Almighty. Only God in His judgments is able to reach the simple, and the genius, and the high-brow in the same language.

We are not.

3

Now that's the first point about God Almighty: that He cannot be spoken of in the same language to all people and at all times. At least, that's my experience. And if they try -- and most people of course are so caught in this catechism: you must not lie -- they think it is lying if they speak of God to different people in different language.

I think when you pause to think ten minutes on this, you will admit that it will be honesty to speak of God to different people. And it's not dishonesty which causes this, but diligence, an attempt to be very honest.

4

So everybody has to be spoken to in a different manner. The boldness of the whole Church to coin the first language in a unified way --.

Who went to the concert two days ago? Who listened -- did you? Did you go? Well, you know what they sang.

(Bach's Passion.)

It's a miracle that by concentrating on events, on facts, on the passion of the Lord, that it has reached this unanimity in the Gospel. The Gospel is that which can reach all people in the same language. It's unique. It could not be enlarged.

IV

1

There came a moment where this history of the Church had to break up. You couldn't retain this passion, this unity. And there are four different Gospels, even.

I have written a whole book on this problem: Why have there to be four Gospels?

For the same humility which I invite you to respect. The more important something is, we say, we have to speak, or we cannot say it in the same manner to all people. And there even have to be four Gospels.

That's however miraculous, it was possible to condense it in four Gospels.

2

If you take philosophy, if you take other teachings, other communications, there have to be many more ways.

I think it's the most urgent thing that we wake up from this monistic dream of the 19th century, that all people can say the important things in the same way. I don't see it. The very fact that you are younger than I, makes it necessary that I express the same thing differently from you.

It's obvious. And I won't believe you if you just repeat what I have said.

But pardon me, I will also not believe me if I try simply to speak as a hippie. This is impossible. We have to acquiesce in the fact that there will always be people who are older than we, and therefore speak in a more obsolete language than you have the privilege to speak.

3

And perhaps this may give you the point that to speak later is not to have more truth. Unfortunately your idea that we know better tomorrow, I doubt it. If you think of important facts, it is very doubtful whether we know more important things later, better, than before.

I think a bride, when she goes to the altar, usually knows better than she knows thirty years later. And fortunately so. Otherwise, no great things would be done.

Take any hero who goes to battle. When he says, "I do it," he's more insight, knows much more what he does, what he risks than thirty years later when he says, "What a fool I was to go there, and to conquer the enemy."

4

So the higher we go in the realm of things to be spoken of, I think the more confusing is the fact that you cannot say it to all people - or not even to yourself at all times in the same way.

So there is a polyglot.

That's why the Bible probably is in a polyglot. Many languages have to be used to say one and the same thing.

CHAPTER TWO: THE NEED OF PARTICIPATION

I

1

I have to admit, this isn't customary to say. But my whole problem here this week is to make you sure that I do not lie. And if I would say the same phrases in the small audience, and in a large audience, I would lie.

2

That's so very strange, Sir. But you, as a minister, must know what I mean, that your sermon itself is predicated on this quandary, that you have to preach to a large audience, a large church very differently from when you go to a widow to comfort her. You say other things. And you say them in a different language.

And both times you are right.

3

So the truth is polyphonic.

And it has been my way of rediscovering the old polytheists.

We are so down on the Greeks, and on the Romans, and on the Germanic gods, and think they knew nothing. Of course they were pious people; they were religious people. And they were quite naive in allowing their style. And so they couldn't reach other nations, certainly. They couldn't reach other ages.

And city people couldn't reach peasants, and peasants couldn't reach sailors, and sailors couldn't reach hunters.

Does this mean that they didn't know the same things?

4

That's quite different. The Spirit is universal. And wherever people have tried to speak the truth, they were in the truth. But never could they say twice the same thing.

II

1

We limit ourselves therefore to the use of the word "truth" for all those dead things which are the same. *Two and two is four*, and you can say it to everybody, and it doesn't get better by this fact.

It's a valueless truth. It's worthless. And it's dead.

All the things, you can count stones, and you can pay money, and you can count the soldiers or you can run statistics. You have computers now in this country; you are mad by computers, and you count therefore the dead part of the universe, by the help of computers. And then you think you know something.

2

But obviously you can only know the worst cases, because they are dead. And the proof of this deadness is that you can say it in the same way to all people. And anything you can say in the same manner to all people is dead. Because if the person is present, and if you are present, and the spirit of God is present, there will be a new way of expressing this.

Can't be helped. That's why children, why loving teachers will always hear new words. The same truth will be expressed.

Children make us eloquent. And they excite us. We love them, and so we want to unite with them.

3

And therefore the originality of a teacher comes from his interest in his students. That's all. He wants to say the same thing.

But you can go through the centuries; and any father of the Church, or any minister, will preach in a different century from love for his students, and for his listeners quite differently.

And after 500 years, you will wake up, and say, "Is this still Christianity?" or "Is it still the same religion?" It is, but it is a constant renewal. And the later is not worse than the older, and vice versa. It has to be different.

4

It's very strange. All our living situations are the same, differently. Anything is alive where every step - *eating, sleeping, loving, writing, speaking* - have to be expressed every moment anew, totally. We call these things alive in the universe, which have to be *revamped, reformulated, restated* every day - just as you have to breathe.

III

1

You cannot live from the breath of yesterday.

This is a difference between death and life. It's unknown today. The strange thing is that these schools here, this agricultural school -- which raises, I suppose, pigs - has ruined us to a certain extent, because dead things if once they are stated, the earth is round, then you can repeat this: "The earth is round," time and again.

But anything important that has to be lived -

*that man has to be faithful,
and that man has to be truthful,
or man has to be good,
or whatever you have -*

or he is to be bad, or he is bad -- that has to be rediscovered by the person who says it, from the older generation, and by the person who comes to know it by the younger generation.

Before, it isn't there.

2

The living truth is of a character a breathing. If you don't breathe now, you choke.

It's a very strange secret. And it's never mentioned. Nobody tells you that living truth consists in the act

*of recovering it,
of reinstating it,
of doing it now again, because it is alive.*

Dead things, you can allow to be there, and nothing happens.

3

I have never found in biology-- have we a man in biology here, somebody who is specialist -- majoring in biology? -- I hope you aren't all dead, because this is a difference between *geology, or mineralogy, or chemistry, and biology*. And it is significant of the last hundred years that this distinction is omitted. People think that they are in the natural sciences when you are either a chemist or a biologist.

But it never stinks that much in biology as it does in chemistry.

Because chemistry is still dead. But living knowledge must be re-conquered, *in praesentia*, in the presence of this part of the living of which we are talking. It has to live now.

You can prove the life of a cell not by photographing it, but you have to enter the process. It is now living. It's changing. That's life, which has to be re-conquered over millions of years. The once-created life has to come to the fore again and be breathed in, breathed out, lived - the *metatabolism* is endless.

4

And this is, you will have to distribute the science of life and the science of the dead things in this manner. You can say to a person, "You only will know of life if you enter this living process yourself." You have to breathe yourself in order to know what breathing is.

You don't have to do this about dead things.

It is not necessary for us to become iron in order to speak of iron. But you have to have some participation of the living process yourself, before it makes any sense that you speak of life.

IV

1

I always feel that there runs the line between life and death.

And that's totally lost. We say with our scientific arrogance that you can speak of living and dead things in the same style. I don't believe this. Anybody who doesn't breathe cannot describe what life is. Anybody who doesn't love cannot describe what love is. It's perfectly fatal to try it.

Don't try it. You get a divorce.

2

And this is, I think, the greatest harm done today by this college education that you have the idea that you can speak of all the things which you learn in the same style.

I assure you, of living processes you can only speak by participation. And of dead things, you can speak by reading books.

It's very different.

3

Now this has to do with my topic here.

And you can see why I was tempted to speak on the new fashions of atheism.

The fashions of atheism in this century has been to speak of living processes as though they were dead.

The Lord was always in the grave, Resurrection or no Resurrection. It was in a history book. So He was never risen -- it couldn't happen anyway, because nothing ever rose in this scientific pragmatism, or positivism, or however you call it.

You describe things, and things don't -- they don't -- compel you to breathe with them, to live with them, to share with them the life. You could understand things without having shared them. And that's what many people today still think. That's called "monism".

You can also call it "mania."

4

The modern fashions in the last hundred years have all consisted in this one-and-the-same attempt to say that man is outside that

*which he learns,
which he knows,
which he judges,
which he describes,
which he discovers;*

and thereby saying that man could step outside his own life, and speak of life as though he wasn't involved.

That's why the word "*involvement*" all of a sudden is now so very fashionable, because people resent now that they shouldn't be involved.

And we say people shouldn't get involved before they say they can know anything.

That's really the whole question today. And you will admit it so important that you are involved in stones, and in water -- although washing is a very necessary process, that's true -- and shaving.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NECESSARY ADMIXTURE

I

1

But the important thing of this modern fashion word "*involvement*" is that you have then to draw the line between the things you can and must get involved, and the same you can treat as dust, and as surface things, and as indifferent things.

All the things we don't have to get involved in, but still can know, would be on the side of death, and all the things you can only know as long as you stay involved, are the living things.

2

And I see -- even on this campus, the fashion is to get involved.

(Yes, I think so.)

Keep it that way. It's very important. The living things, in order to know them at all, we must get involved.

Before, we don't know them.

3

So you will perhaps not be so surprised to understand my thesis that there are fashions of atheism.

The word "atheism" was out of fashion. You just were "scientific". That's atheism. But because it means that you don't get excited. "You are not" - "you don't have to breathe to know what breath is."

You have to breathe before you can know what breath is.

And I assure you, you have to love before you can know what love is. It is no description in any dictionary, about the organs with which love is performed.

No sexuality will teach you anything, including Mr. Freud.

4

Because that's all bygone love. And so the remnants of love are not the beginning of love, and are not the middle of love. And they certainly are quite unimportant.

But it is hard to believe that people ever could think this was great truth.

It's very funny. I have never understood -- pardon me, I'm so old that I'm a contemporary of Mr. Freud - but that anybody could take this seriously, I didn't understand. And I'm too stupid for this.

THE STORY OF MR. FREUD

I will admit that I must even know what Mr. Freud thinks of love, but I must also know what my cook thinks of love. That's equally important. And Mr. Freud doesn't know anything more than anybody who loves. This is the expert knowledge that we have. But it's a living knowledge.

The other knowledge, that's erroneous.

II

1

If this is so, and perhaps you'll accept it at face value as my experience, and I stand pat on this, that living processes can only be known or understood by those who practice, who are alive, who are involved, who are breathing with these processes, because we only know of their existence, thanks to our quality of *breathing, acting, reacting, responding*.

There is no other way.

(Can I know about plant life? Can I have some understanding of plant life, even though I don't know what it is to photosynthesize, for instance? Is it just a matter that I'm alive, and it's alive in a biological sense that allows me or makes it possible for me to understand these processes?)

2

What is your problem? I don't see any difficulty.

(Do I actually have to undergo the same processes as what I'm seeking to understand?)

Well, "the same" is, of course, ambiguous. You are not the plant, so you cannot have shared. But still you can breathe, and the rain and the sunshine can hit you. And in as far as you smile at the sun, and the sun smiles at you, and smiled at the violet, you

and the violet are sisters, as St. Francis very eloquently, in his hymn to the sun, has proclaimed.

"My brother the sun, and my sister the moon".

Have you ever read St. Francis of Assisi?

Well, do it. It's a first great statement outside the church walls of this reality, that God created a living universe.

And all the attempts of the Greek philosophers to prove that He created a dead universe has proved that the man is dead, but hasn't proved that the violet is dead, or that God is dead.

3

(Well, how is this essentially different from the fact that the sun, and the rainfall on the rock, say, also --.)

Well, that we all suffer; the sun suffers, too: frustration.

Well, for all paths of this creation, there are hindrances. There are walls. They are not joking. You mustn't take this -- it's too serious.

(No, my question is: why is a knowledge of a plant a living knowledge, whereas you seem to want to say that the knowledge of a rock is not?)

Well, I don't think you can breathe as the rock, perhaps. If you can, then take it to your bosom. I have no objection that you should become a brother *of the stone, of the rock, or the granite*. But only to the extent that you can identify your life and this rock's existence, would you be successful.

And your knowledge of the equality of the granite and yourself is of a different nature, has a different putting on the scale the density, or the corpuscles of the atoms of the rock.

It's quite a different relation. One is by identity, and the other is by observation.

Is that the same?

It isn't.

4

(I think you were precise when you say that Freud was erroneous, when you spoke about love. And you said that to give an example, a person that makes love, that in the actual situation of doing it, is the only one -- or knows it better than one that talks about it as an object.

But I think that you also said that Freud, his position about love was erroneous.

So my question would be this: Is your thesis about knowledge a kind of thesis, where there is only actual knowledge, knowledge of participation, and is no more reflection about what we do?

Because I assume that your speech here is a discursive approach to a subject that is not this speech in itself. Even the subject of your speech is the speech itself.

The subject of your speech is an object of your speech. You are talking about the subject of your speech.)

Sir, we will talk 24 more hours, if you want me now to define "object."

(No, no, no. My question is precise. My question is, if you devaluate any discursive approach about human actions, that are not just reactions in themselves. For example, I can talk about love, if I have done love --.)

Pardon me, I have difficulty understanding you.

(I can speak about love. Yes? Suppose I have done yesterday night, and today I write a thesis about love. And this thesis is not love, but it is a thesis. An academic, scholarly approach.)

A destructive thing, yes.

(Not destructive. Even destructive. I can say --.)

It is destructive. I assure you. It ends the story.

(Well, I assume, because any knowledge is destructive, in the sense that it breaks a kind of unity. But it exists; we cannot distract its existence. It is there.)

Well, I have no objections. You destroy your love? Poor man.

(I was confronted with the problem of the sophists, now, that in order to communicate me this problem, that you are communicating, you must destroy it. Because you are using a discursive level now to me.

And I was identifying with what you say. But I said I felt this same speech must be also a kind of destruction of this speech.)

Ja. But Sir, this is true. Just as you have to burn wood in order to heat the furnace...

(Well, I think this was Freud's position.)

III

1

...there is a part of our doing -

*you can call it "analysis,"
you can call it "destruction,"
you can call it "deliverance,"
"emancipation."*

But half of our life consists in taking masks off, unveiling something, and thereby the story ends.

That's the end of it. And "end" means death. It's finished. It can rise again from the ashes.

But one of these features of the 19th century, from which we all stem now -- or the last hundred years. I'm so old that for me the 19th century is already bygone, and so my chronology is a little different, I suppose. This breathing in and this breathing out, this destructive process, and this syntheticizing process, they are both there. Life and death, we are in the midst of them.

And you cannot do anything except promoting life, or promoting analysis, and thereby promoting ends. It can't be helped.

More, I have not said.

2

But I want you to know that when you analyze, and what you do when you analyze, and when you only know from the outside by saying, "This is this". And when you feel, "I'm responsible for this, I must make sure that it is there."

You have this problem now with the whole nature of the United States, with the oceans and so; are you responsible that there is still real, fresh water?

You are. It doesn't help you to say, "This is " -- how do you say this in English?

As soon as you only say "H2O" you become irresponsible. You are not responsible for the existence of water. You only know it.

That's not good enough. Anybody who knows what water is, is responsible that there is water, that it is not good enough to say, "This are H₂O." but he has to go out and kill all the people who make the water stinky.

3

(I would explain you why I asked you this question.)

Please.

(I should explain you?)

Ja.

(I felt that you were talking to positivists. I don't feel myself a positivist. Or a scientist. I knew speech was right. But suddenly I felt there was a devaluation in the discursive process, in the reflective analyses of things.

Buber, for example, he assumed that well, there is another objective approach. There is an "I-it" relationship where things go on. These are not the only things, and these are never true. And I accept this. But if someone says to me - because I'm not a Freudian, but any approach about love is erroneous, I feel surprised.

So now you clarify it better, I know now better that --.)

It's not erroneous, but in the phase of ending, and not of creating.

(It is partial, you would say, yes? I understood that what you meant now is that it is partial. It is not the true thing.

You said you would read Freud, but you would also talk to your cook about love. In other words, the problem - is not seeing these discursive approaches which tend to kill things, but the problem is when we begin to recognize them as being the answer, so that we think we know about something, when all we actually know is this outside.)

4

I think we understand each other. If you feel that we should go on like this -- I don't want to -- to escape into my own thesis.

This is not the main point.

My point is the application to our relation to the religious truth. Since it is impossible in one situation to certain people, to tell the whole truth, our speech of the gods must become different from what it is now.

Nobody can only in church believe in God. It is better that he does not go to church, if he doesn't speak to other people, or to non-theologically minded people, to sealed-in - denominationally--people of God, he will not speak sufficiently well of it.

This is quite serious. I don't have to tell you how practical this whole question of the necessity of speaking on all - how do you say? *auf allen Stufen* - on all steps, in all degrees, of the divine.

I will not believe a man who's only a minister, Sir. Pardon me for saying this.

(Thank you.)

That's not enough.

(I stand with you.)

Good. I know.

IV

1

And therefore, I felt, coming here, and intending to speak of religious truths, I should try to find different audiences. I feel it is more true if we can speak together, and I can speak in a larger audience for a wider public.

This is no safeguard, really. I can still say two lies, just as well as I can speak one lie. But it is a little more difficult. And you can at least check the fact that a different audience is needed, I think is very mysterious, and very hopeful.

If mankind is one and this is a very serious and practical question today for us - is it one? With all our telephoning, and aircraft, and television. It's terribly burning: how much do we have to say, that you can understand a Hindu, and a Hindu can understand you?

It seems very doubtful. We certainly don't seem to understand in this country each other very well.

And how about the others?

2

And this pretense, the great tones on Sunday morning, that all people are one, doesn't convince me at all. And the white people in the South find out to their dismay, that it hasn't helped them that they pray in the Sunday morning to the God who has created

all men. If the other days of the week they do not act accordingly, it obviously is not true.

And every one of us is in the same boat.

3

So this is the reason why I think if we would learn to have different audiences, of different constitution, the truth would progress. We would be more careful.

We could not repeat the liturgy, and the prayers, and the formulas from the classroom, or from the church, or from the newspaper editorial in our party, in the same uncontrolled and unchecked way.

We today lie by dividing the things we speak of to different audiences. We don't speak of the same things to different audiences, but we have for every kind of truth our audience.

In the academic world, we speak of the unimportant things.

In the church, we speak of the important things.

In politics, we speak of the profitable things for own promotion.

And we never get together.

4

Man is more divided today than he ever was, because he carries the debate on these various things, only always to certain circles, and never meets the people who doesn't bring them in the same room together.

If you would really be honest, all our gatherings would have to be penetrated by an admixture of somebody who has never heard any such expression meaningfully said to him.

CHAPTER FOUR: "ATHEISM"

I

1

Very strange how we have managed to live in watertight compartments, always under the headline, "All men." Always with the wonderful way, "All men who go to Lutheran churches," meet here". And "All men who are interested in anatomy meet there." And so we all are totally split.

I have never seen a more divided humanity than today. Just because we are so close together *geographically, and by telephone, and radio.*

2

We are more divided than mankind has ever been, because formerly it was obvious that a man and his cook had the same religion. Today obviously this is not true, because you have to have your food cooked by people who have a different color, and therefore are not allowed to live with you.

So I think that mankind is in process of dissolving, because of the closeness. And it's very strange.

This obviously goes together, the danger and the dissent.

What I today would like to add -- I had to tell you this as a preliminary, because to explain

the method today, which every honest man has to follow today is: he must correct his own style, his own way of saying things, by being aware that he must say things differently to different people, when he wants to say the same thing.

3

I must say to you things differently from what I would say to a theological group, strictly.

And that's very strange.

I think mankind has never been faced with this quite, so far, as I know it, at least. You could try to say all these things in one language. You wouldn't perhaps touch on so many points. But what you said would mean all people with the same directness, the pope and the rabbi.

But now it is quite different. What they call "dialogue" is certainly the opposite from what I have admired. Because it had to be rediscovered that for 3,000 years, there has been no dialogue between Jews and Christians.

And to me -- I offer you this as a helpful formula with which you can equip your inner living room; and this is that the more important a truth is, through so much more versions has it to go.

The truth demands transcription, "translation," we say.

4

It's not an accident that the Bible had to be translated in 1,042 languages, so far, which is quite something already. It's very serious. It is only an example of our own situation, that here we are, 20 people--how many? 25?- you know how many we are.

(Between 15 and 20, I think.)

All right, these vital statistics.

And if we then know that's the same thing that can be told to twenty people has to be told to a thousand people in a different manner, and to two million again in a different manner, we have learned something of the divinity of which we all so glibly speak.

II

1

People are so naive that they speak now as though it was over a loudspeaker, over a computer of God. They treat it as an ant, as an insect, as something you either know of or you don't know.

You can say,

*"There is no God,"
or "There is a God,"*

but you speak with the same proliferation of your language, as though it was all the same.

I assure you, it isn't the case. You have to discover what to say about God Almighty each evening and each morning in a new tone, knowing to whom you try to speak, and whom inside yourself you try to reach. And then He will come to life, and you, too.

And otherwise, not.

2

And this is a very serious business, because this speech *on God, of God, to God* is dying. And any nation, and any group in the nation, in the people on this earth, who loses this power, is dead, is doomed.

You can see it now with Vietnam. Americans -- it's coming to life, because this language of what, in the face of God, should be said about Vietnam, is waking up. It's a great experience, I must have been going through.

3

THE STORY OF THE FIFTY SOLDIERS FROM VIETNAM

The most precious document in this respect was in the ad in the paper the other day where fifty soldiers - *privates, corporals, sergeants* -- at their own expense described what they had experienced in Vietnam.

So what they could vocalize, this discrepancy between -- that this was a civil war between natives, and it was not at all a war against Communism or something like that. They woke up to this linguistic -- it seems only a linguistic problem, but that God is in the Word.

In the beginning was the Word.

And if you can say it, you transform the world.

THE STORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The war in Vietnam was to these soldiers not a war. It was a police action, or whatever you call it - I don't care at this moment, to finding the final expression.

But they had woken up from their naive, uniform, patriotism that it was an event in the political history of the United States, which it isn't.

4

And I was very proud of these people. And there was no officer involved, and no college graduate, obviously.

And that's very hopeful, if the people can think rightly despite the colleges. Because in the colleges you are told that you can know without participation. And there's our problem again.

You cannot.

III

1

Now therefore I have always had an axe to grind with the theologians, because

atheism is the attempt to treat God as a thing, in His absence.

And you cannot speak of God in His absence, because the first thing which we still say of God Almighty is that He is present. If He isn't present, we don't have to talk of Him, because then He doesn't exist, and this is of no importance.

And it is still a business of the educated people, when they get together, that they don't speak of God. It's unspeakable.

They drink cocktails, instead.

2

And the whole social cult, which we have - even among theologians, Sir - is that we speak about Him, as though He wasn't present, and He wasn't listening in. And if you can speak of God as though He wasn't listening in, you don't believe in Him.

THE STORY OF ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY SUFFERING

And that has been my problem all my life, that I have still to find the theologians who know that when they speak of God, they speak in His presence.

And I have suffered from this. And what I say is all based on this mere experience that most people I meet take it for granted that you can speak of God in His absence. And I've always been handicapped by the fact that as I would think I was a fool if I tried to. This is a contradiction in terms.

Yet I know so many people yet -- you know them too, your very venerable colleagues - who are able to speak of God in His absence. And you would not believe that they don't understand them, what they are doing.

But God is killed by theologians every day.

3

Now the word "atheism" I have therefore chosen in order to force the issue.

THE STORY OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche was the last announced and proclaimed atheist - Friedrich Nietzsche in Germany. And -- for the poor man, a weak man -- his father had been a minister and it was obviously too much for him. And he said, "How can there be a God in the Gospel? We are told that God perspires when He went to the Cross. There's a proof that He can't have been God."

Of course, the greatest proof was that He was, is in this very human act that He really became a mortal for our sake, and did tremble, and did sweat.

Funny, I mean.

When I read this, I was a boy perhaps almost younger than you, 17. This proved that Nietzsche was wrong. He hadn't understood the greatest proof of the incarnation story, that to be fully man, you must fear death. Death is fearful. And it's natural, that if He was fully man, that He should have trembled and perspired.

And very funny that a clever man, an able man, being so well educated that he could have known Latin and Greek, like German, that he should have said such nonsense.

4

But you can get away with nonsense on this college -- here -- campus, too. The whole academic world lives on such *bons mots*. That's the highest they can say it to these problems.

IV

1

This is the reason why I think it is necessary to re-establish the word "atheism" to its honor. The world will only become believing if we treat atheism just as much as we treat a cold.

People fall sick. And they will be atheists.

They will not have the power *to stand, to face, to discuss, to admit* the divine. It makes you tremble. It makes you sweat. And death is one way in which we tremble.

2

Any soldier -- he may be as brave as you like - where the danger of death arises, feels his mortality, and knows that there is something greater that wants to last.

In all of us, there is a knowledge that with our death, not everything can be extinguished in us. Something that remains. We would like to know what. So we call it the "soul," or we call it "our immortality," or whatever you are, or "resurrection."

But without this hope, nobody could go to battle, and no woman could give birth to a baby.

Both men and women can only live by risking their coming to grief.

3

And this death of danger is always talked away now. You have all these wonderful techniques so that nothing happens.

But if nothing happens, you don't live.

We have all these wonderful organizations now to prevent people, from living.

4

The word "atheism" I think is expressing in a very sober and, you may say, even uninteresting manner - to deny that the divine is always challenging us to be alive, to pay the expenses of life.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ONE NEXT STEP

I

1

If you only go to take the Pill, it's rather uninteresting, I must say. The whole thing becomes interesting only if something can happen, and has consequences.

2

Why it should interest anybody to take the Pill so that nothing happens, I don't understand.

There may be frontiers of life. I know also that man is not always of the same power, and of the same presence, but it is obvious that the great process of re-creation, and procreation is not settled by the Pill.

THE STORY OF ELIMINATION OF 350 MILLIAN BABIES BORN IN INDIA

You can try to eliminate 350 million babies born in India every year, by distributing 350 million Pills. But then you have only excluded the Indians from participation in the great process of creation, that's all. And from the point of view of theology, I would say God has been deprived of His creation.

I don't understand the way you treat these things, here in this country. The people who allegedly have this done in their own interest, they should protest.

You girls should say, "Don't talk in this silly manner about the most difficult, dangerous, and problematic thing. Leave this to me."

3

I only use this as an example, you must understand, that I do hope that as soon as *any minister, any bishop, any cardinal, any theologian - any historian*, by the way, too -- knows that the same thing he treats here in one context turns up in other contexts with other people, too -- the world will become a better place, will become more livable, because we will learn to express these things in more than one language.

So the polyglot of the Bible that had to be translated in 1,022 languages, is still true. Only it is now the whole book that has to be translated, but every great truth in this book has to be translated into these various idioms.

4

But you can speak about the problem of pregnancy, and the problem of living together, I think, to any human being if you must. On all stages the secret is

*great,
and it's very sublime,
and very difficult,
and very painful.*

But the pain and the bliss are always together. There is no such where you can have the bliss without the pain.

THE STORY OF ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY'S THIRD DENTURES

I would like to know. Perhaps when I have my third dentures, then I can hope that this is so.

II

1

If you look at the word "atheism," it's a very strange word and brings up perhaps one more aspect which I would like to speak today about.

How much time have I spent. Too much?

(I don't have a watch, I don't know.)

(About an hour you have spoken, Sir.)

Well, isn't that enough?

(Not as far as we're concerned. but perhaps .)

Well, I just don't know. Freya, what shall I do?

(Oh, just go on a little.)

All right.

2

The economy of this is, I thought today only to draw your attention to the fact that you cannot speak on living processes without saying that all the people who share

this process must be reached. And the same thing must be said in a different manner to all the people.

And there is no formula with which you can lift and wrap up all these people.

There is no different language for educated and uneducated, for academicians and non-academicians.

And anything important in life and anything living, in which we can only breathe in life by allowing it to share our lives, or allowing us to enter upon their lives, when we have this spiritual democracy, for every member of this great body of human souls, there is a different way of saying it.

And these languages must all reach everybody.

3

All human beings, by the way, practice this.

Don't be afraid that I'll say something that hasn't been done *by any laborer, by any coachman, by any teacher, even, and sometimes even by the pope*. What we call "religion" is something infinitely practical. It says, "Every one of us has to be tied to it."

Religion, *religare*, you must always consider from the point of view of the abstract religion.

But what happens in religion is that this living soul too, is bound back to this stem of life.

You, too.

4

This is an attempt to make you have religion, that you are bound to it, that you are related to it.

And this is only when it is said to you in the language which is adequate to your kind of *experience, maturity, or education*, or whatever you call it. The preliminaries of course are in you, to find the style in which this has to be conveyed to you.

III

1

And I think that's the reason why today - what they call this strange utterance, the *Death of God theology*.

2

THE STORY OF THE DEATH-OF-GOD-THEOLOGY LETTER

I received two days ago a letter in which a man said to me that now we had had the *Death-of-God theology* -- and this we were through now.

Now we had the *Hope-in-God philosophy*.

It goes so very fast, it's very hard to keep up with the Joneses.

And what he didn't understand is that this is a very positive thing, that if I know that most people do not believe in God outside their formal existence *in groups, in clubs, in churches, in denominations, in gatherings* of this formalized kind, we'll never get at Him.

So the death-of-God philosophy obviously is only the confession of my own *weakness, or sin, or stupidity, or agnosticism*, that I cannot say more myself. And I have to hope that this will fall like scales from my eyes, one day.

3

This Great Saturday Evening ignorance is of course an omni-Christian experience and goes through the centuries.

THE STORY OF GREAT SATURDAY EVENING

The lights were extinguished on the altar of the old churches on Great Saturday. Man ignored God at that moment.

They were very profound. If you study the liturgy of the Easter Week, all our problems of today are already solved there. They have been only forgotten, that's all.

4

Everybody knows that not every one of us can know God all the time.

It's obvious. How can we?

But the Church as a whole can provide the means of being for you and me to be led into it again, at our own time, and in our own way, and our own manner.

IV

1

But you pardon me for saying this, Sir, but theologians are today completely immune against the wisdom of the teachings of the Church for the last 2,000 years. The Church has always known that man cannot know God all the time. It's impossible.

And the problem of the Church is that there is always still a new way to be discovered, how to say it; and in this moment, where the next path is opened, the older paths come to life again.

2

Does it make sense? Do you understand what I mean?

Because you discover the next path, which, before it was discovered, blocked the understanding. As soon as you get the next chief in, all the former chiefs, can breathe again, can know again, can hear again, can participate.

THE STORY OF THE OLD DOGMA

By the way, that's an old dogma, that the one next convert, is needed so that any life in the Church can be perpetuated. If only the old membership remain, it is dead.

3

So the so-called progress, in this country has been made a pagan idol. America will only recover from its prostitution if you give up the word "progress."

The Christian progress means that the old values will be re-conquered only if the next step is taken. That's progress. And that's already a certainty.

THE STORY OF VINCENZ OF LERINUM

A contemporary disciple of St. Augustine's wrote a book on progress, and was a wonderful man. Vincenz of Lerinum. He wrote this treaty in 432 of our era, and he knew that the Americans would be invented one day, and would think they could have progress without regress.

That's impossible.

You can only go forward as long as you keep still direction.

And since nobody in this country at this moment seems to know in what the progress could exist, you go permanently backward.

4

Americans have completely lost the relationship between progress and the history that has gone on before.

THE STORY OF THE SOUTH

You have just to look at the South, and your behavior of the South in the Negro question to know that there has been, for a hundred years, no progress.

Still you say it's a progressive country. It has only been regressing. How do you explain this?

It is only when you think that progress is guaranteed that you can say such fabulous nonsense.

And the whole Christian tradition is of course is that progress is conditioned on this continuation. And that's why in Christianity, the word "progress" never was used in the plural. You could not say, "The progresses". It had to be the singular. With only the next step, that's progress.

Fifty steps, no progress.

And this country is half-mad, half-wise. And you never know what will win out. Most people think anything discovered in the realm of any field is progress. But it isn't. And you move in circles.

As soon as you keep to the old, Augustinian truth that progress is the necessary next step, you can't go wrong, because you keep all your things you have conquered before.

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Atheism is the attempt to treat God as a thing, in His absence.

Because you discover the next path, which, before it was discovered, blocked the understanding. As soon as you get the next chief in, all the former chiefs, can breathe again, can know again, can hear again, can participate.

Both men and women can only live by risking their coming to grief.

But God is killed by theologians every day.

Children make us eloquent. And they excite us. We love them, and so we want to unite with them.

If you would really be honest, all our gatherings would have to be penetrated by an admixture of somebody who has never heard any such expression meaningfully said to him.

Nobody can speak in such a way of his real faith, that all people can agree, or that there is one language to all.

The fashions of atheism in this century has been to speak of living processes as though they were dead.

The method today, which every honest man has to follow today is: he must correct his own style, his own way of saying things, by being aware that he must say things differently to different people, when he wants to say the same thing.

There is no different language for educated and uneducated, for academicians and non-academicians.

You can only go forward as long as you keep still direction.

You have to breathe before you can know what breath is.

NOTE

This is the transcript of a lecture in Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's eightieth year – with the following changes and additions:

1. Commonplace phrases as “you see”, “so to speak” are eliminated. Where the speaker corrects himself within the same sentence, only the corrected version is kept.

2. Additions:

paragraphs,

chapters with titles scooped from the text,

Roman numbers for the four parts of a chapter,

Arabic numbers for the four parts of the parts of a chapter,

titles for the stories – which are marked by color – which communicate either a personal or historical event,

sentences are marked in bold print, which are as a sum of thought and to be kept as taken for themselves,

indices of contents, names, stories, sentences.

According to the possibilities of one single lecture there is this one main theme: Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's suffering for all his lifetime, that so many and so many theologians kill God speaking about him as though He cannot listen to it. So that the “atheism” is done in speech most surprisingly by all, who do not listen themselves to what they are saying – listening understood as standing under the word.

So the speech transports what is – in Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's understanding – the soul of his whole life, namely that which is – as rhythm, as one word which is proved by the whole life-time – the essence, stronger than death.

It is touching to be with Freya von Moltke who is asked to advise the speaker together with this fifteen to twenty people.

Cologne, March 9, 2017

Eckart Wilkens