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The Virtual Public Square

Alan Jacobs

Father Richard John Neuhaus died on January 8, 2009, just two months before *American Babylon* was to appear. This book therefore becomes a kind of farewell—and there is something of the valedictory in its tone anyway. The last sentence of the book describes the time in which we live:

> It is a time of many times: a time for dancing, even if to the songs of Zion in a foreign land; a time for walking together, unintimidated when we seem to be a small and beleaguered band; a time for rejoicing in momentary triumphs, and for defiance in momentary defeats; a time for persistence in reasoned argument, never tiring in proposing to the world a more excellent way; a time for generosity toward those who would make us their enemy; and, finally, a time for happy surrender to brother death—but not before, through our laughter and tears, we see and hail from afar the New Jerusalem and know that it is all time toward home.

Though there are echoes of Ecclesiastes here—"a time to mourn, and a time to dance"—Neuhaus exhibits none of the Preacher's world-weariness. And though the presiding genius of the book is the prophet Jeremiah, this book is anything but a jeremiad. There's a quiet joy running through it, tempered a bit by the author's knowledge that his days (like ours) are numbered.

American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile
By Richard John Neuhaus
Basic Books ~ 2009 ~ 288 pp.
$26.95 (cloth)

(I should say before I proceed that, though I met Father Neuhaus only once, I have written for *First Things*, the magazine he founded, for many years; we occasionally corresponded, and he was a constant supporter of my work.)

A reader seeing the title *American Babylon* might well expect to find some furious denunciations of this nation's corruption, but that's not what Neuhaus offers. In invoking Babylon he does not mean to make readers think of evil or cruelty or tyranny. Instead, as his subtitle tells us, he means for Christians and Jews alike to see this nation as a place of exile—but a place where we are nevertheless to be in some limited way at home. If the book were a sermon, its text would surely be these words the Lord gave to Jeremiah, and addressed

to the Jews who had been taken from Israel and made captives in Babylon:

> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

This is the model of exile which Neuhaus recommends to American Jews and Christians: "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." We build our houses and plant our gardens and marry and raise children as though we are in our homeland—but we are not in our homeland. Neuhaus refers to "this our awkward duality of citizenship," and it *is* awkward—psychologically, socially, strategically. Yet Neuhaus passionately and convincingly makes the case that it is necessary: the alternatives to such delicate balance are a self-imposed isolation from the public sphere that tends to make people both arrogant and ineffectual, and (the much more common path among Christians) an uncritical identification of the Biblical story with the American story.

Each chapter in the book takes up some aspect of the relationship between substantive religious belief and citizenship. This allows Neuhaus to address the so-called New Atheists and Richard Rorty's model of "liberal irony"—in short, those inclined to believe that the religious cannot be good citizens—as well as his fellow believers. But though there is value in these encounters, the last three chapters ("Salvation is From the Jews," "Politics for the Time Being," and "Hope and Hopelessness") constitute the heart of Neuhaus's meditation. And I would suggest that the heart of that heart lies in a single sentence Neuhaus quotes from Pope Benedict: "A world that has to create its own justice is a world without hope."

Neuhaus believes that some of our wisest teachers in these matters are American thinkers whose heyday was half a century ago: the Protestant theologians Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr and the Jesuit John Courtney Murray. (There's a touch of nostalgia in the book for a time when theologians could be widely respected contributors to American public discourse: Neuhaus himself is well known indeed, but his influence has never reached as many corners of our society as his great predecessors' did.) For Neuhaus, the primary appeal of these theologians is their fearless embrace of political thought and political action:

> In a world that continues to be characterized by *libido dominandi*—the unbridled lust for power and glory—politics is an instrument

> for the restraint of great evil.... Politics is not a distraction from moral reflection, nor is it an intrusion on moral reflection. Politics is—among many other things that politics is—an exercise in moral reflection.

Though Neuhaus speaks in his own voice here, he echoes Murray and the Niebuhrs, from whom as a young pastor he absorbed these lessons.

I am of two minds about Neuhaus's reliance on these figures. On the one hand, we have scarcely exhausted the wisdom of Murray and the Niebuhrs. On the other hand, there have been some recent works of political theology that have built on their work but also corrected and in some respects gone beyond it: I think especially of Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations* (1996), which Neuhaus refers to once, briefly, and Charles Mathewes's *A Theology of Public Life* (2007). At the least, the details of Neuhaus's argument in *American Babylon* would have been enriched by a serious encounter with these thinkers.

But as I read this fine and moving book I found myself thinking that there is a greater lacuna in it—a gap that future political theologians must fill, if Jews and Christians are to navigate their exile successfully. This is Neuhaus's neglect of the fact that the public square, about which he wrote so eloquently for so long, has over the past decade been transmuted, has taken on a new and largely *virtual* form. And this transmutation surely has great implications for the theology of exile. Think of the thousands of American churches not just with websites, but with Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Think of the resources the Internet places at the fingertips of Christian homeschoolers, or the social and spiritual worlds available through the Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, with its video lectures and audio classes and articles by the hundreds.

Does the world of social networking intensify the pains of exile or help to heal them? Does it absorb religious believers into this world, muting or eradicating the awareness of exile? Or does it help them to build a real (but possibly isolating) "counterpublic"? What might it mean to seek the welfare of a *virtual* city, and to plant gardens there? Surely there is no single and universally applicable answer to these questions, but equally surely there are general tendencies that we—all of us, religious believers and otherwise—need to comprehend and account for.

And we should also recall that the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites produced social and, yes, technological developments that permanently altered Judaism—that, one might say, *made* Judaism as a way of life separate from the cult of the Temple in Jerusalem. For it was in that captivity that the synagogue developed—the

place for reading and interpreting Torah—and along with it the scribal system by which the debates of the rabbis were recorded, organized, displayed, and passed down to future generations in what we now call the Talmud. And when the Israelites were given the opportunity to return from exile and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple, many—among them some leading rabbis and their devoutest students—chose to stay in Babylon. They had come to prefer the new social structures they had made, and the new technologies formed to sustain those structures.

For those of us residing in the American Babylon, this sounds suspiciously like a parable; but it's important to see that those who chose to stay behind were often neither frivolous nor culpably assimilated into Babylonian life. Moreover, wise historians doubt whether Judaism could have survived its ultimate diaspora were it not for the cultural forms originally built in that captivity. What is much needed now is a new generation of political theologians who draw on the work of the Niebuhrs and Murray and Father Neuhaus himself, but apply their perennial insights to these new circumstances. How indeed can we sing the Lord's song in a land growing stranger by the day?

Alan Jacobs *is a professor of English at Wheaton College and the author, most recently, of* Original Sin: A Cultural History *(HarperOne, 2008). His blog Text Patterns—on reading, writing, and technologies of knowledge—can be found at TheNewAtlantis.com.*