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Naming the Name of God

by

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NAMING THE NAME OF GOD

Desmond Avery and brothers and sisters, Reverend Fathers and Mothers, what a joy it is to come to this opening dinner of the ITI for World Churchmen. Although it is has been some years since I have been to the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago I am glad again to make contact with you. Also, when I look down the list of your patrons, I find that I know a good number of them well. Desmond has asked me if I would say a word to you tonight.

I've read with very great interest -- with immense interest -- the primary documents of your organization. And the thing that's intrigued me about your organization is that here is a group trying to say something basic and original to the Christian religion, which desperately needs to be heard in our day, if the Church is to be renewed, and if the world therefore is to have the opportunity of responding afresh to the truth of the Christian faith. Of course I think the world is deaf today. It cannot hear what is being said through the Church, and without some kind of renewal of the Church, I think it is not possible for the world to hear again the pristine message of Christ to the Jews.

But I want to say this: it's a tremendous temptation to these great Historic churches to think that they have a monopoly of the Spirit. This is really the great heresy of the Churches: that they thought that they had the truth. Of course, by the Divine Will, they have been the custodians of revelation, although they have often wrapped that treasure up and put it in a napkin and locked it into a safe or hidden it in the ground. But the fact remains that they have been, by Divine Will, the custodians of that truth whereby men can live. The tragedy is that the Church, as it were, lives on the periphery of the contemporary world with that treasure, and there it rests, you might say.

Yet, when you look at the contemporary world, you do find an extraordinary movement of the spirit breaking out like rivulets coming out of a rock face or out of a glacier. That's an extraordinary thing one detects in this period of history. Yet these new rivulets these new movements of the spirit, it seems to me, are hardly related to the traditional institutions of the Churches. And that's a very tragic thing today, because it leaves the Churches, as it were, often arid and unfertilized by these movements. It also leaves these movements, of course, very fragile, very vulnerable, and easily able to become a little odd. You know what I mean? That Spirit needs to be canalized. St. Paul saw this in Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul by no means welcomed every movement of the Spirit. Sometimes he saw some dynamic drastic action of Spirit, let us say, and he said "Come out, Satan." You have to say Satan is spiritual and dynamic, and unless the Spirit is canalized, and it is a Holy Spirit, these movements of the Spirit can be demonic. It is, of course, the Church's task in accordance with the Divine Will, to point to the Spirit as it breaks out and thereby to bring forth the action of God. But there are, and this is a fascinating thing today, however ambiguous they may be, these movements of the Spirit in our day and age. It is as though there is something new trying to be born, and human beings grasp at this.

Let me give you one little theological thought. You know Paul Tillich, that great American---my first visit to the States was to lecture for Paul Tillich at Harvard, and to lecture for Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Seminary---they were both very old friends of mine. Paul Tillich, in some of his writings, speaks about the Latent Church and the Manifest Church. He says there is always the possibility of a Manifest Church because there's always a Latent Church, waiting to be called into existence: new expressions, new people. And Mission, of course, is to make manifest

that which is latent. As I see it these new movements of the Spirit, including your own, are an attempt to make manifest something latent, responding to the action of God, and giving form in our contemporary world, to new expressions called the Body of the Christian Church. To give you another illustration: the poet William Blake was in his day intensely conscious of the action of the Spirit of God in an age when the Church was very sterile. The Methodist movement was doing much in that period to renew the Spirit, but there was as much sterile religion in that period of British history as there is today. William Blake has a marvelous phrase, I think, one of the most powerful theological phrases that I can ever recollect reading, which runs: "Speak about where God is: and what God is" — and you know, that is the question for the modern world. Who is God whom we don't understand? What is this God? Is He up there, is He down here? What does the very word mean? It is so hard for modern man for secular man really to grasp. Those very arguments take place about what is meant by this word God. It's a wonderful phrase of Blake's when he says: "Where love, and joy, and pity live, there God is living too." Now it's just that kind of phrase, you see, that comes straight out of the New Testament. Straight out of the Word of our Lord. "Where love, and joy, and pity live, there God is living too." Which is to say, that in this sterile world you can point to wherever you find love and joy and pity and thank God. However sterile the world becomes, because God has not deserted the world, there are always moments and areas and occasions of love and of joy and of pity. "Where love, and joy, and pity live, there God is living too." You can point to these things, in the most secularized forms of the contemporary world. Even if institutional religion were to die out, this would be true. You could point to the presence of love and joy and pity in the human community and say that is what is meant by the action of the Ultimate, of the Living God.

It seems to me it's the rebirth of a theology that relates to the secular world that is required both for a new transformed organization, a new springtime for the Church, as well as for the condition of the world, once again responding to religious truth, in the best sense of that word. I'd say that there are all kinds of indications of this, struggling against enormous odds, to come into existence. I think, for example, of young people today. A lot of you are young people. I think it's a crazy, mixed-up generation today, but then they are the children we deserve, for we've begotten or borne them and given them this world that makes them crazy and mixed-up. Yet you find amongst young people, generally outside the Churches, an extraordinary kind of spiritual sensitivity, that I believe my generation broadly speaking, has always lacked.

For example, in my own work in Manchester I have seen the generosity of young people to one another. Generosity with their goods, generosity with their cash and things, and generosity with their bodies, I'm afraid sometimes — but extraordinary generosity. Giving to one another and so on. One could only detect elements of the Spirit in this. And yet at the same time, my own work in Manchester brings me up against groups of young people who are addicted to drugs, who are fascinated by witchcraft — astonishingly enough, the occult, astrology, and often the most anti-rational kind of behaviorisms. Now there is the action of the Spirit and yet not the Spirit canalized. It is not the Spirit informed by the Christ, who gives shape to the Spirit. That seems to me a tremendous challenge to the Church and to a movement like your own, which has its instinct for working out in the secular world and relating to the secular structures, and so on.

We are struggling for a new expression of the Church. We can't just abandon these monolithic institutions which we've inherited down from the corridors of time, whether they're the established churches of the great Catholic Church or the free churches—I mean they're all monolithic. I'm afraid. Even the stone work, you know, is massive! Many churches consider getting rid of these because they oppress

the Spirit. How hard it is: for these new shoots to grow through that concrete which today houses the Church. You can't get rid of those and yet we must not be prisoners of those institutions. We must somehow learn to give new expressions to Christian community. And might I say, because this is implicit in what I said about people responding to the Spirit in our day and yet being unable to name the Spirit, it is absolutely imperative that the new movements of the Spirit shall be free to go beyond the traditional doctrinal expressions of the Church. There are so many people who are moved by the Spirit of God today, and yet who could not recite the Nicene Creed. I mean, it's just a fact. And if you find that very untidy, it is untidy. One falls back again on that word of our Lord, "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth." The Spirit of God is not bound. He is not the prisoner of the institution. He can use the institution and could even renew the institution. But he is never the prisoner of the institution. The Holy Spirit can work in the most secularized kind of world. Our task is to name that Spirit.

You know that the great Spirit of the Moravian movement from central Europe, which was so instrumental in moving John Wesley in the 18th century, began to wrestle with the Spirit and express it in new words. You know how, after Wesley's trips to America he went through some difficulty before he finally concluded what should be that new expression of the vehicle of the Spirit in the 18th Century to which Methodism of course gave birth in such a magnificent way. But the Moravians, who were so largely responsible for the conversion of John Wesley and in whose service he went in his first visit to Georgia, used to say, and John Wesley quotes from them: "If you went to a foreign culture or a heathen culture where Christ's name had never been there, because it was utterly detached from Christendom, you do not take God with you." You don't take God on the ship when you go to a foreign country; you don't take him in your pocket, because the Spirit of God is not bound. He was always at work, always at work in that unchristian culture, waiting to be named. The Spirit of God is always at work. That is to say, the Churches of God do not have God in their pocket.

Now all I'm saying is that God has not abandoned this highly secularized world. He is still at work. But he is not recognized or named, and that is the most tragic thing. You can go into factories, you can go down pits, you can go into ordinary little homes, you can go into the hospitals in Manchester where men and women are struggling with pain and facing death with courage. And in these places the Spirit of God is abundantly present. And yet so often, this is the real tragedy—not recognized as such. The Church has not been there to point to the actions of grace and the actions of God in the secular world.

The hope of that taking place lies in some kind of committed movement essentially emerging forth into the secular world, conscious of that kind of mission to the institutions of the secular society, to our great cities, however sterile they may be, to work to make them more human. And I, in talking to Desmond Avery and visiting the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago and, indeed, having been involved in the course of my ministry with starting many movements of people in the secular world, in industrial urban structures, and so on, I would say that is what we should be about. And as I understand it, that is the kind of objectives the International Training Institute admits to serve. And might I say, this is a movement of renewal of greater significance than probably most of its members may realize. Both for the renewal of the Church and also for its penetration and the encounter with God in the secular world. And that is what I wanted to say to you tonight, and in thanking you for asking me to your repast here. I shall hope to come in and engage with you in some kind of disputation in the course of the three weeks you are here.

I would like to wish you well in God's name and hope that we can have the privilege of working together.