

HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

The Crucible of the Sixties as a Portal to Orthodoxy

by ROBERT BENNE

Formative Years: 1937–1965

I was born in 1937, old enough to remember the surrenders of both the Germans and then the Japanese at the end of World War II, as well as the soccer playing of the German prisoners of war who were interned in our town, West Point, Nebraska. The young Americans coming back from the war wanted to marry and have children. The churches were burgeoning; some church historians call this period the Third Great Awakening. Martin Marty, who along with Ralph Bohlman and Fred Niedner grew up in West Point, noticed that the county was 105% churched.

The Christian culture was clear and coherent. The church did not need to teach me a sexual ethic. The culture did, as it did concerning hard work, love of country, honesty, and respect for others. It was an idyllic time to grow up. Our public high school enabled a young guy to play sports, sing in various choral groups, play an instrument, do journalism, and act in plays. I love the old school building that housed us.

About my twelfth year I worked as a gardener for the most distinguished woman in our town. I overheard her tell her phone mate that “Bobby Benne would make a good pastor.” Wow. I interpreted her remarks as coming directly from God. I knew the call was authentic because becoming a pastor was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to be a jock and a coach, not an effeminate pastor. But I began secretly preparing to become a pastor.

That meant going to Midland College, just thirty miles away in Fremont. I got to letter in four sports and became the valedictorian

of our class. But, most importantly, I met my wife-to-be, Joanna Carson. Intellectually, the required senior course in Christian Ethics provided a great awakening. We read Reinhold Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. I was enthralled. For the first time in my young life I discovered that the faith (Christian theological ethics) had relevance for economics, politics, and culture. That discovery touched me deeply.

I won a Fulbright in my senior year. Joanna and I went off to the University at Erlangen, Germany, after we married at the end of the summer of 1959. There, amid a lot of travel and socializing with other American Lutherans, I was further stimulated by the lectures on Christian social ethics by Walter Kuenneth. Not only did he demonstrate a robust social effect by the Christian faith in his lectures, he had also lived it out by resisting the Nazis during World War II.

Following Midland friend and mentor, Phil Hefner, to the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1960, I naturally chose the field of Ethics and Society for my Ph.D. work. Two very influential professors impressed me deeply. One, Al Pitcher, was heavily involved in the three great movements of the early 1960s, the civil rights movement brought north to Chicago by Martin Luther King, Jr., the anti-poverty campaign stimulated by Michael Harrington's book on *The Other America*, and the Alinsky-led community organization efforts by The Woodlawn Organization, which was an organization of poor blacks pushing back against the "urban removal" efforts of the University of Chicago. Pitcher lectured passionately about those three efforts. I was drawn into them as a student.

My other professor, Gibson Winter, was a writer more than an activist. He wrote *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*, which lamented the escapist, monolithic church culture of the suburbs. He then wrote *The New Creation as Metropolis*, which argued that parishes should be organized by slices extending from the center city to the suburbs. Such organization would ensure the mixing of class and race. That was as unrealistic as it was idealistic.

Two things were most important about these graduate school years (1960–65). One was the positive idealism that surrounded the movements. I call the period one of "liberal idealism." We thought

we could overcome the great problems of American life by positive action. Camelot extended into social movements for change. The second thing that was very influential for me was that both of my professors saw the church as an instrument of social transformation. The internal practices of the church were assumed, but what was exciting and necessary was the churches' direct involvement in the movements for constructive change in society.

At the end of my graduate years, I was invited to teach at the Rock Island Campus (formerly Augustana Seminary) for two years before the new Lutheran School of Theology opened next to the University of Chicago in 1967. I was primed for action.

Early Teaching and Writing; The Big Upheaval (1965–1975)

The quiet campus at Rock Island was aching for a new, exciting message. I taught, wrote, and preached about the necessity of the church's direct involvement in the three great movements of our time. I convinced two thirds of the graduating class of 1966 that they should be inner city pastors.

The opening of the new Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) in the fall of 1967 was one of the late monuments to the robust mainline Christianity of the post-war years. It was a confident move by the Lutheran Church in America to place its new flagship seminary right in the midst of a great university (the University of Chicago) and a consortium of a half dozen other theological schools. It was an expensive venture—a brand new lovely all-glass building—surrounded by apartment buildings for the students. The students showed up in large numbers for the opening of the new seminary.

Because I was effective in inspiring students in the vision of the church as a “transformer of society” in my first two years of teaching at Rock Island, I was invited to be on the faculty of the new seminary. At just thirty I became Assistant Professor of Church and Society.

I taught successfully out of my “liberal idealism” paradigm—the church as transformer of society—to large classes of young men from the Midwest in the first couple of years. During that first fall I

was able to get LSTC students into Operation Breadbasket (headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and then Jesse Jackson) as student interns. I even got the seminary to host the Saturday morning gatherings of Operation Breadbasket. King visited the gatherings every month and I got to shake his hand as he thanked LSTC for hosting his group. However, King was already being out-flanked by more radical black leaders: Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Huey Newton.

Shockingly, in April of 1968, our first year in Hyde Park, King was assassinated. There were riots in a hundred cities. Chicago had some of the worst. The National Guard patrolled Hyde Park, the area of the University of Chicago and LSTC with its residential environs (including our home) and seminary apartments. It was surrounded by three poor black communities. The people of Hyde Park expected that our area was the next to be burned, as was the case of many areas on the south and west sides of Chicago. There was an apocalyptic atmosphere.

Jesse Jackson, after King's assassination, took over Operation Breadbasket, dismissed all white people in the organization, including our students, would no longer meet at the seminary, and changed the name of the organization to PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). The Civil Rights movement became the Black Power movement; Jesse did not want to be out-flanked by more radical leaders. He now identified with Black Power.

In June of 1968 Robert Kennedy was assassinated as well and in August there was an uproarious Democratic National Convention. The Chicago police clashed with the Yippies and with large groups of revolutionary students. There was lots of violence in downtown Grant Park. The radical young wanted Gene McCarthy or George McGovern as presidential candidates, but the old guard held on to nominate the Humphrey/Muskie ticket. Our Missouri Synod Lutheran friend, Richard Neuhaus, was a Democrat delegate from Brooklyn who regaled us several late nights in Hyde Park. We were part of the revolution!

The War in Viet Nam had heated up and the United States sent more and more troops there. The draft was enacted; young men rebelled in great numbers. Our seminary was sharply influenced by

young men fleeing the draft. They wanted the seminary to welcome the revolution that was coming. They despised my liberal idealism and demanded that I become more radical. To shore up my image, I invited the Chicago Seven to the seminary, where they rabble-roused in the chapel, using profane language, which upset LSTC President Herman very much. I was embarrassed but praised by the left-wing students for my “courage.”

Revolutionary groups proliferated, some of them based in Hyde Park: the Weathermen, the Chicago Seven, the Symbionese Liberation Front, the Students for a Democratic Society. Two of our faculty lost young loved ones in violent conflicts with the police. Liberal idealism had disappeared.

In order to strengthen my radical reputation, I led a student demonstration against an awful exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. Then I helped organize a bus trip for the students to an anti-war march in Washington. As we thousands of protestors marched down Constitution Avenue, I was shocked to find out what the majority of the protestors chanted on behalf of North Viet Nam: “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Min!” As we passed the Washington Monument, I noticed a tent city inhabited by hippie types who were smoking pot, drinking wine, and fornicating on the lawn! I was shaken. Was this what I was for?

Soon thereafter I went to a rally in Hyde Park organized by several revolutionary groups that were emerging: radical feminists, gays, ecological radicals, Marxists, and anti-war zealots. Each ended their harangue with the chant: “Power to the People!” As I walked home that night I came to the conclusion that I could no longer pursue the radical path that I had been on. I thought: “If power were really given to the people, those groups would be the first to be attacked by the people. Instead of a revolution they were going to get Richard Nixon,” which they did in the election of 1968 and again in 1972.

The next day I went to the Dean’s office and told him that he would hear some surprising things from me in the coming days. I had been reading Irving Kristol (“a neo-conservative is a liberal mugged by reality”), Michael Novak, and, above all, my friend, Richard Neuhaus. They were departing radicalism and shaping a

movement called neo-conservatism, which fit my beliefs and temperament to a T: strong belief in American democracy, support for our troops, great respect for religion's role in American life, affirmation of capitalist economies in combination with democracy, and sharply critical of the revolutionaries.

My political and economic convictions were turned about. The sixties did that to many people. *But, most importantly, my view of the church returned to the more classical view of the church as proclaimer of the gospel, not simply an instrument of social justice.* Indeed, how could I convince my students to go out into the church and summon the congregants to revolution? I began to see that the most important way the church affected society was indirectly through Christian vocation. I began to construct my book, *Ordinary Saints*. I wrote a book in the late 1970s that defended democratic capitalism. That was so unusual for a Christian intellectual that I was featured in *US News* and *Newsweek*. The students were so displeased they boycotted my class on democratic capitalism.

But I have not yet mentioned the cultural revolution. After all, the political and economic upheavals of the 1960s rather quickly quieted down: Nixon was elected for two terms and capitalism made a recovery. This is what happened culturally in 1968–69: *Hair* opened on Broadway in April 1968, a powerful and explicit expression of the cultural/sexual revolution. Lots of nudity and wildly popular—and controversial. Woodstock happened in August of 1968, a great musical affirmation of rebellion by 400,000 young people on one farm! In June of 1969 the gay patrons of the Stonewall Inn fought back a police raid. The gay revolution began.

Back to the seminary. Because we were a “progressive” seminary, we attracted not only draft dodgers and radicals, but also an increasing number of gay men, as well as a few lesbians, who were now part of the growing number of women seminarians, who finally won ordination in the early 1970s. The atmosphere of sexual freedom hit our students and the seminaries around us. I was sympathetic with the movement at first. I spoke at one of the first meetings of Lutherans Concerned, a gay advocacy group in the Lutheran Church in America. But my sympathy was short-lived. LSTC faculty heard many rumors of sexual misbehavior in the dorms. Some

of the gay men propositioned “soft” but not gay guys, who were terribly upset by those approaches. Of course, the majority of the seminarians were upright Lutheran young people who were also shaken by what was going on.

The most dramatic upheaval was in the Catholic seminaries, especially the Jesuit School of Theology, right next to us. The students were in full rebellion from the stringent Catholic expectation of celibacy from its students. I believe that many of the predators of the 1980s and 1990s came from that generation of Catholic priests. Many young Catholics simply left their preparation for the priesthood; others found ways to dodge the celibacy demands. The Catholic faculties were as distraught as we were.

I thought that the least I could do would be to offer a course in Christian sexual ethics that taught classic Christian marriage and sexual ethics. I attracted large classes which were sometimes very contentious. I found myself arguing for natural law with Jesuit students who were fleeing from it. But many students welcomed an affirmation of their traditional Christian sexual commitments. Over the years I have come to believe that the classic Christian teachings on marriage and sex are compelling and very much worth defending.

Since the 1960s, there has been relentless, ongoing pressure to deregulate sexual life. The radicals did not get a political or economic revolution, but their cultural/sexual revolution did continue its “long march through the institutions.” We are now dealing with the continuing negative effects of that long march.

Later Teaching and Writing

We moved to Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, in 1982, recruited by President Norman Fintel, who worried that the college was losing its connection to the Lutheran tradition. I was to build a good Lutheran Theology and Philosophy Department, which I proceeded to do. What I noticed, however, was the apathy and downright hostility of many faculty toward that connection. What a change from my four years at Midland, which was a forthright, Lutheran, Christian enterprise.

I became very interested in the secularization of church-related institutions, especially colleges. I was interested not only in that process, but also in how to impede it. After lecturing and writing widely about the plight of church-related colleges, I wrote a book that got wide attention: *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (2001). Sixteen years later I wrote a book on the history of Roanoke College's relation to its Lutheran Christian heritage: *Keeping the Soul in Christian Higher Education: A History of Roanoke College* (2017). It was ignored and intentionally marginalized at the college itself because the last chapter posed an either/or with regard to keeping its soul alive. Members of the board thought it too pessimistic, so none of my suggestions were taken seriously. The college now has little room for any public relevance of its Christian heritage.

As department chair over the years I was able to recruit two stars: Gerald McDermott and Paul Hinlicky. Among the three of us, I believe we published more and lectured more widely than any small college religion faculty trio in the country. Sadly, all three of us are now retired and the theology department has become a "religious studies" department, with little or no privilege given to Christianity.

As part of Fintel's recruitment enticement, he had raised money with which I organized a Center for Religion and Society. After many years of programs that demonstrated the relevance of the faith to society, the college named it after me in 2012, when I retired from chairing it. The Benne Center for Religion and Society continues today under the direction of James Peterson, my successor in Christian ethics at the college.

I wrote two editions of *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (1988 and 2003), which summarized many years of work on the Lutheran teaching of vocation. To supplement my work on personal ethics I wrote two books on a Lutheran view of how the church should interact with society: *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (1995), and *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (2010).

In 2019, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau published my memoirs: *Thanks be to God: Memoirs of a Practical Theologian*. I continue

to teach Christian ethics at the online seminary of the Institute of Lutheran Theology.

My journey from the idealistic liberalism of the early 1960s through the enormous upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s to my current theological/ethical commitments was characterized by huge changes of my mind. I have moved from seeing the church as an instrument of social transformation to the conviction that the church is the proclaimer of the gospel, and that the vocation of Christians is the best way for the church to influence society. I have settled into an orthodox version of Lutheranism that has distanced me and many others from the church into which I was born, which I believe has departed from that orthodoxy. That has been a painful and long process, but one that has led to a new church—The North American Lutheran Church—which I helped organize and to which I joyfully belong.