A NEW SONG

A chapel talk by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Houghton Memorial Chapel
Alumnae Council
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People often ask me these days, "What do you hear from students about religion?" Well, many things. This morning I want to try to sort them out, with the help of two biblical texts. The first is from the prophet Amos, "Take away from me the noise of your songs." The second is from the Psalmist, "O sing to the Lord a new song."

As you know, few students sing the old songs today. Students leave the institutions of traditional religion in droves, as soon as they get the chance. Yet this is not because they are anti-religious. On the contrary, for the most part they are deeply religious. Indeed, as it turns out, they are deeply religious in a venerable biblical sense. They sing the songs of biblical prophecy, rather than the old songs, on which you and I were nurtured, "Rock of Ages" and all the rest. They sing with the prophet Amos, the song of protest:

> Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

To be sure, students in the past sang songs of protest, in one way or another. But rarely, I think, with the kind of heightened consciousness that these young people exhibit today.

Let's consider this point for a moment. A recent writer in Scientific American (Jan. 1968) summarizes a body of scientific evidence, which indicates that both physically and psychologically today's students are some two years more mature than in the past. That is to say, incoming freshmen today are roughly as mature as juniors used to be. But much more important than this, today's generation has grown up on television. They have been aware of the breadth of the world and the depth of its problems from an early age. Most of us, I think, probably began to come to serious terms with politics and social problems only when we came to college, sometimes not until graduate school or even later. But today's college students have been reared on TV news stories from all over the globe. They knew all about the threats of atomic warfare, the population explosion, mass starvation, the violence of war, and so on, already in grammar school. The psychologist Kenneth Keniston reports, for example, that almost all the seriously alienated students he studied told of childhood fantasies and nightmares of atomic explosions and warfare.

This awareness of the whole world, which this generation has had from its earliest years, means that their consciousness if profoundly sociological, as well as personal. They are instinctively much more aware of the role of institutions in shaping human life than many of us were at their age. Thus when they think of the suburbs, they think not so much of a congenial home, surrounded by green grass, where a man can return from a hard day's work for comfort and consolation, or a woman can creatively care for children. Much more, they think of suburbia as a social unit in relation to urban problems. For them, the people who live in the suburbs are indistinguishable from the political role suburbia plays in our society vis-a-vis the city and minority groups.

Then, lest we forget, the heightened consciousness of today's youth is matched by a set of horrendous challenges unknown to earlier generations, such as the population explosion, massive pollution, the bomb, and the revolution of the third world.

Today's generation naturally turns its heightened consciousness toward traditional religion. And when it does, paradoxically, it sings songs not unlike those of the ancient prophet, as I have intimated: students today see institutional religion as

inextricably tied to a deadening, regimenting established order, which calls for non-violence at home while it engages continually in violence abroad. So they sing to you and to me, to the representatives of old-time religion, with the words of Amos, "Take away from me the noise of your songs."

I emphasize, that as in the case of the prophet Amos, the protest songs directed against traditional religion are in themselves a religious phenomenon. Protest is an essential element in our religious tradition, especially for Protestants. So with Amos, and with that kind of prophetic religious commitment, youth today cry out against a religious establishment which seems to them to be more concerned with solemnity than sincerity, more concerned with property than people, more concerned with tradition than truth.

After they sing their protest songs against established religion, what do they do? Not a few of them go their own ways, as is their wont -- "doing their own thing" religiously. They give up on traditional religion, since no one seems to be willing to listen to their protest songs. Each one begins to chart his own personal religious course, and hum his own individual religious song to himself for the most part, sometimes to a small close circle of friends.

As you know, a great deal of religious experimentation is underway today: with drugs, through study and involvement in Eastern religions, and through an intensely serious moral life. Indeed, for many students today social morality is the only religion. Religion is working for McCarthy in New Hampshire or mobilizing in Washington against the War. I'm not endorsing or rejecting any or all of these phenomena here, I'm just trying to identify them for what they are, a serious religious searching, a reaching out for something tangibly religious to hold onto. Sometimes, as we hear of it, this quest sounds dissonant to our ears -- to ears accustomed to old-time religion, to be sure, but even to ears which have grown accustomed to protest songs! Dissonant or not, however, many youth today -- having given up on the protest songs, since no one would listen -- are embarked on a continuing religious quest.

A few students, I am glad to say, find themselves able to take a further step, beyond the quest, to celebrate anew the reality of God in our time. They find themselves able, though usually only with a very uncertain voice, to sing a new song with the Psalmist. This is happening today even in memorable and venerable old places such as the Wellesley College Chapel, which as you know has been increasingly empty in recent years. But verily, contemporary youth will not venture to sing the new song in an environment which shows no signs of change, no signs that the community of faith which lives there is daily striving to respond to the great social challenges of our time. The community of faith itself has to have heard the songs of protest. Only then will even a few students venture to join with it and sing the new song.

We have heard the new song in this place this year, more than most people(myself included) thought possible only a year ago, through the idiom of jazz, through the profoundly beautiful singing of the Ethos Choir, through a preacher like William Sloane Coffin, who packed this place two weeks ago. But the new song in the Chapel on Sundays is not just a new idiom, a new black music, or a new kind of visiting preachers. The new song is also the willingness of those who are able to sing the great religious music of the past to rededicate themselves to their art and present the best of our musical heritage with real vitality.

But most of all the new song in Sunday Chapel is a new sense for congregational participation in our Service. We have seen this community participation grow in several ways: when all the people come forward for the Offering, when we pass the peace during Communion, when we work together on banners for our processions and our special Services, when we work together and talk together and argue together concerning some of the social issues of our day. Our new song presupposes a new -- but still very fragile -- sense of community life.

But, I stress, in order for this new song to be heard in our time, particularly in this Chapel, from this generation, we cannot pass over the protest song of Amos. We travel from the mountain top of the old song to the pinnacle of the new song, not by some quick heli-

copter trip, but only by walking through the valley -- with all the hard work, struggle, and false starts along the way -- singing protest songs. In a word, we must hear the prophet Amos if we are truly to hear the Psalmist in our day. This is surely true for a College Chapel such as this one, and I suspect that it's true for communities of faith everywhere.

Walking through the valley, then, we sing: "Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Then, as we begin to make our way to the summit on the other side, we sing: "O sing unto the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things."

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The Service

Prelude
HYMN: No. 69, Let the Whole Creation Cry
RESPONSIVE READING: No. 94, O Sing Unto the Lord a New Song
LESSON: Amos 5:18-24
THE MEDITATION
(The congreation will gather around the Table, following the Meditation; please bring your hymnals.)
THE PRAYER

Let us pray. O Lord God, king of the universe and redeemer of all mankind, we praise you this day for your many gifts to us. We thank you for this day, that we have life and breath, and that we may drink in the beauty of your creation.

We thank you for this Alumnae Council, that all of us may work together with new dreams, so that this generation and generations to come may also go forth not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

We thank you, Lord, for sending your Spirit to the community of faith, to revitalize it when many of us had begun to lose our hope, to teach it to sing a new song, celebrating your presence in our lives today.

We thank you, Lord, that you rule over this planet with special concern for the poor and the oppressed in our world. Lord, you know how much they need your care, and how much we need your inspiration to respond to them wisely and compassionately.

Above all, Lord, we thank you that each one of us can call you Father, each in his own way, and that we can say together in once voice: OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD: AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US. AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL. FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY, FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN.

BENEDICTION
HYMN: No. 29, Now Thank We All Our God
Postlude

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Copies of the Chaplain's New Year's Letter, which describes the work of the Chaplaincy this year, and copies of various sermons preached here during the year are available in the narthex.

The collages in the narthex are a modest Epiphany essay on the Word of God made manifest in our post-Gutenberg era. Could it be that "the silent Word is pleading" in our time more than we know?

The modernistic white paintings in the sanctuary are by Jennepher Steczynski of Lincoln, Massachusetts. The paper flowers on the Table were made by Peggy Holt '71; the yellow banner, "Dona Nobis Pacem," in the rear of the nave was designed and sewn by several students.

Alumnae are cordially invited to visit the Little Chapel downstairs, which has been experimentally renovated and redecorated in keeping with motifs from the post-Vatican Council movement for liturgical renewal.

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