

A preacher reflects on a life's journey

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By Rich Barlow, 2/7/2004

When he comes to the phone, William Sloane Coffin apologizes, as if he needed to, for his speech, slightly impaired because of a stroke five years ago. Perhaps that's natural for a preacher accustomed to summing things up through the power of the spoken word. The dusk of an eventful life naturally inclines a person to summation, and Coffin has lived a notably eventful 79 years.

As chaplain at Yale, he was jailed during the Freedom Rides in the South for civil rights and then for protesting the Vietnam War. Later, from the pastorship of Manhattan's Riverside Church, he visited the Americans taken prisoner by Iranian students, spoke for AIDS victims during the early days of the disease, and lobbied for a nuclear freeze.

Now, after years residing in Vermont as a senior statesman of liberal Protestantism, he is dying. He has a terminal heart condition; he said one doctor gave him a month to live. That was last March. Defying that deadline allowed him to sum up his spiritual outlook in "Credo" (Westminster John Knox), a compilation of excerpts from his sermons and speeches. Its publication is to bring him to Andover Newton Theological School on Thursday for "A Conversation with William Sloane Coffin" from 4 to 6 p.m., sponsored by the Massachusetts Bible Society.

Coffin said by phone that he is at peace with the prospect of death. Eternal life, he said, would mean eternal boredom and efforts to alleviate it through mischief, the way the gods in Greek mythology did.

"I only hope, as did the Native American who said, 'When death comes to find me, I hope it finds me alive,' " he said. "As a pastor, I have spent a lot of time with dying people. And once you feel really depleted, it's not as if you want to bounce out of bed and go running around the block. My energy level is now pretty low."

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He only longs to live to see the fall elections. "And then," he said, "I might want to live a little bit longer, or die immediately."

That twinkle shows he remains engaged with current events. In "Credo," he writes that he loves his country enough to address its flaws, and "today, these are many." Asked to elaborate, he cited self-righteousness and President Bush "basking in moral self-assurance." (Lest Republicans think he picks only on them, he also faults Robert F. Kennedy, describing RFK's calls for moral leadership as "a bit arrogant.") After self-righteousness comes the Iraq war, which he believes lacked self-defense as a rationale, bleeds money that could be spent on the poor, and operated on a naive assumption that the occupation wouldn't be resented. Saddam Hussein was "an evil man, a demented man," but Coffin said that American sanctions after the Gulf War cut off necessities to Iraq and killed an estimated 500,000 children. He thinks America's wars became "more and more questionable" after World War II, in which he served as an infantry officer.

For one whose activism has long provoked strong reactions, Coffin's political views may be the least provocative part of his book. Readers who are aware that the book is written by a man who knows he is near the end of life may zero in on the final chapter, which deals with that topic. Readers might come away marveling at Coffin's unshakeable Christian faith. He said by phone that the carnage of the war in which he fought, which cost some to lose faith, convinced him of God's existence. The war "raised all kinds of profound questions about life and death. And there's nothing quite as irrelevant as an answer to unasked questions."

To the question posed by all wars -- how could God permit such evil and suffering -- he said human freedom, for better or worse, is the prerequisite for a loving God, and "love is self-restricting." True, parents love their children by limiting their freedom to engage in hurtful behavior, but "eventually, with parents as with God, they have to provide maximum support but minimal protection."

Coffin knows that mortality means leaving behind a treasury of personal blessings as well as an activist life.

"Saying goodbye to my wife, who's been an angel, and my children, who are angels too, and friends, is something that has to be done," he said. "But you have to cooperate gracefully with the inevitable in life."

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There are many things he'd like to know about death. But, he added, the only thing he needs to know is something of which he's sure, that God is handling the details.

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