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What Planet is Gerson On?

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

I want to like Michael Gerson's writings. His essays are always well written and his overall ideological perspective - center-right, religiously inflected views - are rarely obnoxious even if they are wrong. Then, every once in awhile he writes a column that forces you to ask: Excuse me, but what planet have you been living on for the past few decades, Mr. Gerson?

Today he writes about how the pro-life movement and the pro-gay rights movement have grown in the past few decades. He attributes the advances of the pro-life movement to advances in technology and to a change in political rhetoric, for which he gives a nod to the late father Richard John Neuhaus, in which pro-lifers began talking of an expanding circle of legal inclusion and protection that includes the unborn. Actually Neuhaus, to his credit, used such language before Roe, during the debate in New York state over the Blumenthal bill which liberalized abortion laws in 1970. That rhetoric was not the cause of the change. The technological advances in embryology are undoubtedly a more likely explanation: once you have seen a sonogram, your own or a friend's, it is hard to de-humanize the unborn child. A related development, the push for bans on late-term abortions had a similar effect. In both cases, the culture was forced to ask: What is actually going on here? Abstract legal theories were not so persuasive when looking at a sonogram or reading about the grisly details of late-term abortions. So, Gerson scores a C+, right about the role of technology, wrong about Neuhaus, and a sin of omission about the partial birth abortion debate.

Then, Gerson goes on to consider the advancement of gay rights since the 1970s. He notes that many gays have come out of the closet since the 1970s, and that "[a] human face always makes harsh judgment more difficult." But this is a cart-horse observation on its face. But, what is stunning is that Gerson never mentions AIDS. Gays came out of the closet and organized politically because they had to, they had to secure funding for AIDS research, they had to raise money for clinics, they had to build support networks

for those afflicted with the disease. And, one of the big reasons it became harder to make harsh judgments was not that you had a gay man to tea, but that your gay neighbor was suddenly dying a horrible and untimely death.

To write sweepingly about gays in the last quarter of the twentieth century and not to mention AIDS shows an ignorance that does not befit the pages of the Washington Post. Why don't they publish me on the subject of Tasmanian soup making methods. Gerson wants to be compassionate, and I applaud that, but a writer has an obligation to be informed too.

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