

Glenn Beck's Rally & the Banality of Goodness

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 28, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Watching the Glenn Beck rally on the Mall, Mr. Beck has proven true to his word. The rally is not political if by political one means partisan. Every moment, every speech, every song has a feel good, I Love America, quality to it. A phrase, slightly modified from the original, fills my mind: The Banality of Goodness.

Who doesn't honor our troops? Who doesn't admire Albert Pujols and his work with Down Syndrome children? Who doesn't think honor is better than dishonor? Who doesn't think family is important? Who is opposed to charity? The only thing missing as far as I can tell is the tribute to apple pie.

There is, of course, a sinister side to the rhetoric. The invocations to a golden age of Americanism implies that the current age is somehow un-American. If we have lost our sense of honor, is it not possible that someone has taken it? For all the inspiring rhetoric that "We are Americans," to which the virtually all-white crowd applauds, there is the counter-picture that some people, those not present, are not Americans. There is nothing explicitly anti-Obama or anti-Democrat, but there doesn't have to be. The language is not exactly in code, but everyone understands the inferences perfectly well. There is a reason Gov. Palin was invited to address the crowd, just back from her defense of Dr. Laura's right to use the "n" word. The references to Jesus Christ are heartfelt, no doubt, but the Master is presented exclusively as a prop for Americanism and not as the Savior of the World.

Mr. Beck himself is the star attraction and it is difficult not to conclude that the whole purpose of the rally was to boost his star appeal. All the speeches praise him. The mere mention of his name elicits applause from the crowd. His voice narrates the videotaped interludes which resemble nothing so much as those insipid, framed pictures one finds on office walls, the ones that show eagles in flight over mountains with an accompanying quote about "Success" or "Opportunity." They are meant to be inspirational but they are merely motivational, in the most vulgar sense of that word.

The rally calls to mind a series of rallies the Rev. Jerry Falwell sponsored in the mid-1970s. Those were called "I Love America" rallies and they were held on the steps of each of the 50 state capitols. Falwell would contact area pastors in advance, to drum up a crowd. He would fly in with singers from his Liberty Baptist College who would serenade the crowd with patriotic songs. Falwell would give a speech, not a sermon, but the difference between the two was a bit blurry: The Gospel being preached was the Gospel of American Exceptionalism, but that exceptionalism derived not from the Enlightenment principles at the heart of our Founding documents, but from a more tribal instinct, rooted in the Bible Belt, built on Fundamentalist theology, organized out of the remnants of the Goldwater campaign and anti-civil rights groups. Then, too, the enemy was largely "within," and condemned under the label "secular humanism," whereas Beck's target is now "progressivism."

Finally, there is something creepy in the cult worship of Mr. Beck. I half expected him to give a five hour speech announcing a new five-year plan for the economy. His simplistic, self-contained understanding of history, and especially of the Founding of the American Republic, is but a hop, skip and jump from the simplistic, self-contained understanding a Marxist would espouse: The premises and the conclusions are different, but the style and the invitation to group-think are astonishingly, and frighteningly, similar. Watching it, I felt a sense of *deja vu*, recalling the time I went with a Russian friend to attend a Communist Party rally at

the entrance to Gorki Park in Moscow. One of the speakers said, "Let Marilyn Monroe drown in her capitalist perfume; her beauty is as nothing to that of the beauty of the Soviet woman." You don't forget a line like that. Today, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, similar nonsense is being spewed. There is no patriotism like American patriotism, no soldiers like our soldiers, no apple pie like our apple pie.

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