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Beck, Liberation Theology and Values

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Distinctly Catholic

Some of my posts anger the right. Some needle the left. This is one of my favorites, where I get to make both camps upset!

Mr. Glenn Beck, in an interview on Fox News where he was busy backtracking from his charge that the President of the United States is a racist who hates white people, impugned the President for his theological influences, specifically liberation theology. My friend and colleague Father Jim Martin, SJ, came to the defense of liberation theology in a post at *America* magazine. Alas, the problem with liberation theology and the problem with Beck's touting of "Judeo-Christian ethics" is the same problem. Both reduce our Christian faith to ethics.

Father Martin writes: "Liberation theology is not Marxism disguised as religion. It is Christianity presented in all its disturbing fullness." But, the criticism of liberation theology was precisely that it did not present Christianity in its "fullness," that its use of Marxist analysis (Martin is right that it is not Marxism per se) nonetheless used materialistic concepts in place of theological ones, that its acceptance of class struggle as a theological norm minimized the universal call to holiness, and, most importantly, that it suffered from an inadequate anthropology, seeing man as the capitalists see him, as a cog in the wheel of means and methods, not as a child of God.

It is true that Christ is the Liberator, and that he has the power to liberate ourselves and our cultures from the sins of oppression that afflict us. Our God is a God of justice as well as of charity. So far, so good. But Christ also liberates us from sins that have nothing to do with class struggle and he promises us a Kingdom not of this world. He promises us a justice that does not have to be fought for generation after generation, which is not a human justice. The problem with Marxist analysis, though they were and are at pains to admit it, is that it was drinking from the same Enlightenment fountain as the capitalists they

opposed. God transcends, and so the Church must transcend, all human categories and analysis.

Mr. Beck and his ilk tout something they call "Judeo-Christian values" by way of response to the more forward-leaning liberation theologians and the secular humanists they blame for all of society's ills. They wish to restore not honor but the "White Christian Nation" of which Professor Lichtman wrote. Of course, through much of our history, that nation did not let Jews into its country clubs, colleges or law firms, but that changed in the twentieth century when anti-Semitism earned a bad reputation and, desiring to be free of the charge that they desired to create a "Christian nation," conservatives adopted the phrase "Judeo-Christian values." What they are really interested in is defending their version of American values, but they like the gloss of divinity that the Founders achieved because they were doing their founding business in the heyday of Deism. Alas, there are no more Deists.

Conservatives like Beck extol values that bear a remarkable resemblance to the current talking points issued by the Republican National Committee. They are opposed to government action on behalf of the poor because of their suspicion of government and their inability to see the essential link between charity and justice. They promote a Gospel of Nostalgia, seeing in the 1950s the Golden Age of Christendom, with Ozzie and Harriet as the first of the apostles. That is, except when they don't. So, gay marriage is a threat to traditional marriage but divorce is another matter.

I have never met a "Judeo-Christian" so I am unsure what one would believe. I take second place to no one in my commitment to rooting out the vestiges of Christian anti-Semitism and in my support for the State of Israel. I carry the burden of Edgardo Mortara with me daily. But the differences in belief between me and my Jewish friends are not negligible differences. I believe that Jesus Christ, in His person, fulfills the claims of the prophets for Eternal Israel. Jews do not believe this. My sense of ethics flows from my anthropology, which has been radicalized by the event of the Incarnation. Jewish ethics flows from Talmudic writings that are brilliant and humane, but which are not Christian.

In our modern societies, religious leaders can gain access to the public square by reducing themselves to the role of ethical experts, as Monsignor Albacete observed in a *Communio* article two decades ago. It is a temptation that should be resisted. The "New Evangelization" for which Pope Benedict XVI has called, is aimed precisely at resisting this temptation. The starting point for Christian preaching is not the fact of economic injustice, nor the decline in traditional morality. The starting point is the event of Jesus Christ. The Church does not confront the problems of the age with a program but with a person, the Crucified who Lives. He is the Liberator who saves us not only from injustice, but from death. He is the God-Man who came to teach us that the Gospel is not about us, it is about the absolute love which He came to bring, the love of God that we call the Trinity, a love so powerful that its issuance is itself a person, the Son, and the communication of that love is also a person, the Spirit.

Nobody is opposed to good values, and debate about values is important. But it is derivative. Unfortunately, the price modernity exacts is a steep one: It is deemed impolite to bring the Gospel into the Public Square. Everyone is worried that dogmatic claims lead inevitably to a renewal of the Thirty Years War. For my part, I confess I have not worked out in my head how my love for this Christ I have encountered coheres with my love for the First Amendment. But, I do know this. The reduction of religion to ethics is the central problem for the Church in the West today.

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