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\"God in America\" - Part III

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The PBS documentary, "God in America," ended last night. Like the first two installments, it was very well done. The price of admission was worthwhile in this last episode just to see the video of a young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking to the camera in Montgomery, Alabama, his personal magnetism still shining through the medium and through the years. I confess I am a blubberer, and when the show got to King's assassination, I wept. There was a great American and we Americans have not seen his equal since.

Again, they stayed away from the subject that seems to me inextricably linked with religious experience, especially Christian experience - suffering. In their re-play of parts of King's "I have a Dream" speech, they left out these words which were at the heart of that speech's religious inspiration: "I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."

PBS also captured the magnetism and the boundless energy of Rev. Jerry Falwell, who played such a central role in galvanizing the religious right. The show made too much of the difference between Falwell's Moral Majority and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition: They noted the Coalition's efforts to engage at the local levels, in school board races and the like. The Moral Majority also was active at the local level however. For example, within a year of its founding, they had captured control of the Alaska GOP and defeated a moderate Republican congressman in the GOP primary in Alabama. And, before Falwell, there was "Sweet Alice" Moore, fighting to remove abjectionable books from the schools of Charlestown, West Virginia in the early 1970s.

I had one other quibble with their conclusion, when the show discuss the "I'm spiritual but not religious" sensibility of our own time. They pointed out that this was not that different from Billy Graham and from the 19th century revivalists at Cane Ridge, and so it isn't: All believe that "religion happens inside the individual." So do Catholics, but Catholics also know that religion happens inside the community, inside the Church, that the Church enjoys a guarantee of the Spirit's indwelling that was not given to individuals. To be fair, Billy Graham and the revivalists at Cane Ridge, unlike the "I'm spiritual but not religious" crowd, recognize that religion also is "outside" the individual, rooted in the Scripture, that the self is not the final authority. Still, the producers should have noted the communitarian sensibility of American Catholics, a sensibility that is even more pronounced among Latinos Catholics who come from a Catholic culture that does not champion rugged individualism the way American culture does.

These are small quibbles. Over all, it was refreshing to see a complex topic dealt with so thoroughly, so engagingly, and so fairly on television. If you missed it the first time, I am sure PBS will replay it. It is worth the time.

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