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When Presidents Must Preach: Obama at Prayer Breakfast

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The National Prayer Breakfast, held yesterday here in Washington, is a strange event. It is not held in a church, but in a hotel ballroom. It is not organized by a church or by a coalition of churches, but by a shadowy, quasi-religious organization known as "The Family." And, most disconcertingly, it places the President in the role of a preacher, the Constitution notwithstanding.

The Prayer Breakfasts began during the Eisenhower Administration. It was the former General who best expressed the lowest common denominator approach to American religious pluralism, famously saying that "government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." This expression of religious indifferentism was inoffensive to most, expressing perfectly that amorphous phenomenon known as "American civic religion."

As something of a stiff-necked RC, I have always been suspicious of "American civic religion." I remember my childhood neighbor, Mae MacKinley, who was born in Scotland and had the accent to prove it. She was, of course, a Presbyterian but in our small New England town, there was no Presbyterian church so she attended the Congregational Church and no one thought anything of it. I was horrified. Some days I want a martini and other days cabernet suits my temper, but changing denominations was, to my childhood mind, unfathomable. It still is.

This "American civic religion" did not include Catholics for most of the nation's history. You could say that it forced John F. Kennedy to travel to Houston and tell a bunch of preachers that they need not fear his Catholicism, that it was something he did on Sunday mornings and would have no bearing on his decisions the rest of the week. Strange, is it not, that the thought of religion having so little an effect would be comforting to the assembled ministers. But, Kennedy's claim that his religion was "private?"

went too far, leading Democrats to entirely separate religion from politics. After the emergence of the "God Gap," they needed to relearn how to speak in religious idioms, and no one has done it better than President Obama and his facility with those idioms was on full display yesterday.

Of course, all politicians of both left and right - and of all religious persuasions - in some sense resolve the issue of how to speak about religion in the same way. They avoid all talk of the type of doctrinal differences that distinguish individual denominations and, instead, focus on the effects religion yields. For more conservative politicians, the focus will be on how religion strengthens traditional familial roles and moral standards. For more liberal politicians, the focus will be on religion as a spur to social justice. In both cases, it is like saying you enjoy the music, but declining to applaud the musician who produced it, or ordering a pizza to smell, but not eat, it. The moral implications of faith are derivative of, and subordinate to, the dogmatic claims of faith, not the other way round, no matter how hard we Americans continue reducing religion to ethics.

Politicians do not, then, really talk about religion at all when they are called upon to give these awkward preacherly speeches. They do not talk about religion, they talk about religiosity. They point to the effects of religion, in their own lives and the lives of others. A kind of religious utilitarianism emerges. They tell us about the good impulses of the human heart that religion elicits or supports, but they do not ask or answer the prior question about a religion: Is it true? The claims made by the Christian religion are pretty specific and pretty outrageous - that God Himself came down from Heaven, was born of a Virgin, walked on the earth, was crucified as a criminal and rose from the dead - those are some big claims and if they are true, everything is changed. If they are not true, does it really matter whether they somehow aid morality? And, let's face it. We don't want our presidents talking theology. It is awkward enough hearing them say that they have confessed Jesus as their Lord and Savior, which is, I suppose, the equivalent of admitting the truth claims at the heart of the Christian faith, dressed up in the kind of Oprah-like, hyper-personal way Americans understand spirituality. (And, everytime I hear Obama or George W. Bush confess Jesus as their Savior, I wonder if it makes the election of a Jewish President that much more impossible.)

That said, President Obama, yesterday, came as close as one dare to acknowledging religion's truth claims, avoiding mere utilitarian and ethical views of religion, and he did so without becoming denominational. He pointed to the enormity of God. In the most interesting part of the speech, he said, "So my prayer this morning is that we might seek His face not only in those moments, but each and every day; that every day as we go through the hustle and bustle of our lives, whether it's in Washington or Hollywood or anywhere in between, that we might every so often rise above the here and now, and kneel before the Eternal." Kneel before the Eternal. There it is. Religion per se, not just an examination of its consequences. Religion focused not on this world - and not on our ego-drenched selves - but on the Eternal.

How refreshing. I prefer the "opaque, abstract references to the Eternal" approach to the "religion as moral prod" approach to the problem of providing Americans with a religious impulse that respects their religious diversity. It is more theologically sound. God really is greater than our imaginings. He really is eternal. He transcends our ways even as He inspires them. It helps keep us from advancing the erroneous claim, made by zealots through the centuries, that "God is on our side."

I know that relativism and secularism are problems for Western culture which is in danger of forgetting its own roots in the Christian faith. But, I fail to see how the "American civic religion" bears much resemblance to the Christian faith we confess every Sunday when we recite the Nicene Creed. Our civic religion seems to me too much like the only pagan mentioned in the Creed, Pontius Pilate, who looked at Christ and bewilderedly, skeptically - I had almost written "post-modernly" - asked him, "What is truth?"

Unable to answer that question in a way that will not offend our countrymen of different religious persuasions, we simply do not ask it anymore. The Holy Father is right to warn about relativism and secularism, but he should add "civic religion" to the list too.

If we fear that explicit religious speech will lead to a new outbreak of the Thirty Years War, and I don't, I suppose we must endure this civic religion stuff. But, future presidents should follow Obama. It is better to have our President allow some of the Mystery of the Godhead to emerge into our civic religion, as Obama did, lest we reduce our religion to a prop for Americanism.

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