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Pakistan & Augustine

Michael Sean Winters | May. 9, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

If you are a generally optimistic person, if you find the glass always half full, and share either an acute belief in divine Providence or an Enlightenment confidence in the human mind?s ability to solve the riddles of the world, think of Pakistan. It will make an Augustinian out of the most cheerful of souls.

Most people deploy the adjective ?Augustinian? to suggest a dreary, depressing way of thought, the capacity to miss whatever silver lining exists in a cloud, the knack for expecting the worst, a dark vision of human nature. This is not entirely true, I think. I recall a brilliant theologian once explaining to me that when St. Augustine writes that even the marital act, open to procreation, between a husband and wife who could not be more in love, even that act is not unstained by concupiscence, Augustine is really telling us something very liberating. When I finished laughing, I realized that the scales had fallen from my eyes and I have never used the adjective ?Augustinian? since without thinking of that story.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that when our foreign policy analysts and experts and, most importantly, decision-makers, turn their attention to Pakistan, they come face-to-face with an intractably difficult set of conundrums. Churchill famously said of Russia: ?I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.? With Pakistan, there is no key and the enigmatic, mysterious riddle is even more difficult to pierce.

We do not know yet whether the failure of Pakistani intelligence to recognize Osama bin Laden was in their midst was the result of complicity or incompetence. Neither possibility is particularly comforting. But, it points to the fact that we do not have any idea how complicit large parts of the Pakistani intelligence and military forces are in the cause of Islamicist extremism.

In a sense, it doesn?t matter how much complicity there is because there is not a whole lot America can do about it. If we cut off aid to the Pakistani military, we will only strengthen the hands of those with extremist sympathies and possibly drive Pakistan into the willing, open arms of China. If we continue to supply aid to the Pakistani military, some elements may warm to our interests but we will have no way of knowing how strong those allies are. We can threaten to involve India in the West?s war in Afghanistan, presenting Pakistan with the prospect of encirclement, but that, too, might strengthen the hands of Islamicist extremists.

Not every problem has a solution. That is a difficult thing for twenty-first century Westerners to get their heads around, but it appears to be true, Pakistan is a problem that we must manage, look for small advantages here, an opening to strengthening the relationship there, but at the end of the day, our options are not only limited, none of them promise the kind of neat resolution we seek. George W. Bush?s ?you are either with us or with the terrorists? approach is a non-starter, an attempt to force a precise moral calculus on a situation that is not precise. President Obama?s more subtle approach more correctly analyzes the situation as it exists but it also has no guarantees. And, unlike the issue of concupiscence, there is nothing liberating amidst the darkness.

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