

The Problem With Bishop Tobin

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 8, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Many people expressed their disappointment, and others their disgust, with the [recent statement by Bishop Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island](#) [1], after that most Catholic state in the Union adopted civil unions for same-sex couples. Critics charge that Tobin was insensitive in his remarks, but I think there are times when a religious leader must risk others' sensitivities when proclaiming difficult truths. Some thought the bishop's injunctions severe, but there are times in the Scriptures when Jesus is severe, albeit usually with those rendering judgment not with those receiving it.

My difficulty with Tobin's statement is of a different character. I find it impoverished.

Tobin wrote: "Can there be any doubt that Almighty God will, in his own time and way, pass judgment upon our state, its leaders and citizens, for abandoning his commands and embracing public immorality?"

The problem here is not that such dire warnings coming from a Catholic prelate risk being mocked, coming so soon after predictions of the end of the world by some evangelical preacher whose name we have all forgotten. No the problem is that the bishop's stance is so entirely defensive and, just so, it strikes me as evidencing a decidedly Protestant stance vis-à-vis the culture.

At the commencement of King Philip's War, in 1675, the Massachusetts General Court convoked a ministerial committee to propose moral reforms, subsequently enacted into law. God could not be expected to deliver His people from danger unless the people delivered themselves of moral rectitude. In a Thanksgiving sermon after the defeat of King Philip the following year, Increase Mather discerned the real source of the colonists' victory, saying, "From the day when there was a vote passed for the Suppression and Reformation of those manifest evils? The Lord gave success to our Forces?"

In colonial times, of course, the environment the colonists faced — the harsh winters, the forbidding landscape, the sometimes hostile natives — combined with their own history of persecution, to produce this kind of defensive posture. The colonials tamed the wilderness but they fared less well when they faced a different kind of threat to their culture, the breaking asunder of cultural and covenantal bonds by the socioeconomic expansion and dislocation that accompanied their increasing prosperity. In American history, you can choose any decade and find the bonds of religious community being intertwined with, and overwhelmed by, the acquisitiveness and the speed of the ambient secular culture. Throughout American history, Adam Smith continually trumped John Calvin.

The defensive posture of American Catholics was similarly imposed upon them in part by their circumstances. Poor, ill-educated, hated and exploited by the dominant culture, immigrant Catholics came to see the world as threatening, and built the walls of the Catholic ghetto. A vibrant and faith-filled culture grew inside those walls, but it was still a ghetto. And, even as Catholics left the ghetto, they tended to bring that defensiveness with them. The League of Decency in the 1930s and 1940s represented that defensiveness in its most arch form. Although they did not recognize it, and can be forgiven for not so recognizing it, this adoption of a defensive posture was not only imposed upon Catholics by the Protestant mainstream, but was itself the adoption of a

distinctly Protestant religious stance.

The danger in Tobin's facile defensiveness is not that he might alienate someone. For starters, Tobin's problem is that he mis-diagnoses the "threat" to traditional marriage. By simply casting aspersions at gays and the legislators who support them, he loses credibility because you do not have to pay much attention to American culture to recognize that it is its commercialism that is the main threat to traditional marriage. If you want to sell a product in America, which is another way of saying "if you want to be an American," the most useful adjective to describe your product is not "effective" or "great" but "new." How many people have become shopaholics of one variety or another, running to the mall whenever they need a sense of control (consumers are always in control), boosting their self-esteem, realizing that elusive American Dream. I would submit that a culture fixated on the new and on stuff is not a culture capable of nurturing long-standing commitments.

But, the principal danger in Tobin's stance is that it reduces the faith to moralism, and a faith that is so reduced is incapable of generating culture. The entire struggle over gay rights demonstrates a core cultural clash, identified brilliantly by Cardinal Francis George when he noted that in modern liberal culture, everything is permitted but many things are never forgiven, while in a Catholic culture, many things are not permitted but everything can be forgiven. Catholics must find ways to grow their own cultural forms that will attract people by their beauty and inherent good sense, appealing to their fellow citizens not by legislative fiat but by the sweetness and integrity and happiness of those who dwell in that culture. We must generate a culture that is alive if we want to generate a culture of life.

That is the great struggle American Catholics need to face, and the challenges and difficulties of facing it are deeper than civil unions or gay marriage. And, there is nothing in Tobin's statement that indicates in the least his appreciation for, or even awareness of, this broader cultural challenge. He is Increase Mather, updated and in a cassock. Which leads me to a question for the good bishop of Providence: Just what does he think the New Evangelization is about?

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