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\"Niggerhead\"

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 3, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the Washington Post broke the story [1]about a West Texas hunting camp that Gov. Rick Perry and his family used to lease and where he hosted fellow politicians and supporters. The camp was known by the name ?Niggerhead,? and the offensive word was painted onto a large rock at the entrance to the camp. The Perry campaign contends that neither the governor nor his family painted the slur on the rock and that when they first leased the property in 1983, his father painted over the offensive word. Seven other people with whom the Post spoke said the name remained for a long time.

We will probably never know when, precisely, the rock got painted, still less when Perry and others stopped referring to the camp by its hideous name. The most interesting comment quoted in the Post story came from a county judge, David Davis, who said, ?It?s just a name. Like those are vertical blinds. It?s just what it was called. There was no significance other than as a hunting deal.? To Judge Davis, the entire controversy evidently seems opaque. He is not alone.

Volumes have been written about the Jim Crow South and I am no expert on Southern history. But, it does seem to me that this controversy points to a larger problem in the culture, one I am reminded of every time there is a debate about flying the Confederate flag and some similar cultural dust-up about the racial history of the American South. That problem is specifically moral and it extends beyond considerations of Gov. Perry?s hunting camp.

The Civil Rights movement and desegregation changed the social and cultural fabric of the South. Although desegregation was fiercely resisted, only a few extremists today would argue that the South is not better for having shed its Jim Crow laws and the attitudes that supported it. Many prominent southerners, from Jimmy Carter to Jerry Falwell, were once ardent segregationists who came to see the error of their ways. Many of these men have given moving testimony to that error and apologized for the harm done to black Americans by Jim Crow.

But, there has been far less attention to the harm Jim Crow visited upon white Southerners. To be sure, it was blacks who had their human dignity assaulted by Jim Crow. It was blacks who were forced to the back of the bus, subjected to a host of daily indignities, their children sent to substandard schools, their lives subject to arbitrary and often violent attack, their most basic rights denied. But, there is no moral disgrace in having one?s dignity assaulted by others. There is no shame in being attacked. The shame belongs to those whites whose moral vision was so deformed that they perpetrated Jim Crow. White southerners surely must apologize for the evil they wrought against black southerners, but they must also come to grips with how Jim Crow deformed them too.

I would here draw an analogy between the after-effects of Jim Crow and the after-effects of the Holocaust and mass killings in eastern Europe between 1933 and 1945. In his magisterial work, Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin, Timothy Snyder makes the following observation: ?It is easy to sanctify policies or identities by the deaths of the victims. It is less appealing, but morally more urgent, to understand the actions of the perpetrators. The moral danger, after all, is never that one might become a victim but that one might become a

perpetrator or a bystander.? Certainly, the ground-breaking and highly controversial work of Daniel Goldhagen has shown a light on the perpetrators, but let us admit that our national interest in turning West Germany into a bulwark against Soviet expansionism kept us from asking the questions Goldhagen posed for too long. Let us admit that the Austrians have spent more than sixty years convincing the world that Beethoven was an Austrian and Hitler was a German. Let us recall how long it took for the upper reaches of France?s political class to acknowledge the degree to which they did, or did not, collaborate. People want to put their ugly histories behind them, but Clio is not harlot cheaply bought. Scholars like Snyder and Goldhagen will do her work and, at long last, focus our attention on the real, painful, moral issues that our pasts entail.

Is it not obvious that, mutatis mutandi, this easier path of sanctifying policies and identities based on the experience of the victims of Jim Crow has been largely followed while shockingly less attention has been paid to what motivated those who were perpetrators or bystanders? It is not enough to say ?we are converted now and regret the past injustices done to our fellow humans.? It is not enough to learn about Dr. King. We must learn about Bull Conner. Hats off to Perry or his dad for painting over the rock at their hunting farm, but we need to examine the mind and the heart of the man who first painted the word ?Niggerhead? on that rock. Judge Davis? suggestion that this is merely an issue on nomenclature points to the very real fact that there has been no deep wrestling with the sins of the past, only with the victims of those sins. If only examinations of conscience were so easy!

The South today is not what it was. In the case at hand, there is no reason to think that Gov. Perry is a bigot. Indeed, the principal hurdle his campaign faces now is his past endorsement of a humane policy regarding the children of undocumented workers. But, there is a moral authority to our alarm that those perpetrators and bystanders during Jim Crow have not sufficiently explained themselves and that our scholars of the South have been so busy examining the lives of the victims of Jim Crow they have paid insufficient attention to the perpetrators and bystanders of Jim Crow. As Snyder makes plain, that misunderstands the moral danger of human evil.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/rick-perry-familys-hunting-camp-still-known-to-many-by-old-racially-charged-name/2011/10/01/gIQAOhY5DL_story.html?hpid=z1