

Reducing Religion to Ethics

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 21, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Wednesday, I argued that George Weigel was complicit in the secularization he denounces because he, and others like him, have been reducing religion to ethics for many years now. It has been suggested to me that I tease out precisely what I mean by this idea of reducing religion to ethics.

The American Ur-text of the phenomenon of reducing religion to ethics is a text often cited by those who seek to demonstrate how profoundly religious the American founding was, George Washington's Farewell Address, in which we find these words:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Of course, it is foolish to think Washington was capable of anything more than this. His private correspondence is devoid of concern about eternal judgment and the name of Christ is conspicuous only in its absence. He attended church services but never took communion. He was a vestryman, because that is what wealthy planters with political ambitions did. His correspondence with religious groups and personages during his tenure as President was decidedly cool in tone, showing none of the fraternal association his letters to fellow Masons revealed. He was concerned that America should flourish. By the end of his terms in office he was definitely convinced that sacred order was more necessary than sacred liberty, and his entire Farewell Address is designed around that theme. Religion is given its role: Support morality without which citizens cannot govern themselves.

It is what Washington does not say that is the problem. Never once does he suggest that religion might be true. For him, it is the utility of religion, not its truth claims, that mattered. He was, in his private life, as influenced by Stoic ideas as Christian ones. Indeed it is a remarkable thing that so many have been trying to baptize the American founding when one reflects upon the fact that not one of our first five presidents, founders all, could be considered an orthodox Christian. To one and all, their understanding of religion was a utilitarian one.

This was a commonplace of some late-nineteenth century pulpits as well. One visitor to the country, Jean Pierre Brissot de Warville, surveyed the cultural landscape of Boston, a city still tied to its Puritan roots in many ways, during a visit in 1791, and he reported, "Universal tolerance, the child of American Independence, has banished the preaching of dogmas, which always lead to discussion and quarrels. All the sects admit nothing but morality, which is the same in all, and the only preaching proper for a great society of brothers."

There is something decidedly modern in this moralistic, utilitarian understanding of religion. A focus on morality, as opposed to, say, worship, allows us to talk about ourselves. It permits something else. Weigel and his ilk may fashion themselves standing up to the dominant culture, but in fact they are the most abject of conformists. They want to baptize the founding. They want to baptize capitalism. They want to baptize the Republican Party. It is why Weigel and his neo-con Catholic confreres have never adequately appreciated the really interesting development in theology in the 20th century, the ressourcement, the return to the Fathers that animated such theological luminaries as de Lubac and von Balthasar.

Nineteen years have passed since I wrote these words in the pages of the New Republic:

The Fathers of the Church argued about the animating beliefs of Christianity ? the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the role of the Virgin Mary. And the ressourcement theologians of the 1950s understood that, while these dogmas were no longer in doubt, they also were no longer in focus. Catholic theology had become a congeries of arcane, designed to provide a ready answer to any and every conceivable human problem; a kind of applied Catholicism, as if the application to the world were the heart of the matter. For Balthasar and his colleagues, Christianity is not a moral code organized around natural law; it is a stupendous claim about the supernatural.

We will never become truly converted, and just so, truly counter-cultural, until we drink in these foundational creedal claims and let them help us to discern moral truth, not the other way round. Every Sunday, we stand and recite the Creed, and it mentions the ethical teachings of Jesus not at all. Another theologian of note has commented on this phenomenon. ?The Creed offers us no teachings of Jesus; evidently no one even conceived the ? to us ? obvious idea of attempting anything like this, because the operative understanding pointed in a completely different direction?. Jesus did not perform a work that could be distinguished from his ?I? and depicted separately. On the contrary, to understand him as the Christ means to be convinced that he has put himself into his word. Here there is no ?I? (as there is with all of us) that utters words; he has identified himself so closely with his word that ?I? and word are indistinguishable; he is word.? Thus, Joseph Ratzinger.

Modern society, and America most obviously, has never been keen on the idea of letting dogma into the public square. No one wants to restart the Thirty Years War. And, so, religion is permitted into the public square as an ethical authority. But, shorn of our dogma, the Church is not the Church. And, while at the time of the founding, there might have been broad agreement about the basic contours of morality, no such agreement exists today. The moral teachings of the Catholic faith are not self-evident. But, they were never meant to be self-evident. They only make sense within a divine economy, not a free market one. And, it should be beyond obvious, even to Weigel, that until we reclaim the sense of divine wonder that speaks from every page of the Fathers, and shapes each line of the Creed, until that sense of wonder is restored, Catholic ethics are in for a rough time. Ethics derive from anthropology and anthropology, for us, derives from our understanding of God in whose image we are made. To show how this applies to a modern and controversial issue, Mr. Weigel has written that he wants abortion to be illegal. Mr. John Carr has written that he wants abortion to be unthinkable. I would submit that we will never succeed in making abortion illegal until we make it unthinkable, and that it is Mr. Carr who better grasps how Christian belief should animate our ethical stance.

There are those who bring our dogma into the public square. Those who practice charity, the sisters who run the hospitals, the religious men and women and lay faithful who staff our inner city schools, anyone who works for the Church and earns far less than they could in the private sector, the priest in the confessional who serves as an ambassador of God's mercy, the only thing that truly transforms a human life. Their hands are the merciful hands of God. That is a dogma. Mercy, the superabundant mercy that is at the heart of the Gospels, such mercy is not understandable in terms of non-Christian ethics. The Stoic authors with whom Washington was familiar were not keen on turning the other cheek anymore than the plutocrats who run today's GOP are keen on giving away all that they have to follow Jesus. The Christian moral vision is more radical, literally, it goes to the core,

and until that is grasped, and as long as moralism is painted in nostalgic, 1950s hues, we miss the point.

The reduction of religion to ethics is the hallmark of faith in the modern age. It began really with the Reformation. There is much work to do if we hope to re-evangelize our culture. But, that work is impeded, not assisted, by people like Weigel who wish to tether the faith to a conformist morality, reduce it to a prop for Americanism, and use its holy mission to advance a partisan agenda. The reduction of religion to ethics is the problem, and Mr. Weigel has made a career writing new chapters in that sorry tale.

Note to Readers: Off to a breakfast meeting - one of the most horrible of modern inventions - and thence to a symposium at Georgetown Law on the HHS mandate, so no more posts this morning. Have a great day.

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