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"To Hell With It" Award - Fr. Rutler

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 3, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Flannery O?Connor, early in her career, famously attended a party of the Catholic intellectual elite in New York City, during which the consensus of the group emerged that the Eucharist was, whatever their doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation, still a useful symbol, worthy of admiration if not really the assent of deeply held faith. Flannery famously confronted this faux-rationalism of the literati with the comment, ?Well, if it?s only a symbol, then to hell with it.? Today, I begin a short series of commentaries ? ?To Hell With It? ? on Catholic identity, inspired by Flannery?s quip, which is more than a quip; it is a challenge to us all to question our own capacity for a sophisticated rationale for this cause or that agenda.

I start with Father George Rutler, a man who I would like to meet because I enjoy his capacity for story-telling, but a man with whom I would argue profoundly because he has aligned the cause of Holy Mother Church, which I do not doubt for a second he ardently holds dear to his heart, with a political agenda that is unworthy, perhaps not of Rutler, but definitely unworthy of Jesus Christ. I refer you to Rutler?s column at Crisis magazine [1]the other day on religious liberty.

One would be hard-pressed to find a single article that manages to insert more right-wing agit-prop than this. There is the equation of America?s current debate over religious liberty with the French Revolution, as if President Obama, whatever his faults, was really little different from Robespierre. I take back not a single word I have uttered against President Obama and his obnoxious HHS mandate with its narrow exemptions for religious institutions. But, he is not Robespierre, there are no guillotines, and the HHS mandate is not the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Historical analogies are meant to enlighten, not inflame, contemporary political debate.

Rutler then takes on, a propos of nothing in particular, the US bishops? statement on the economy in the 1980s, ?Economic Justice for All.? Rutler writes: ?The letter?s flaws were addressed by laymen who knew about economics, such as William Simon, J. Peter Grace, and Michael Novak.? So, we must listen to our bishops, except when they fail to agree with us? As for Mssrs. Simon, Grace and Novak, they know something of a particular brand of economic thinking, a brand that has its roots in a deeply anti-Christian ideology espoused by the likes of von Mises, Hayek and Rand. Simon, Grace and Novak were early apologists for the plutocratic age in which we live, confident that the market would bring about all manner of human happiness and right living (remember the End of History?), a confidence that has been unshaken in Rutler?s mind by recent history. I guess his 401(k) must have done better than mine.

Rutler goes on to note that ?the archbishop responsible for the letter on economics retired in unhappy circumstances from his archdiocese which eventually filed for bankruptcy protection.? Of course, ?Economic Justice for All? was passed overwhelmingly by the full body of bishops, so it is wrong to suggest that there was only one archbishop who was ?responsible? for it. But, Rutler wishes to create a correlation between whatever truths were found in the economic pastoral and the subsequent personal failings of Archbishop Weakland who led the drafting committee. On this theory, we should ignore the Successor of Peter because Peter denied Jesus

three times, or condemn the Declaration of Independence because it was written by a slave-holder. But, this is not really a theory so much as it is an ugly attempt to further besmirch the reputation of a man whose flaws are well known but whose writings can stand or fall on their own. It is telling, is it not, that Rutler does not once challenge any of the content of the pastoral letter he is trying to undermine.

Rutler notes that while Protestants backed the candidacy of Mr. Romney in the recent election, Catholics backed Obama narrowly and Latino Catholics backed Obama with 71% of their votes. He notes: ?Actually, everyone has suffered from the neglect of catechesis in the past forty years.? He clearly intends to intimate a causal connection here. Certainly, I am prepared to agree with his observation about the neglect of catechesis, although I would not let any child of mine near a CCD class led by Rutler. But, I am also prepared to acknowledge that Latinos were right to reject the candidacy of a man and a party that showed great disrespect for them and for their interests and to wonder if Rutler will some day be condemning those bishops who rightly argue for immigration reform. (Perhaps we should consult some of his neo-con friends, people who ?know about immigration policy,? and see if they can gin up a counter-letter to the bishops? statements on the subject in the manner of Simon, Grace and Novak.) Conscience is deeper than morals, it goes to what Levinas called ?the moral challenge of the face of another.? Our conscience informs not only our conduct but our stance towards the world and especially towards other people and to God. Mr. Romney suggested undocumented Latinos self-deport and his wife unhelpfully addressed a group of Latinos as ?you people.? Latinos had every right in the world to vote as they did.

Bad as all this is, what truly earns Rutler his place in this ?To Hell With It? series is his evident willingness to conflate Catholic faith with American civil religion. He notes approvingly George Washington?s comments about ?our blessed religion? and Franklin Roosevelt?s D-Day Prayer. Rutler laments ?We are not a Christian nation now.? But, I am suspicious of this conflation of our Catholic faith with American civil religion. I will go further and say that I am suspicious of the conflation of our Catholic faith with the dominant Protestantism that has shaped all religion, including ours, in American history. For starters, I have been re-reading Patricia Bonomi?s ?Under the Cope of Heaven? and Linda Colley?s ?Britons? so the deep hostility to Catholicism that shaped the political thinking of the American revolutionary generation is at the forefront of my thinking. The civil religion that Washington and Roosevelt evoked is not the same thing as the Catholicism I discern in the Creed. This civil religion received its pithiest expression from Dwight Eisenhower when he said that America?s ?form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply held religious faith, and I don?t care what it is.? To be fair, Ike was trying to explain the source of America?s commitment to equality in our religious tradition. And, the latitudinarianism of Eisenhower?s ?I don?t care what it is? is not merely the result of his pre-Inauguration conversion to Presbyterianism, but is deeply rooted in American religious experience.

I do ?care what it is.? I reject civil religion as an imposter, just as I reject Michael Novak?s attempt to apply the prophet Isaiah?s ?suffering servant? text to the modern business corporation. Rutler stands in a long line of Catholic neo-conservative thinkers who decry the encroachments of secularism, without recognizing how far encroached it is, that it has already gained a foothold in their minds, that in reducing religion to a prop for Americanism, they are engaged in a kind of blasphemy or even idolatry. Jesus Christ did not die to make America great. Period. If He had, if Catholicism and civil religion were the same, I would not give a hoot whether it survives or dies. For failing to see that, Father George Rutler wins this week?s first ?To Hell With It? award.

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[1] http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/catholics-must-face-squarely-the-dire-threat-to-religious-liberty