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"To Hell With It" - the "War" on Christmas

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 7, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Truth claims. That is what this week?s series ?To Hell With It? is about. Against the Catholic neo-cons, I resist their attempts at an apologia for our faith by drowning it in a utilitarian Americanism, quoting George Washington about the need for a morally serious citizenry as if Jesus Christ had died to make America great. Against a strand of Catholic thought associated with the left, that sees social justice as the principal goal of the Church while neglecting the need to see our commitment to social justice as part of our obedience to the Lord, an obedience that often challenges the left to go where they do not want to go, I set down my marker. Against those trying to claim Dorothy Day as one of their own, emphasizing only half of her story, I say stop it. And, against those, across the ideological spectrum, who reduce religion to ethics so as to gain access to the public square, I say, let?s bring our dogma with us into the square and see what happens. The reduction of religion to ethics requires a false impression of the Church, as if what is distinctive about a Catholic is what he or she does in bed or how they view Medicaid cuts, when what is truly distinctive about Catholics is that we believe God came down from Heaven, was born of a Virgin, walked the earth, taught his disciples, was crucified and rose from the dead. The ethical cart cannot be allowed to get in front of the doctrinal horse without a serious step down the path of self-secularization. At the heart of our faith is a truth claim - the tomb is empty - and all that we do and teach must be rooted in that truth claim.

So, today I conclude the series with the most obvious example of this willingness to hold on to the chaff, the cultural accoutrements of the faith which, however well-intentioned, highlight the problem against which Flannery O?Connor addressed herself when she said of the idea that the Eucharist was merely a symbolic presence of the Lord, ?Well, if it?s just a symbol, then to hell with it.? This most obvious example is, of course, the now perennial ?war on Christmas.?

As night follows day, you knew that this Advent would see Bill O?Reilly of Fox News castigating someone. This year the lucky designee was the Governor of Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee, who adorned his State Capitol building with a traditional tree but decided to call it a ?Holiday Tree? not a ?Christmas Tree.? And, of course Bill Donohue of the Catholic League is distressed because a town in Illinois that has traditionally placed a cross on its water tower, this year is declining to do so, although the good people who own the water tower might be a bit confused about which Christian holiday they are commemorating. Donohue?s concern for the Christmas Cross called to mind a story years ago, I think in the Atlantic Monthly, by James Fallows, about the way Christmas is celebrated in Japan, a country with a very tiny Christian population. It turns out that the Japanese love celebrating Christmas and their stores are all decked out this time of year but, given the cultural differences, they often don?t quite get it right. Fallows noted that one department store had a large display the centerpiece of which was Santa Claus, nailed to the cross.

The Rhode Island case is especially interesting to me. Governor Chafee is, to be sure, the kind of politically correct secularist who would not be much fun at a party. There is something plain stupid about calling a Christmas Tree a Holiday Tree. Sometimes, there are those on the left who diminish their own causes by

trafficking in foolishness, taking umbrage where no offense was intended nor really delivered, getting nit-picky about verbiage, and thinking that diversity only matters when it comes to gender and skin color, and not ideas. These well-intentioned ?speech codes? ? explicit or, more dangerous, implicit ? that have come to dominate college campuses are an affront to our liberal ideas about free expression, but no one wants to say so. Of course, there is stupidity on all sides here. Bill O?Reilly seems not to know that he should be careful about using words like ?always? to describe a tradition. In colonial New England, of course, Christmas celebrations were illegal because they were ?popish.?

The Supreme Court?s jurisprudence on religious symbols is curious. They permit religious expression in public places, such as a nativity scene, but only if it is grouped with other secular symbols and, therefore, serves a secular purpose. That is, you can have a religious symbol but only if you gut or so contextualize its religious significance that you have to ask yourself ? is this worth fighting for? I feel the same way about the arguments put forward by those who want the Bible read ?as literature? in our public schools. Obviously, it is difficult to understand much of Western history if you are not familiar with the Bible. There is a pedagogical issue here. But, there is not a religious issue. From a religious standpoint, I do not want the Bible taught as one more book, among many, that contains religious insights. I want young people to engage the Bible as the inspired Word of God. If the Bible is just another great book, then ?to hell with it.?

Here is my difficult with Bill O?Reilly and Bill Donohue?s concerns about the war on Christmas: Who cares what Wal-Mart or Bloomingdale?s done, indeed, it is they and other large corporations that have conducted the real war on Christmas, the war that has changed the liturgical commemoration of the birth of a child amidst circumstances of poverty and political difficulty into a consumerfest of the grossest sort. If I were raising children in the faith, and this time of year came round, I am quite sure that I would recognize that Gov. Chafee?s tree in Providence is not the principal impediment to instructing children in the meaning of Christmas. It is the non-stop ?hey kids, with this new toy you will be happy? consumerism that is destroying the holiday. We sing ?Venite adoremus,? a vestige of the blessed time when a Catholic understood that he or she was, in large part, by reason of baptism, homo liturgicus. Now, we are all homo economicus, especially at this time of year.

The defensive stance of Mr. O?Reilly and Mr. Donohue against the dominant culture has a long, unproud tradition in American culture. The trope about national decline, in war or wages, as a result of moral failings is as old as America itself. In King Philip?s War in 1675, the Massachusetts General Court asked for a ministerial association to recommend moral reforms for the colony so that God would bless their arms. You saw a similar defensiveness in the Temperance Movement and the Legion of Decency. I dare say we witness that defensiveness in some of our pulpits lately! O?Reilly and Donohue are noisy but they are not novel. But, they also seem so unaware of the breadth of Catholic history that they fail to see that a defensive posture against the culture does not befit a Catholic. There are times when we must draw lines in the sand, to be sure, but the dominant way the Catholic faith has interacted with culture is to generate it, to bring forth beautiful and powerful art and music and literature, to build temples to the glory of God and devotion to the Blessed Mother, to create a body of thought, Catholic Social Teaching, to guide us as we make political and economic decisions. A faith that does not generate culture is a dead faith. Here is the question that we should be asking this time of year: How can we, as Catholics, not only in our parishes but in our workplaces, but most especially in our families, how can we create a culture that reflects the truly wondrous event we are commemorating? Do we have traditions of going to Midnight Mass with friends and family? Do we have foods and songs that accompany us through Christmas Day, and foods that we make and make together, instead of buying readymade at the supermarket because that is so much easier? Some of my most cherished memories of my mother and grandmother came in the kitchen, making Christmas cookies. Do we teach our children the beautiful, religious songs of the holiday, and not just the Christmas carols but the Advent songs too? Do we even commemorate Advent outside Sunday Mass?

I look at the way our culture celebrates Christmas now and I say ? to hell with it. I look at the Christmas I will enjoy, with my family, with a tree that my Dad and I cut fresh in the forest and the blue and silver ornaments my mother collected, the drive to Midnight Mass, Christmas feast at the Burelle family?s ?Party Barn,? the homemade cards and the few, but I hope meaningful, gifts we will exchange, mostly a book or a freshly baked quiche or some wine we can then share. I like keeping Christmas humble, personal, familial, not showy, and I try and keep the evil consumer stuff as far away as possible. It is not easy. I am sure it is difficult with children who are exposed to the ads on TV and the chatter about Santa at school. There has been a ?war on Christmas? for several decades now, and it has nothing to do with Gov. Chafee?s tree. I do not choose to fight either war on Christmas, but to create, within my own familial and cultural circumstances, a holiday in which we can still find the star in the sky, and make our way to Bethlehem. Venite, adoremus.

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