

Christian Conservatives & "Secularism"

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 8, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

Towards the end of his interview with Pat Buchanan on this week's installment of "The World Over," host Raymond Arroyo bemoaned the [removal of a picture of Jesus from a southern Ohio public school where the picture had hung since 1947](#) [1]. Arroyo noted that the picture was set amongst other photos of prominent people like governors and senators. Both Arroyo and Buchanan lamented this loss, another defeat in the culture wars being forced on Christians by those horrible secularists.

To be clear, the picture was taken down at the behest of the principal because he said the school could not risk paying for an ACLU lawsuit that demanded the picture's removal. I admire much of the work that the ACLU does, and worry that very few people other than ACLU seem to evidence much concern for the rights of prisoners and those charged with crimes. But the ACLU's leaders are bullies sometimes and their recourse to lawsuits against small school districts is the kind of thing a bully does. This case was not decided on the merits, it was decided on the balance sheet.

But, the more important question for us Catholics is not whether the ACLU represents the spearhead of secularism or if the world Arroyo and Buchanan lament losing is not itself a threat of secularization dressed up as concern for religion. Arroyo's comment about the pictures of other famous people was telling. What was Jesus famous for? Did he pass a significant piece of legislation? Did he serve multiple terms in Washington and bring back lots of federal pork to Galilee? We remember Paul of Tarsus not because of his skills as a tentmaker. The Blessed Mother is not remembered for her beef stroganoff. Peter did not have the biggest fishing boat of the day. We remember Jesus and the other great actors in the drama of the Gospels because of their role in salvation history and public schools in the U.S. do not teach salvation history.

I admit a bit of ambivalence here. I have an on-going debate with a bishop friend of mine who says he is very grateful for the Protestant evangelicals because they keep biblical knowledge and language alive. Yes, I suppose they do, but I do not suppose, I know, that they engage the Bible differently from the way the Catholic Church has engaged the Bible and that their method of engagement tends to undermine the faith, reducing it to pietism which is always the last, final step on the road to secularism.

It was not so long ago that the Catholic Church fought the teaching of the Bible in public schools because it was the Protestant Bible that was taught. But, today, many Catholics join other members of the Religious Right in dating what they perceive as the decline of America from the moment the Supreme Court "threw God out of the schools." I agree that it is virtually impossible to teach Western Civilization classes without reference to the Bible. But, I hate the idea of the Bible being presented as just another important book, different in style, certainly, from the works of Homer or the letters of Pliny or the plays of Shakespeare, but with the Bible's significance reduced to its cultural throw-weight. I do not listen to the account of Easter morning a week ago, nor the account of Thomas' doubt yesterday, and ask myself questions about why these stories had legs. I prayed for the grace to always believe this to be true. Period.

You could see this same dynamic in the recent miniseries "The Bible" on the History Channel. I tried watching it but it was too painful. When Moses got to the burning bush, there were some nifty pyrotechnics, great wonderment that the bush, though on fire, was not being consumed by the flames. Okay. But, at no point did the show focus on the important part of that moment in salvation history, the revelation by God of His own name. The key to the story is not the miraculous suspension of the laws of physics, but the miraculous theological truth claim: God gives us His name. The Israelites are empowered by grace to call on God by name and, as well, the grace to know that the name of God is so precious it cannot be spelt out upon the page. The significance of the entire drama is lost if this is lost, consumed, unlike the bush, by the fire of the miracle.

There was another overlap between the controversy in the Ohio school and the TV miniseries: In both, Jesus was an Aryan from Darien. Oy vey!

As I suggested Friday, I think Pope Francis is pointing us towards a different model of combating secularism. My colleague John Allen's masterful reporting from Argentina this week confirms it. The way to beat back secularism is to renew the faith of the Church in the Risen Lord, and the place to encounter the Risen Lord is among the poor. I do not know how many students in Jackson County, Ohio had their faith strengthened by seeing the image of Jesus next to that of Governor Voinovich or Governor Kasich. I doubt many. If the Church goes out to the slums of the world and encounters the marginalized, secularism will not stand a prayer, so to speak. And, someday, and I say this with hope not viciousness, I hope that conservative Catholics like Arroyo and Buchanan will recognize how far down the slope of secularism their worldview already is, and that the recognition will come in time for them to do penance for abetting the ACLU, however unwittingly, in reducing the Savior and His work to a kind of bumper sticker slogan that will save no one's soul and inspire no one's faith. It only creates a convenient boogeyman who, like all boogeyman, serves one purpose and one only: To keep us from the necessary self-reflection on our complicity in the crimes we decry.

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[1] <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/04/03/jesus-portrait-in-an-ohio-school-district-that-the-aclu-was-suing-over-has-been-taken-down/>