

THE FUTURE OF PROPHETIC FAITH

During December 2007, a Pew Forum Faith Angle Conference dealt with the theme “Religion and Secularism: The American Experience.” Wilfred McClay, the featured speaker for the event, made a distinction between “political secularism” and “philosophical secularism.” The conference transcript (posted on the Pew Forum web site) explains the difference as follows: “Political secularism recognizes the legitimacy and even moral necessity of religious faith, while preventing any one faith from being established. Philosophical secularism, on the other hand, views religion more negatively and attempts to establish a common unbelief as a basis for government.”

In short, secularism can but does not necessarily mean a Godless society. Furthermore, as we shall see, a Godless society can but does not necessarily mean one that is devoid of all religious sentiment—at least in theory. After all, there are those who happily claim to embrace a religion that does not include God. The secularism/religion dynamic is complex and constantly in flux. They each come in many varieties and God or no-God is in the details.

The French Revolution, as distinct from the American Revolution, was highly anti-clerical and – in the main – hostile to religion. This was even more tragically true of the Russian Revolution. In the moment of revolutionary exhilaration, it seemed that the future was solidly assured for the Goddess of Reason and the supreme Rule of the Proletariat. In France, the enthronement of the new Goddess was soon followed by the rule of the guillotine, and in Russia by the terror of the Gulag.

History has its ironies. The French Revolution left a legacy of *laïcité*, which meant that French officialdom would observe the strictest discreteness about matters of faith when speaking in public. In short, political correctness required silence on the subject. The newly elected French President Nicolas Sarkozy now seems to have cast all caution to the wind. In a December 20, 2007, speech in Rome, he referred repeatedly to France’s Catholic heritage, its contribution to the “Christianization” of Europe, and (*mirabile dictu*) the need to recover that past. The French Republic, he claimed, has need of people of faith who are unafraid to voice their views in public. “Laïque” professionals muttered about a *Sarko l’américaine*—a Bush-like President.

Similar about-faces are occurring in what was once Stalin’s Soviet Union. Today, President Vladimir Putin is actively pursuing a new accommodation with the Russian Orthodox Church, and the latter seems quite open to the idea of some kind of political alliance. “Keep religion out of politics,” a favored slogan of some secular-minded publicists, seems to miss the point. All political theory is rooted in some sort of metaphysical/ideological belief-system. Atheistic Communism, too, had its pseudo-religious confessions. The nature and role of faith and faith communities in shaping the culture of a society is the real question of universal urgency.

Militant atheist literati sound as if they see their best-seller status threatened by any suggestion that religion has a continuing relevance in a twenty-first century political discourse. To be honest, I have not bought nor read the latest fruits of their labors; but I have seen and heard their almost evangelistic zeal during TV interviews. From those I gathered that Richard Dawkins, foreseeing the end of religion, is eager to help hasten its demise; that Sam Harris sees religion as a menace, no matter how moderate its public expression may be; and that Christopher Hitchens hates religion like a poison that is killing the body politic. I suspect that their books have some valuable things to say about the Church's obstinate resistance to science at times, as well as other assorted sins and criticisms that one can find in any respectable volume by Christian theologians and historians. While I find the candor of such authors sometimes refreshing, their unconcealed and disdainful intolerance of opposing views strikes me as counterproductive to an intelligent debate. Intellectuals - be they on the Right or the Left, religious or non-religious - wishing perhaps to be the prophets of a new age but lacking a sense of dialectics, will all too soon reveal themselves as propagandists. Complexities evaporate in the thin air of cocksureness. "The essence of tyranny," I recall having read somewhere, "is the denial of complexity."

Mark Lilla sounds more frustrated than infuriated by the survival and continued influence of religion. "The twilight of the idols has been postponed," he writes in an August 19, 2007, *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "The Politics of God." It wasn't supposed to happen this way. We, in the enlightened West had *assumed* that politics would be conducted "unilluminated by divine revelation." The West was supposed to be on a "one-way track toward modern secular democracy"—an era of the "Great Separation."

"It is an unnerving tale," writes Lilla as he describes the historical process that brought us to this fate, "one that raises profound questions about the fragility of our modern outlook." How could such a political theology of the regrettable kind reassert itself, "even in the face of seemingly irresistible forces like modernization, secularization and democratization?"

However, states Lilla in conclusion, if there is a will, there is a way to reclaim the "Great Separation," or at least some semblance thereof. "We have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by divine revelation. All we have is our lucidity, which we must train on a world where faith still inflames the minds of man." Hope springs eternal for the triumph of the secular mind!

For Albert Einstein, it seems, the "God question" involved a life-long struggle, a faith journey that it so well described in Walter Isaacson's 2007 biography. No atheist triumphalism here, just a profound sense of mystery when beholding the harmony of nature—the "mind of God" as manifested in the created universe. Mystery, wrote Einstein, "the most beautiful emotion we can experience...stands at the cradle of all true art and science."

Over against “fanatical atheists,” people who “cannot hear the music of the spheres,” Einstein confessed belief in “Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of mankind.” In deistic fashion, his determinism did not leave room for divine intervention. In sum, Einstein’s approach to culture is religion-friendly, but does preclude belief in the God of the Bible—the Lord of history who rules the destiny of nations.

Today, Charles Taylor too seeks to make culture safe for religion. Reading his magisterial *A Secular Age* (2007) is like an “Amazing Race” of the mind experience. For those unfamiliar with that TV show, it involves an exercise that requires the ability to negotiate numerous detours and overcome enormous obstacles, but great rewards await those who persevere.

This man knows much about many things—historical, philosophical, theological, and cultural. The author offers brilliant analyses of how, he believes, we in the West got where we are. To do justice to this work would require a lengthy review. My purpose here is quite limited to zero in on how Taylor perceives the present situation in terms of the culture/religion dynamic. What is our secular age like?

First of all, this is not a Godless age. True, in the West at least, church religion is in decline; multitudes of people have jettisoned faith in the God of Abraham and the orthodoxy of historic Christian beliefs. Modernity, with its “immanent frame,” has taken its toll in a number of respects, but has not succeeded in snuffing out religious striving or, in Taylor’s terms, “the longing for and response to a more than immanent transformation perspective”—a search for “fullness.” People need to believe in order to give life meaning. Modernity of the wrong kind has created a malaise that makes people (young people in particular) reach out for a spirituality that is existentially accepted and lived rather than doctrinally imposed. If one knows where to look, plenty of religion is still to be found.

The word “fullness” as used by Taylor reminds one of Jesus’ reference to “abundant life” or “living life to the full” (*Jerusalem Bible*), as recorded in John’s gospel (10:10). Then there is also the concept of *pleroma*, fullness as gift of the Holy Spirit, which is found in the apostolic writings. However, Taylor’s notion seems to be more about achieving than about receiving. One must *find* transcendence and recognize or experience it as God-inspired. Such transcendence, which does not need to bear a relationship to a supernatural reality or an authoritative revelation from “beyond,” can be discovered in many places and daily life experiences.

According to Taylor, secularism is not what is left after the myths of old-time religion have been lost or tossed. Rather, “secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike.” What has been lost is authoritarian religion with its naïve notions of transcendence; but now the field is wide open for the discovery of numerous alternative options to find fullness. The revolution of the 1960s was in essence a search for a “culture of authenticity.”

There are moments of wonder when one observes the harmony of the universe. It is like being lifted to a higher plane. Likewise, when perhaps listening to a Bach cantata, one may have a powerful sense of being moved by something profound and archetypal-something similar to the force of Christian piety, “while dropping the Christian God of personal agency.” Nevertheless, thus being touched by transcendence can be experienced in a theistic register of responding to God.

Because of what Taylor calls the “nova effect,” transcendence is manifested through the spirit(s) and values embedded in daily life experiences. Therefore, in order to find God one ought to enter into the worlds of art, music, inspiring architecture (Chartres Cathedral), natural beauty and even sensuality. There one finds residuals of transcendence that can become the basis for moral imperatives and social responsibility.

At one point, Taylor discusses the power of poetic language, the language of symbol that speaks of “the highest things, the things to do with the infinite, with God, with our deepest feelings.” It is a language that reveals, evokes, and is potentially world-making. “A new poetic language,” he writes in that context, “can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham.” Really? More on that in a moment, but first let me mention one more author. Bruce Ledewitz, a legal scholar and devout advocate of “Hallowed Secularism,” is a non-believer in God who loves the Bible. My review of his book, *American Religious Democracy: Coming to Terms with the End of Secular Politics*, can be found on my web site, so there is no need to repeat the arguments presented there. He too seeks to make culture safe for religion and, like Taylor, has little use for our latter day militant atheists.

Ledewitz did, however, post a mild criticism of Taylor on his web site. Let me quote the final paragraphs:

“Where Taylor and I differ, I think, is that he does not see the advances in science as actually causing a falling away from biblical religion, especially Christianity. I agree that there are many factors to these trends. But, science promises that two identical experiments will yield identical results. There is no room for a God who could alter such results. Such a God is ruled out in principle.

This is different from deism, in which God created the universe and then chose to step back. This is a universe without such a God at all. I still think there is room here for “religion” as Taylor defined it - a transcendent reality connected to a transformation beyond ordinary human flourishing - but we have a lot of work to do to understand such a reality without God.”

In a later posting, after having finished reading *A Secular Age*, Ledewitz tells us that he found Taylor “curiously unhelpful.” He seems puzzled that Taylor continues to feel more or less at home in the Catholic Church in a way that he found it impossible to stay in Judaism. Frankly, I too find it hard to understand how the Catholicism Taylor professes can be reconciled with what I read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) or the recently issued *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*” with its emphasis on the revelation of God in Christ and incorporation in the Church as a

“network of friendship with Christ which connects heaven and earth.” It can be exciting, albeit sometimes exhausting, to read professors who think beyond the boundaries, but when all the boundaries of historic confessional faith fall away, there will be little left for the Church to proclaim.

Ledewitz believes that the United States has reached “the end of secular politics,” as evidenced by the 2004 election. The people have spoken, and they have decided that religion must play a role in the political process. Society can do without God, but some sort of religion is desirable, and unbelievers should be persuaded to recognize that. Taylor, too, believes that a secular society can fully engage in politics without ever “coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably.” John Patrick Diggins ended his *New York Times* review (12/16/07) of Taylor’s book with these sentences: “There are many reasons to read the profound meditations in “A Secular Age,” but waiting for God to show up is not one of them.” But there is the rub! The God of the Bible has a way of “showing up,” and that has profound personal as well as political implications.

The God of Israel is not a nameless “Somebody Up There,” nor a “Something” down deep in our inner being. The God of Abraham and Moses has a name: YHWH, the One who is and shall be... redemptively present in the world. The Bible does not speculate about the Being of God, but proclaims God’s acts, His ways of “being there.” This is the Creator/Covenant God who comes (“shows up”), who cares, and who calls human beings to become coworkers and partners in the service of the promised Kingdom of universal Shalom. The God of the Bible is not a God whom we find, but rather the Holy One in our midst (Hosea 11: 9) who finds us.

Modernity does not have a problem with religion and its pantheon of Gods. The spirit of our age is suffused with religiosities that are quite acceptable to many a cultural despiser of the God of the Bible. Taylor assures us that he does not wish to “leaven Christianity with a dose of paganism,” but many spiritualities that are advertised as new paths to God seem to carry a neo-Pagan signature. The God of historical revelation, the Lord of history who confronts us and calls us to repentance and accountability is the true offense to the modern mind. Torah, with its law of the Lord given as a guide for personal and national decisions, is an intolerable thought for all who believe in their autonomous inner selves.

In his book, *The Prophetic Faith*, Martin Buber described what he called “the struggle for revelation” between the God of Israel and the pagan naturalism of Baal fertility cults and temple prostitutes. The idea of finding God in the realm of sensuality is not a modern invention. In the end, however, it was the word of prophetic faith that changed the world. The apostle Paul, too, spoke about aspects of the “divine nature” that can be known by observing the glorious creation (Romans 2). But that was not the core of the *kerygma* with which the early Church confronted the Greco-Roman world. That world was changed by the gospel of the great divine intervention in Jesus of Nazareth.

The “struggle for revelation” has never ceased. It is inherent in prophetic faith. The battle was vigorously fought at the time of this nation’s founding—both in Europe and in the American colonies. It is reflected in the Declaration of Independence with its compromise language that gives both the God of nature and the God of history (Providence) their due. On the American continent, the 18th century was an age of reason, revolution and revival. The third element was missing in France, and that made a good deal of difference as to how the revolution evolved.

The major Founders of our Republic were strongly attracted to Deism and its God who keeps distance from human affairs. But, while rejecting certain aspects of Puritan orthodoxy, most of them did never entirely detach themselves from the rich piety they had inherited from their home environment. In short, they were inconsistent Deists, thus providing choice quotes for later commentators with opposite viewpoints. When it seemed that Rationalism reigned supreme, the leaven of biblical faith was never entirely lost.

Jefferson provides a good illustration as well as one of my favored quotes in his Second Inaugural Address.

"I shall need," he declared, "all the indulgences which I have heretofore experienced from my constituents; the want of it will certainly not lessen with increasing years. I shall need too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power, and to whose goodness I ask you to join in supplication with me that He will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures that whatsoever they do shall result in your good, and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations."

Those words do not sound like a testimony to a God who keeps distance, but rather to the God of the Bible who has a way of “showing up.”

In those days, there were giants in the land—among them Thomas Jefferson and Jonathan Edwards. Charles Taylor has remarked that “the imprint of an impressive array of Deists among the founders, most notably Jefferson, seems to have been largely effaced by the Second Great Awakening.” To the contrary, it seems to me that our forebears were engaged in a struggle for revelation that has remained an integral part of the American experience and is still raging today.

How shall prophetic faith find a voice that effectively impacts societies and their cultures? In the aftermath of the naturalistic Nazi neo-Paganism, a powerful theological voice was raised by Karl Barth, and the Barmen Declaration was one of the results—a word about the God of Israel addressed to a pagan regime. In the United States, Reinhold Niebuhr’s voice was heard and listened to far beyond the boundaries of the theological seminary where he taught. Later, Pope John Paul II’s passionate belief in the power of the Christian message to transform the cultural forces in Europe and elsewhere inspired millions across the globe, as did Martin Luther King’s prophetic gospel of liberation.

The word of prophetic faith has a hard-hitting and counter-cultural quality about it. “I have put my word in your mouth,” says the Lord to Jeremiah (1:9-10). Things happen when God puts words in people’s mouths, because they are “like a fire...like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” (23:29). Stanley Hauerwas talks about the rock-like nature of divine revelation. Our secular age needs to be confronted with a “hard-rock religion.” Sweet therapeutic sermonizing will not do. Nor is party-politics in the pulpit evidence that the preacher has struggled with biblical revelation. The exact opposite could be true. These approaches, as well as health-and-wealth prophecies, bear all the earmarks of intellectual laziness and lack of evangelical courage.

Finally, what about the apostolate of the laity? What sounds will flow from the sanctuary into the street and penetrate the culture? In the 1970s, evangelicals emerged from a long slumber to enter the political arena. It didn’t take long before the Falwell/Robertson alliance declared war on American secular culture. Today, many (especially young) evangelicals are seeking to play a more constructive role in society. In his book, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals joined the American Elite*(2007), Michael Lindsay describes what he calls “a cosmopolitan evangelicalism” that is engaging the culture less as warriors and more as culture-shapers. Their influence is felt from Hollywood to Harvard to Capitol Hill. Are they equipped with a robust faith that is deeply rooted in the biblical revelation? Our secular age poses an immense challenge to the Church in its manifold manifestations.

However, secularity is not to be feared by churches and parishioners imbued with a daring faith. This *seaculum* is our world after all, the world God has loved so much that he sent his Son to save (John 3:16). The world must always be close to the heart of the *ecclesia catholica*. The drama of sin and salvation is played out in the human heart as well as on the stage of history. At one time, the Protestant ecumenical establishment promulgated the motto, “Let the world set the agenda.” It was well meant in its intention to promote sensitivity to worldly concerns. But the underlying dangers were insufficiently recognized; because when the world really sets the agenda, secularism wins and we end up with the wrong kind of this-worldliness.

Biblically speaking, the world *is* the agenda. In faith, believers embrace this *seaculum*, this present age in the sure and certain hope that the future rests secure in divine grace. This world of ours is destined to be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22, Revelation 21:1)--the realm of God’s Kingdom and universal Shalom. Martin Marty has coined the term “religiosecularism” to describe the culture that we have and are.

The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is a divinely instituted and-- at the same time-- worldly reality. It is not, as Taylor suggests, the place where people come to share their manifold spiritual itineraries. Rather, it is the communion where the divine Word is proclaimed and the sacramental Mystery is celebrated. Furthermore, it finds its true being in mission; by addressing the world with the word of prophetic faith —the self-authenticating Word of God.

To many of our contemporaries this may sound crazy and unbelievably pretentious. So it was in the days of the prophets, as well as in the days of the apostles. In response, St. Paul suggested that if we dig deeply into the “foolishness of God” that comes to us through revelation, we will find a wisdom that can change the world (I Corinthians 3:19). Facing today’s huge challenge will take hard work, and it won’t come cheap in terms of spiritual and intellectual capital. But, when God “shows up” in the power of the Spirit, miracles happen and secular minds are changed to holy amazement and divinely inspired awe. Then the world will know what a world-making Word is truly like. *Soli Deo Gloria!*