

C • O • N • T • E • X • T

MARTIN E. MARTY ON RELIGION AND CULTURE

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Don't sell ethics short

Bowen H. "Buzz" McCoy, C.R.E. (Counselor of Real Estate), on four levels of reality: "As a teacher of business and organizational ethics, I ask my students to spend some time considering four-level living, a concept embraced by many of history's great thinkers—from Dante to Peter Drucker. We can be said to be operating on these four levels, consciously or unconsciously, more or less simultaneously: 1) the superficial *surface* story level; 2) the *allegorical* level, which we allow to shape our own stories—our heroes who we can copy and mimic, mentors, and the like; 3) the *moral* level where society sets appropriate behavior by social custom or laws and regulations; and 4) the deep transcendental *spiritual* level, where one is in touch with what it is God truly intends us to do. . . .

"I believe that ethical living is a product of the fourth level, grounded deeper than cultural norms, a by-product of faith. It can inform us about when we decide to stop trading off. We trade off, always, compromising our deep beliefs for expediency. When and where do we stop and take a stand? Which ditch do we die in? Ethics is not about always winning. Ethics is about what we are willing to fight and lose for. Morals are human response to humans. Ethics is human response to God. Therefore it is difficult to talk openly about ethics in a business, because we have made it difficult to talk about God in a business. This is certainly our densest wall to straddle."

So much for straight-out ethics. But McCoy likes to relate ethical thinking to religious, so: "In this current age of globalization, such activities as global money, capital markets, and the Internet are driven by the culture of the

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United States. Within this culture are imbedded the canons of Jewish-Christian experience. My Christian faith informs me that one must come into a relationship with the creator God through Jesus. To be successful in the global arena, it seems to me that we must expand our cultural consciousness beyond that of our own. World culture is shaped by religion, or those deepest feelings about who we are and who we want to become. If we

are to have impact in other cultures, we must bring with us an awareness of the others' deep cultural perceptions. At some point, as we become ever closer together, we must begin to evolve a true global ethic. If such an ethic is to motivate us at our deepest level, it must be pluralistically faith-based."

(*Real Estate Issues*, Summer 2001)

Floundering father

On the general principle that no historical figure should get a free ride, in this season of John Adamsism, we ought at least to register one voice of dissent.

Historian Richard Rosenfeld is not a huge fan of John Adams:

“If we knew nothing more of John Adams than that his alternative life plan was to preach from the pulpit of Massachusetts’s established Puritan church, that two of his three sons, Thomas and Charles, were alcoholics (one died of it), that the third,

John Quincy, who dogged his father’s footsteps to the presidency, was, by all accounts, ‘a cold, austere, and foreboding character’ (J.Q.’s words), and that leading politicians of his day saw John Adams as emotionally, shall we say, unbalanced (Benjamin Franklin: ‘in some things, absolutely out of his senses’; Hamilton: ‘liable to paroxysms of anger which deprive him of self-command’), we might speculate that John Adams was an overbearing and hypercritical pedant, distant from friends and enemies alike.” But the truth is far worse, says the grumpy Rosenfeld: “Adams’s pathological narcissism

repeatedly put his country’s interests at risk and ultimately doomed his Federalist Party to extinction. . . . For his problems as president, he blamed Hamilton (‘a bastard Bratt of a Scotch Pedlar’ Adams described him) and disloyal Cabinet members. To himself, John Adams was always a hero. The historian David McCullough, in his most recent book, *John Adams*, has taken a similar view.

“McCullough,” continues Rosenfeld in his attack, “evidently accepts Adams’s belief that Americans define themselves more by their independence from England (which Adams certainly advocated) than they do by their devotion to popular democracy and the Bill of Rights (which Adams tried to suppress). . . .

“When Adams left the presidency, he did so in disgrace. He was the founding father who had opposed popular democracy, subverted the Bill of Rights, and brought his nation to the brink of civil war. He had visited on his political opponents an American reign of terror, which, even in old age, Jefferson could never let Adams forget.

“It would take a mighty hagiographer to place John Adams on a pedestal, and indeed for 200 years no one has been equal to the task. But now, in the eloquent David McCullough, Adams may finally have found his man. McCullough’s finely crafted and eminently readable *John Adams* would doubtless please the founder whom democrats dubbed ‘His Rotundity.’ But in pandering to the highly remunerative national yearning for heroes, David McCullough denies Americans the critical lessons in liberty and democracy that every history of the Early Republic should teach.” And so the debate goes on.

(*Harper’s*, September 2001)

Sphere of the Lord

After that rather heavy dose of political writing, it’s time to turn religious and to a religious thinker who has had enormous influence on and through the Dutch Calvinists in America, Abraham Kuyper. Do you know him? If not, here is Lucas E. Morel,

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assistant professor of politics at Washington and Lee University, on John Bolt's recent book on Abraham Kuyper, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2000):

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!' said Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a Dutch pastor-theologian by training and jack-of-many-trades by vocation." You do get the hint, don't you, that you are on Calvinist soil, when you hear the language of "sovereignty" and "dominion." Morel: "With *ni Dieu, ni maitre* ('No God, no master') as the ideological mainspring of modern life, Kuyper saw the need for the church to preach the sovereignty of God." His particular twist was "sphere sovereignty, which distinguishes society from the state, protects 'social spheres' such as the family, business, science, and art from the encroachment of politics, and frees the church to proclaim the gospel without state regulation."

Back now to the era of John Adams, as Morel asks: "So how does the American Revolution, with its Lockean pedigree, not only avoid the rhetorical wrath of Kuyper but also garner his utmost praise? Kuyper saw the Spirit of '76 as a 'Puritan/Calvinist spirit,' which understood political freedom as the blessing of a sovereign God and not the grant of a sovereign state. Seeing government as only one of several institutions God ordained to order their freedom, Americans would keep government from meddling with other social institutions (such as church) and thereby preserve what he called 'the free life of free citizens.'"

How match Kuyper's thought, born in a "state church" Holland, with American life? Morel, again: "Given Kuyper's project to re-Christianize Holland through public appeals to the nation's heritage and free proclamation of the gospel, some critics might associate his party activism with a theocratic agenda. [Author John] Bolt quotes Kuyper to the contrary, highlighting his aversion to tyranny in all its forms, whether atheistic or religious. Bolt argues that only a 'structurally pluralistic' society would satisfy Kuyper, who saw the need for both the church and the state to stay within the confines of their authority and competence in order for both to flourish. The concept of *simul iustus et peccator*—the person of faith as righteous by divine imputation but still savoring of original sin—should inform all human institutions until Christ's return." "Simul iustus et peccator": That sounds Lutheran. Morel and Bolt advance themes for an argument that continues.

(*Religion and Liberty*, July/August 2001)

Good isn't spelled G-o-d

Now for an opposite view, a non-God, non-sovereignty, non-domain outlook, a reviewer in a British magazine checks in. Americans disputed with each other during the "God Bless America" autumn whether one needed faith in order to "belong," as citizens closed ranks in the face of insecurity and pursuit of a foe. We don't often hear explanations as to how the explicitly non- and sometimes antireligious humanists who are moralists ground their thinking and action. Here is a good example. Adam Morton on Simon Blackburn's *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2001):

"One recurring theme in the book is not designed to protect but to encourage. We do not need to support our moral convictions with a religious scaffolding.

Blackburn's target is often religion, or at any rate the idea that the care and maintenance of patterns of decent behavior are aided by any traditional supernatural belief. Very little of all this is new, but it is wonderfully concise, direct, and to the point.

"The reason that morality survives abstract debunking and does not need a religious basis is that most of its practices have a simple point which is in our general interest. So as long as you are looking for a reason why you shouldn't tell this lie now, the justification is not hard to find. Other parts of morality have a yet more fundamental basis. As Blackburn says: 'Gratitude to those who have done us good, sympathy with those in pain or in trouble, and dislike of those who delight in causing pain and trouble, are natural to most of us, and are good things. Almost any ethic will encourage them . . . these are just features of how most of us are, and how all of us are at our best.'"

(*Times Literary Supplement*, 7/6/01)

War no more? Reverence the thought

Paul Woodruff, in his new book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2002):

"Religious wars are endemic in our time, which is a time with little care for reverence. . . . If a religious group thinks it speaks and acts as God commands in all things, this is a failure of reverence. A group like that may turn violent and feel they are doing so in good faith. Nothing is more dangerous than that feeling.

"War is nothing new, and neither are killer strains of religion, pathogens that take hold of a people and send them into paroxysms of violence. War and religion will always be with us; we can't expect to shake them off. But we can ask what it is in religion that might keep the dogs of war on leash, and what it is that whips them into a frenzy and lets them loose. It is reverence that moderates war in all times and cultures, irreverence that urges it on to brutality. The voices that call in the name of God for aggressive war have lost sight of human limitations. They have lost reverence, even when they serve a religious vision. . . . Even when the goal of war is something as noble as freedom or peace, it may be irreverent to think we can impose these goals by violence."

(*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/12/01)

Who'd a thunk it?

Reviewer Jerry Fodor illustrates why he says the prose in Charles Travis's new book *Unshadowed Thought: Representation in Thought and Language* "belongs to the copulating-snakes school of composition":

[Travis writes,] "A thought is something there is to think: what one thinks in thinking thus and so. One thinks things to be a certain way; what one thinks is a matter of which way one thus thinks things. A thought, so conceived, may be right (or wrong) in the sense that it is a right (or wrong) thing to think; in thinking it, one thinks what is (or is not) so. One thinks what is right, in this sense, just where what one thinks—on this conception, the thought—is so. Here a thought is identified by the conditions whose obtaining would make thinking it right."

Comments Fodor: “Remarkably, many philosophers suppose that this kind of writing conduces to conceptual clarification, or at least that it shows how much they are in earnest. Each to his method.”

(Times Literary Supplement, 7/6/01)

Science is not the soul concern

Sometimes people from the world of science resist the religification of science in the name of both science and religion. Here Jerome Groopman, M.D. writes on the “curious coupling of science and religion”:

“Why do we have this strained attempt, clothed in the rubric of ‘neuro-theology,’ to objectify faith with the bells and whistles of technology? Polls show that we live in a time of spiritual thirsting, and that nearly all of our citizens (some 95 percent) believe in God. About 80 percent pray on a regular basis, and more than 40 percent attend church weekly. It would be comforting to be able to worship at the altar of science if that altar could be relocated to a church or a synagogue or a mosque or a Buddhist temple. Doubt and uncertainty are erased by science’s insistence on reproducible, measurable results.

“But science does not seek such worship. The attempt to overlay its authority with the cloak of mysticism or the imprimatur of Logos tells us more about the persistent sense of vulnerability that people of faith, like myself, live with than about the deeper workings of the Deity. Man is a proper subject for study in the world of science. God is not. Science is a discipline that demands accurate measurements of phenomena upon which to build models of cause and effect. But the dimensions of what we call the soul—the divine spark in human life—cannot be so delineated, and thus the soul must be excluded from such considerations. Religion in modern culture seeks properly to attribute spiritual meaning to the experience of the physical world, whereas science lays no claim to meaning: It is always agnostic. The possibility that we are intrinsically wired for spirituality cannot be dismissed; the complexities of the cultural forms we know as religion may well grow from blueprints in the brain that have evolved over the millennia. But, as has been the case with all past attempts to ‘prove’ the presence or intent of God, [brain] scans [of believers] and cerebral anatomy fall far short of doing so. Indeed, to believe that science is a way to decipher the divine, that technology can capture ‘God’s photograph,’ is to deify man’s handiwork. And that, both religious mystics and scholars agree, is the essence of idolatry.”

(The New Yorker, 9/17/01)

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Oh, ye diehards of little faith!

Writer Nancy Mairs, in her new book *A Troubled Guest: Life and Death Stories* (Beacon Press, 2001): “The wonder indicated by the Christian resurrection story—and by other tales, whether religious or secular, which attempt to point toward realities that are humanly unknowable—is that death does not, from some perspec-

tives, occur at all. The fact that we believe in it as an absolute end says more about our limitations than it does about either the event itself or the universe in which we are embedded.

“Because it is, without question, the absolute end of the personal consciousness beyond which noesis no longer functions, we require faith (though not necessarily religious faith) to proceed any further; and faith, as the (doubting) Thomas of the Resurrection story demonstrates, comes hard to some of us—and to others, not at all. Faith requires a kind of letting go—a relinquishment of any pretense of control and an admission of radical ignorance—which, in the name of intellectual rigor, modern thinkers tend to resist to (excuse the expression) death.

“Seeing is believing,’ most of us say along with Thomas, as though human vision were some arbiter of reality, although our eyes perceive only a fraction of the spectrum. Few of us doubt, however, that on either side of the rainbow’s red and violet lie the infrared and ultraviolet. . . .

“If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’ Jesus asked his followers (John 3:12). A more apposite question nowadays might be: If you are so credulous about earthly matters, some of them really quite far-fetched, why should the idea of transcendence so try your faith?”

(Chronicle of Higher Education, 10/12/01)

Was Jesus not the churchgoing type?

We like to keep readers up to date on polls, and on writings suspicious of polls. An evangelical editor is suspicious: “When it comes to perceiving reality clearly, weighing moral issues, or determining spiritual truth, public-opinion polls are as relevant as a psychic’s reading of chicken entrails. Nevertheless, some polls are so bizarre that they demand our attention.

“For instance, a recent survey of 931 self-designated Christians in Britain reveals deep confusion about how Jesus would live in the 21st century. . . .

“When it comes to perceiving reality clearly, weighing moral issues, or determining spiritual truth, public-opinion polls are as relevant as a psychic’s reading of chicken entrails.”

“Only 40 percent of the respondents believed that Jesus would go to church—a generous number, actually, considering that 71 percent said they attend church only a couple of times per year. A similar number (43 percent) said the church harms, rather than helps, people’s openness to Christian faith. When these souls do attend church, one wonders what they are learning. The poll asked respondents to rank the Christian qualities of five world figures.

“Undoubtedly to the great relief of her Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa won in a landslide of 53 percent. But then the results turn strange: George Carey (the Archbishop of Canterbury) and Mahatma Gandhi tie at 10 percent, singer Cliff Richard snags 6 percent, and evangelist Billy Graham wins only 3 percent.

“Most telling,” notes the editor, “is the popularity of Gandhi. The poll respondents must have in mind the Gandhi of Richard Attenborough’s epic film, a figure so mythical (and indeed, so sanitized) that film critic Richard Grenier compared him to E.T., Steven Spielberg’s wrinkled and cuddly space alien.

“Gandhi is the perfect hero for a post-Christian culture. Putting aside his quick temper and beastly treatment of his family, he emulates certain Christian virtues (but remains a lifelong Hindu); he leads his people through a standoff with British imperialism; he dies from an assassin’s bullets; and he makes a pithy observation about Christians bearing insufficient resemblance to their Lord (it was *their* fault, you see, that Gandhi chose not to become a Christian).”

(*Christianity Today*, 10/1/01)

A cross-cultural man of the cross

Randy Woodley, a Keetoowah Cherokee Indian in ministry among Native Americans for nearly two decades, was asked how Christianity affirms Indian culture:

“*Christianity* is a dirty word in our community so I don’t believe ‘Christianity’ affirms us. For the past seven years of pastoring in Nevada with traditional people, I had to learn to avoid that term. So many Indians have said to me that Christianity is a white man’s religion, the white man wrote the Bible, and the white man always uses erasers. Our people are willing to follow Jesus, but not ‘Christianity.’ So it’s Jesus who affirms Indian culture over and over again, which is really a very godly culture. Ninety percent of our culture points to Jesus—what some call the redemptive analogies, or shadows of Jesus. Unfortunately missionaries, rather than bridge the culture, simply looked at what they didn’t understand and said if you want to follow Jesus, you have to get rid of these cultural attributes. I believe, however, that Jesus can be at home in every culture of the world, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

On what he wishes non-Indian evangelicals knew about Indian culture: “I’d like them to understand first that they [non-Indians] have their own culture. If non-Indians learned about their own culture, they might not be so quick to condemn ours. One of the great sins of the American church is that it presumed that everything in American culture was right. It was a good idea, a holy experiment as some called it, but so far they’ve failed. They either think our culture is cute and use us as college mascots or they think our culture is evil and accuse us of having spirit demons. But they don’t see our culture as real, as godly, or as acceptable. I don’t think they can accept ours until they realize theirs needs to be brought before the cross and redeemed.” [Woodley’s Web site is www.eagles-wingsmin.com]

(Prism)



Martin E. Marty

TAKEN ♦ OUT ♦ OF ♦ CONTEXT

■ Philosopher George Santayana, from a letter to Marchesa Origo on the death of her little son, 1933: “We have no claim to any of our possessions. We have no claim to exist; and as we have to die in the end, so we must resign ourselves to die piecemeal, which really happens when we lose somebody or something that was closely intertwined with our existence. It is like a physical wound; we may survive, but maimed and broken in that direction; dead there. Not that we ever can, or ever do at heart, renounce our affections. Never that. . . . On the contrary, I wish to mourn perpetually the absence of what I love or might love. Isn't that what religious people call the love of God?”

(Wilson Quarterly, Summer 2001)

■ Philosophy professor and critic-at-large Carlin Romano argues that “greater clarification and defense of innocence forms a crucial part of fighting terrorism”:

“In modern secular thinking, innocence attaches not to a person as a whole, but to a person in regard to a specific act of wrongdoing. You may be innocent because you didn't do the act in question, were compelled to do it, and so on. In everyday life, talk of innocence almost always connects to the concept of punishment, according to which only the guilty should be punished. Fundamentalism in *this* area means you shouldn't punish the innocent—that doing so itself warrants punishment. (Thus the famous dictum of the legal philosopher Blackstone: ‘Better that 10 guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer.’)”

(Chronicle of Higher Education, 10/12/01)

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