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"To Hell With It" - Reducing Religion to Ethics

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 6, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

?If it?s just a symbol, then to hell with it.? Thus, Flannery O?Connor when it was suggested that the Eucharist was merely a symbolic presence of the Lord Jesus. Of course, we Catholics are not allergic to the importance of symbols. People will negotiate a policy but will die for a symbol, and not just Catholics. Think of the once seemingly perennial legislative and court fights over burning the flag, even though a protester can never truly burn ?the flag,? they can only burn ?a flag? just as a protester can rip up a copy of the Constitution, but the document continues to govern the political life of the nation.

Flannery was not dismissing symbols. She was, instead, pointing to the fact that at the heart of our faith, beyond the symbols, beyond the intellectual worldview, there is a truth claim: The tomb is empty.

Yesterday, I was speaking with a group of Catholics about the relationship of the Church and politics and stated my belief that the most basic problem facing us is the expectation that to gain access to the public square, we must reduce our religion to ethics. On the Catholic left, this usually entails reducing the faith to social justice issues. On the Catholic right, this usually entails reducing the faith to a congeries of issues ? anti-abortion, traditional marriage, anti-euthanasia ? that are cast as moral issues. Now, I care about social justice as much as the next Catholic, and I am as determinedly pro-life as I can be. The issue, then, is not whether the Church?s teachings on social justice or life issues are right or wrong. The issue is that when we reduce these ? and any issues ? to ethics, a couple of things happen that are deeply dangerous to the faith. We set ourselves on a path of self-secularization and find ourselves complicit in the thing that most bothers us, the loss of the religious sense in our time and in our culture.

This can all be a little opaque, so bear with me. The reduction of religion to ethics has been a hallmark of the estuary where religion and politics meet throughout American history. It was commented upon by de Tocqueville. It was evidenced in the Legion of Decency. The Moral Majority, as its name implies, was built explicitly on the premise that people of different faiths can enter the political arena united around a common moral agenda. Americans have always had so many different denominations that many Founders and political leaders since, have warned against the introduction of anything dogmatic into the public sphere. There remains a fear, which I can only label bizarre, that introducing dogma into our public discussion will lead to re-igniting the Thirty Years War. But, the Founders and political leaders subsequently also recognized that the moral fiber of a people must be robust is that people are to be capable of self-governance, and that for most people, moral fiber is derived from their faith. And, so, religion and religious leaders are permitted to enter the public square as ethical authorities, checking their dogma at the door.

Ten years ago I wrote these words and do not see the need to change a comma:

Few would argue that the Church's moral teachings, standing on their own, are persuasive in today's culture. But they were never meant to stand on their own. What is distinctive about Catholicism is not the manner in which its members copulate, but how we pray and to whom. This core sense of wonder at the admittedly large claims of the Catholic faith--that God himself came down from Heaven, was born of a virgin, walked upon the Earth, died, and rose from the dead--and the wonder they must necessarily inspire to those who hold them, are what the Church must reclaim if its credibility is to be restored. Unless a bishop or theologian can trace his views on moral issues to the empty tomb of Easter morning, there is nothing distinctively Christian or Catholic

about them.

Really, ask yourselves this: If you got a room of priests together and gave them a blank sheet of paper, a pen and five minutes, could they trace their ethical commitments to a living wage or to traditional marriage to the dogmatic claim about the empty tomb of Jesus? And, as I always remind our RCIA members, all that they have learned from the Catechism, all the moral teachings, all the social teachings, all they have learned about the Sacraments, none of it matters unless the tomb is empty. The society in which Jesus lived thought him worthy of execution. That was their verdict on his ethics. It is only in the light of the Paschal ministry that any of Jesus? ethical teachings should be considered worthy of our attention let alone our assent.

The face a person or an institution presents to the culture eventually affects that person?s or institution?s self-understanding. And, so, many, perhaps most Catholics, when asked why they consider themselves Catholic, or why they still go to Mass, will talk about how it has helped their marriage, or that they want their children to be raised in a church, or they like the Church?s commitment to the poor and/or to the unborn. You almost never hear someone say: I like coming to Church because I believe that worshipping the Lord is what makes us truly human. Perhaps it was the same in previous ages, but I wonder. In his 1966 book ?Introduction to Christianity? Joseph Ratzinger called attention to the fact, strange to us, that the authors of the Apostles Creed pass over the ethical teachings of Jesus in silence. The Nicene Creed we recite weekly at Mass mentions the birth of the Master, the suffering of the Master and the death and resurrection of the Master, but not a word about his ministry or his teachings. Alas, in our day, dripping in self-reference and self-regard as it is, we get a bonus when we reduce religion to ethics; We get to talk about ourselves and not about God.

We, and by we I mean the whole Church, need to find different ways of speaking in the public square. We Catholics have traditionally looked to natural law as a means of carrying on a dialogue in the public square, but that tradition, for all its many accomplishments, has a tendency to end up with the same result, a reduction of religion to ethics. In his famous public discussion with Jurgen Habermas, in 2004, and published under the title ?Dialectics of Secularization,? then-Cardinal Ratzinger said:

The natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogues with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society. Unfortunately, this instrument has become blunt. Accordingly, I do not intend to appeal to it for support in this conversation.

I remember the day I first read those words and I almost fell out of my chair! How to make the instrument sharp again, or, perhaps, find a new instrument?

What, then, should we do? The central dogmas of our faith ? the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the Paschal Mystery, the Blessed Trinity ? these are not in doubt, but I don?t think they are in focus either. When was the last time you heard a sermon on an article of the Creed? Instead of opposing, say, abortion because we think it is immoral, can we not make a different argument, a more anthropological argument, that we oppose abortion because it is inhumane, and it is inhumane, even a kind of iconoclasm, because the human person, even the very tiny ones not yet born, are made in the image and likeness of God. The issue of same sex marriage has been contentious, in part, because it is has cloaked in moralistic garb. I have no problem privileging traditional marriage but I think some of the rhetoric about same sex marriage being a ?threat? to traditional marriage, a civilizational threat no less, is severely overwrought. In this culture, traditional marriage died with no-fault divorce laws. And, in America?s Protestant-dominated culture, marriage has never been understood as what we Catholics believe it to be, a sacrament. Our Church?s commitment to a living wage, and to the right to organize, and to justice for immigrants, these are not rooted in some partisan agenda, or an ethical agenda, but in our beliefs about human dignity, beliefs that are in turn rooted in the self-revelation of Jesus Christ who disclosed what we could not find out for ourselves: God?s innermost nature is one of communal love, the Trinity, and God

wants to invite us to join deeply into that love.

This is not a program, still less and agenda. I do not know what will happen if we bring our dogmas into the public square. But, I do know this. The Church's strength, its true strength, is never organizational. It is found in the proclamation of the Gospel, which is why the Church is always her truest self when she is standing with the poor, with the weak, with the marginalized, with the grieving, with those who rely on the Lord and not themselves.

So, in our ?To Hell With It? series, which finishes tomorrow, I invite everyone to ask yourselves basic questions such as how you discuss these public issues of social justice and morality, how you relate them to the Creed, and whether or not you are even comfortable in this culture discussing the Church?s dogmatic beliefs. Because, if we are not witnessing to the empty tomb of Jesus Christ, we will become chaplains of somebody else?s agenda in the twinkling of an eye, with our best intentions in tact but our faith in tatters. The authority of the Church?s teachings, all of them, are not found in canon law, they are not found in moral theology textbooks, nor in the Catechism. The authority of the Church's teachings is found in the story of events that took place on a hillside in Jerusalem two thousand years ago involving an upper room and an empty tomb.

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