Opinion



by Michael Sean Winters

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Last week, I called attention to Bishop Robert McElroy's Bernardin lecture at Loyola University Chicago. I noted that I disagreed with the bishop's diagnosis of what ails our body politic, but that did not prevent me from embracing his prescription for how the leaders of the Catholic Church should engage the political issues of our day.

Mutatis mutandi, this article at The Guardian by Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins is wrong in its premise that religious conservatives can rescue political conservatism from Donald Trump's populist nationalism and create an American version of European-style Christian democracy. As Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro and Rev. Marcelo Figueroa argued in their famous essay "Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism," the religious right in this country has long since lost its essentially Christian character, if by "Christian" we mean having to do with the Gospels of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, some of the comments by Invernizzi-Accetti and Steinmetz-Jenkins are weirdly wrong. For example, they write:

> For instance, the president's dogged determination to curb socially redistributive policies — like taxes for the rich and healthcare coverage for vulnerable groups — jar with the Christian values of solidarity and neighborly love, which previously found expression in the commitment to a form of "compassionate" conservatism.

In Europe, it is true that an essentially conservative Christian democratic program embraced redistributive goals, but when did U.S. conservatives, compassionate or otherwise, embrace higher taxes on the rich or a health care system that takes universality as a goal?

Or take this observation:

> As George W Bush's former speechwriter Michael Gerson notes in the Atlantic's latest cover piece: "One of the most extraordinary things about current politics … is the loyal adherence of religious conservatives to Donald Trump." It's so extraordinary, in fact, that it is hard to imagine Christian voters remaining loyal to Trump if faced with a better alternative.

Did these two professors sleepwalk through the 2016 GOP primaries? Gov. John Kasich and former Gov. Jeb Bush came as close as a Republican can come to the kind of Christian democracy principles Europeans espouse — and even they did not support higher taxes on the rich! — and there were plenty of other less nasty, less morally compromised, less bellicose, less racist, less demeaning, less secular alternatives to Mr. Trump on those debate stages. He creamed them all, and he did it with the backing of religious conservative voters.

The professors also make a claim that gets to the heart of their misreading of American politics. They state, "Christian democracy, a political ideology embodied by figures like Germany's Angela Merkel, contributed to establishing stable democracies in Europe in the aftermath of the second world war. The US was often deeply supportive of this process, yet never cultivated an analogous political movement at home." Yes we did. It was called the Democratic Party, and the alliance occurred before, not after, World War II, when Franklin Roosevelt, elected to the presidency in 1932, embraced the kind of domestic policies the U.S. bishops had outlined in their 1919 program for social reconstruction after the close of the First World War. If those policies had been adopted in 1919 we might have avoided the Great Depression. But *felix culpa*! The Depression won for us a great president and

the foundation of a durable social safety net that is with us still.

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Whatever mistakes Invernizzi-Accetti and Steinmetz-Jenkins make in their diagnostic and historical analysis, however, these are wiped away by the simplicity and accuracy of their prescribed treatment: Christian democracy could helpfully address what ails American politics. They correctly identify its three essential principles: a core commitment to the inherent dignity of the human person, a moral critique of capitalism, and a resolute internationalism. And they are undoubtedly right that all three principles are both firmly grounded in Christian belief and diametrically opposed to the populist nationalism of President Trump.

The natural home for this religiously-based ideological disposition in the U.S. used to be the Democratic Party. Today, the Democratic Party is run by a class of professional pollsters, media mavens and fundraisers, virtually all of whom prioritize a libertarian fetish for abortion rights and an indoctrination in Foucault's theory that power is the only important defining reality in social relations. It is a strange thing to find liberals putting the words "religious liberty" in scare quotes and denigrating the very idea that someone could have a conscientious objection to performing an abortion.

The Republican Party has always been the party of the moneyed interest and, just so, resists the second principle of Christian democracy.

And the face of Christianity in American public life the past three decades has largely been the face of the religious right. The recently deceased Rev. Billy Graham baptized a variety of Americanism that never questioned modern capitalism. The next generation of evangelical Protestant leaders, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, embraced a full-throttled alliance with the Republican Party. In the Catholic Church, the clergy and lay leaders who congregate at First Things have been only too willing to bastardize Catholic moral theology in order to justify an uncritical allegiance to the Republican Party, a stance that is now joined to an overt hostility to Pope Francis. If there is any hope to be expected from the pews on the right, I do not see it.

I commend these two professors for thinking that Christian democratic principles could aid what is unhealthy in American politics. They are correct. But, as much as I wish it were possible that such a thing could happen, I fear that American politics will become more coarse, more out of touch with the ideals of Christian democracy, more libertarian and therefore feckless. I hope I am wrong. Surely, the path forward to which Invernizzi-Accetti and Steinmetz-Jenkins point, and which McElroy outlined, is the only way out of the morass we are in. I just wish I know how we could get there.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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