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Michael Gerson, the Dalai Lama & Liberals

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 24, 2009 NCR Today

Reading Michael Gerson is not like watching Glenn Beck. Gerson is a serious person and his words are read in the Washington Post. So, when he gets something wrong, it is important not to snicker, but to reply.

Yesterday, Gerson went after liberals, and specifically the Obama administration, because the White House will not be receiving the Dalai Lama when the Tibetan exile comes to the United States next month. He perceives in this non-invitation a portent writing that ?a large diplomatic signal is being sent.? And he then jumps to the conclusion that the White House is not serious about the promotion of liberty. He concludes his moral chastisement thus: ?What is left of foreign policy liberalism when a belief in liberty is removed??

The problem is not, as Gerson writes, that ?in great power politics, morality often gets its hair mussed.? That problem afflicts all politics, great and small, but the choice is rarely between morality on one side and immorality on the other. More often, the choice is between one moral good and another. For example, during World War II when the Germans discovered the mass grave at Katyn, where the Soviets had murdered thousands of Polish officers, the moral good of revealing the truth was set against the moral good of defeating Hitler, in which effort the Soviets were heavily engaged.

But, Gerson has chosen an odd point of focus to voice his concern that liberalism has lost its concern for liberty. The Dalai Lama is not, after all, a Western liberal. The regime to which he is the heir was a theocratic one when it last ruled, and the Dalai Lama?s claim to legitimacy has to do with birth not election. I am all for the people of Tibet having greater freedom, and I recognize the Dalai Lama?s courage in calling for those people to be free. But, I am not sure that the freedom he represents is not more similar to the freedom of the children of God of which St. Paul spoke which is a different freedom from that which is embodied in the First Amendment.

The Obama administration can be faulted, or praised, for how it seeks to promote freedom around the world, as was the Bush administration and the Clinton administration. But, not inviting the Dalai Lama to the White House allows one to question their tactics, not their motives.

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