

Chaput's Latest

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 18, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Archbishop Charles Chaput, soon to be installed as the next Archbishop of Philadelphia, gave a talk to the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders, which has [now been published as an essay](#) [1] by the Witherspoon Institute. The essay is entitled "Nation of Faith; Nation of Immigrants," and it explores how religion and American culture intersect historically and what Latinos bring with them into the U.S. cultural mix. Chaput addressed some of these themes in his book, *Render unto Caesar*.

Much of what Chaput said is correct and needs repeating. For example, he states:

"We can't claim to be a faithful husband or wife and then cheat on our spouse. And we can't claim to love God and be a "good Catholic," but then ignore what it means to be Catholic in our business dealings, our social policies and in our political choices. Christian faith is always personal but never private. It either guides our behavior all the time, both in public and in private, or it's phony. And if it's phony, we should stop trying to fool ourselves. We need to be faithful Catholics first. If we're good at that, then every other quality of fruitful citizenship will follow."

I do not know if I would use the word "phony" because I think many people are guided by their faith, but they fall short, or they can't integrate their faith with what they perceive as the demands of justice. Sadly, often the Church and its leaders do not help them achieve such an integration either.

As well, Chaput is correct when he states: "For all of its greatness, America has a huge capacity to homogenize new immigrants; to bleach out their personality, their character and especially their beliefs. In the decades ahead, being a Catholic will need to be a conscious choice." This is undoubtedly true, America does homogenize, but it was not always completely true. If Chaput would extend his historical gaze a bit deeper, he would recognize that it was only in the postwar era, when the hyper-commercialization of the culture combined with the flight to the suburbs, that Catholics began to really homogenize. No one thinks of the 50s as a decade of rampant secularism, but that is precisely what it was. Our capitalist culture began to reach into daily life in new ways, and the rhythms of religious life were torn asunder. People became identified by what they could buy, not by who they were, the size of their house not the commitment to their family, the money in their bank account not the depth of their solidarity with the friends and family and colleagues.

Archbishop Chaput, sadly, is not much of a historian, and here is where his essay is problematic. He, like many conservative Christians, is intent on baptizing the founding fathers in a way that does not bear historical scrutiny. I am not one of those historians who believe that the American founding had nothing to do with religion. Religion was in the air they breathed so even when they were not explicit about their religious beliefs, religion shaped their entire view of the world and of the men and women who inhabit it. The American founding happened before Darwin changed our view of nature irrevocably, and before the great skeptics of human reason, or most of them, wrought their peculiar havoc on intellectual life. I share Chaput's criticism of those who would whitewash religion out of the founding.

But, Chaput also needs to recognize that the God whom the founders worshipped was not the God whom Catholics worship. Many were Deists or Unitarians who believed God created the universe but then leaves it

alone. These men used the name of God to denote the author of their first principles, but those first principles came from the Enlightenment, not from the Gospels. The Deist God has died and all Christians in America now worship a God who interferes in the world in ways Thomas Jefferson did not perceive. Those who were more orthodox were orthodox Protestants for whom private judgment was a sacrosanct principle and who did believe that religion was a private matter.

Indeed, I think Chaput's interpretation of the American founding would be more persuasive if he managed to admit that, at the time of the founding, the Catholic Church was robustly opposed to the political tenets that animated the founders. The Catholic leaders then knew that the freedom of the children of God was not like the freedom championed by the American, still less the French, exponents of revolution and liberty. Chaput is a smart man, and he is smart enough to recognize that while there was a moral consensus among American believers, including Catholics, and a shared commitment to the new nation's political arrangements, the Holy See continued to refuse to relinquish its insistence on Church-State union and its opposition to religious liberty until Vatican II. And, when he cites John Courtney Murray, you would not know that the Vatican had silenced Murray for his views in the 1950s. Finally, you would not know from Chaput's argument that Vatican II's Decree on Religious Liberty raises as many questions as it answers and that the tension between the negative conception of liberty (freedom from) that was at the heart of the American founding, and the positive conception of freedom that is the only kind Catholic anthropology can truly embrace, remains unresolved.

Put differently, Chaput may like to cite Courtney Murray, but I would submit that when Courtney Murray argued that the Bill of Rights were "articles of peace, not articles of truth," he was making the kind of assertion that would earn a frown from Pope Benedict XVI.

There is a deeper problem with Chaput's attempt to baptize the founders, one that flows from his misunderstanding of how religion informed their views. He may be right that the founders knew religion was essential to their purposes, but they were content with a sterile civic religion, one that would prop up Americanism by helping people govern themselves and so, be capable of governing the country. As Dwight Eisenhower so eloquently put it, "In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." As a Catholic, somehow I think I am supposed to be concerned with "what it is."

I do not think Archbishop Chaput is intentionally trying to reduce religion to being a prop for Americanism, but his friends at the Witherspoon Institute surely are. For them, religion is always an "add-on," a way to bless capitalism by insisting that businessmen be ethical, a way to engage American culture without evangelizing it. Professor Robert George has made a career out of misunderstanding the difference between religious engagement with culture and religious complicity with culture. Religion stays plenty private for them when they want it to: Whenever conservative Catholics disagree with the Church's teaching on, say, the rights of organized labor or the moral claims of the poor, these, we are told, must be left to "prudential judgment." It is a smokescreen.

So, Chaput is half right and half wrong. He clearly has a fine mind and one has the suspicion that if he ever took a step back, engaged someone who doesn't already agree with him, stopped taking calls from Princeton for a bit, he might gain a broader perspective, and a more historically accurate one. But, this essay falls short, very short. It does not point the way forward for the Catholic Church in the United States, still less for Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. It points to a kind of neo-conservative view of America that is intellectually shoddy, religiously inadequate, and would, in fact, achieve precisely the kind of homogenization of Hispanic Catholics that Chaput says he wants to avoid.

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