

THE ALTERNATIVE

May 2005
Vol XXXII No. 4

Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the topic of religion in public life. It is suggested by the relentless news coverage of the Vatican that began on April 2. Whatever else this explosion of attention to the Catholic church indicates, it is evidence that religion remains a lively issue, not simply as a private matter but something inevitably mixed up with politics and moral persuasion. The common thread of the following three essays is that religion does not fit comfortably into the conservative vs. liberal framework that today's politics and news media use.

DEEPLY CONSERVATIVE

By Gabriel Moran

Someone not fully acquainted with the English language might mistakenly think that the first name of the new pope is Aconservative.@ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was regularly referred to as conservative. Since his election as Pope Benedict XVI, the news media have been looking for signs that he is not so conservative as has been assumed. The issues of contraception, abortion, clerical celibacy and women's ordination are used for a conservative to liberal ranking. It will probably be a few years before the pope's outlook is clear. For the sake of the world, not just Roman Catholics, one wishes him well in taming the Vatican bureaucracy and providing a good direction for the Roman Catholic church. The thesis of this essay is that to accomplish these ends the new pope needs to be more conservative than what is evident in his paper trail of the last fifteen years.

The Catholic church is a conservative institution. All institutions are conservative but few so profoundly as the Catholic church. It would be more conservative if Eastern and Western churches united, something the new pope seems interested in. The necessarily conservative character of the church is its great strength and its great danger. In the United States, there is a problem in what Aconservative@has come to mean. Calling New Gingrich, Tom Delay or Karl Rove Aconservative@is a bizarre misuse of language. Etymologically, logically, historically, a conservative is one who conserves, one who has a respect for tradition and is skeptical about grand plans to fix the human race. Tradition is about handing on what the human race has learned, which includes the recognition that human institutions will always need reforming.

ALiberal,@the word usually contrasted with conservative, underwent its own

metamorphosis at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, liberal focus was on liberating the individual from governmental oppression. At the beginning of the twentieth century it became evident that the main oppressor had become big business. Paradoxically, liberals now looked to government for protecting the vulnerable against economic oppression. Conservatives in the nineteenth century were rightly concerned with defending the role of government authority. But in the twentieth century, their reaction against excesses of liberalism found expression in the defense of the rich against the poor. An older meaning of conservatism still finds roots in some of the moral and religious tradition, but this attitude is often one of defending bits and pieces of the tradition, especially the sexual mores of the nineteenth century.

What kind of conservative is the present pope? Maureen Dowd, in a column entitled *Uncle Dick and Papa*, compared Joseph Ratzinger's advisory role to the previous pope and Dick Cheney's influence on George W. Bush. Dowd was as usual clever and witty but I don't think the comparison sheds much light. The more interesting comparison would be with Antonin Scalia. Scalia and Ratzinger are products of the same era of Catholic theology, even though on separate continents. Scalia is often called conservative but he calls himself an *originalist*, which he thinks is the only alternative to an *evolving constitution*. He dismisses with contempt the idea that the court should be influenced by world opinion, such as in the recent decision outlawing the execution of 16 year olds.

Granted that the Supreme Court should not rule by opinion poll but if the world's judgment of the immorality of a practice is 190 to 1, shouldn't that give pause to the minority? Perhaps Scalia is right in his confident judgments but he does not seem to be a conservative. A conservative would cherish the constitution and respect the interpretations of jurists past and present. Scalia's originalism claims to divine what the eighteenth-century writers meant about issues they could not have considered. The alternative to originalism versus an evolving constitution would seem to be a conservative respect for tradition.

The writings of Joseph Ratzinger suggest an outlook similar to Scalia's. As many people have pointed out, his job as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may have forced him to be defensive. That would be understandable but the defense did not draw upon the best of scriptural, patristic and medieval traditions. His most significant writing is a Declaration entitled *Dominus Jesus*, which did not go over well with a broad range of Catholics and offended many other peoples. It is unlikely that this reaction bothered him. One of his books is entitled *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*. While he tries to be tolerant of World Religions, his first commitment is to the truth of Christian Belief. Like Scalia, he thinks that public opinion is irrelevant to a truth set in the past. He believes that defense of that truth is not

intolerant, but for many people the claim to possess the truth is arrogant.

The Christian analogy to Scalia's originalism would seem to be what is called fundamentalism (a peculiar word invented in 1920) for describing people who treat the bible as a series of statements that convey the truth to a reader. Not many Catholics are originalists of this kind; for them the bible is read through a more basic set of texts: the doctrines of the Catholic church. All or most of these revealed truths are supposedly in the bible even if they are pretty far removed from the bible's language. The guarantee of these truths is that they are preserved by the bishops under the guidance of the Vatican. Such a system could be admirably conservative if it took history seriously, that is, if the tradition of two thousand years were respected enough to allow various interpretations, lively debate and admission that religious knowledge will always be incomplete.

The key to Ratzinger's writings is the claim - or unquestioned assumption - that there exists a thing called Christian revelation. This object is the standard by which every opinion and practice can be judged with certainty. Most church officials would be surprised to know that the term Christian revelation cannot be found until the late sixteenth century, that it is the by-product of Catholic-Protestant disputes. What is contained within the Christian revelation may be debated by Catholics but bishops believe their mission is to defend - teach - this collection of revealed truths. In the nineteenth century, a strange word, Magisterium, was invented to complete the abstraction from any kind of historical process. Thus, anyone who argues with the proposition that the magisterium teaches the truths of Christian revelation is wrong - by definition.

After the introductory words of Dominus Jesus, Ratzinger states the main threat to the Catholic church: Certain theological propositions are developed...in which Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church lose their character of absolute truth.... In his Instruction on the Vocation of the Theologian, which refers to revealed truth, revealed doctrine, the deposit of divine revelation, Ratzinger was concerned that the theologian not stray from the Magisterium, a word that appears 59 times in a brief document.

The way out of doctrinal rigidity would be a deeper conservatism that draws on the 2000 year history of the Catholic church. Dominus Jesus, like most Vatican documents, mainly cites other Vatican documents and a narrow range of biblical and conciliar texts. It neglects much of the tradition that one would expect a conservative to cherish. For example, Ratzinger does not think that mysticism fits within Christian revelation. He is right in saying that in a choice between mysticism and modern enlightenment, Christian revelation is more on the side of enlightenment. But the mystical tradition is one of the richest strands of Catholic history and a key for a Catholic rethinking of the meaning of

Revelation. @ If this term is to be intelligible to the contemporary world, Catholic mystical tradition is needed, along with cooperative inquiry by Jews, Christians and Muslims, all of whom lay claim to the term. Of course Jews and Muslims have no part in the conceptual object AChristian revelation. @

While the dogmas of the Catholic church might simply be dismissed by most people, the claim to possess revealed truths in a Christian revelation can have moral reverberations that affect the whole world. In his Instruction, Ratzinger writes that while Revelation also contains moral teachings which per se could be known by natural reason, it is a doctrine of faith that these moral norms can be infallibly taught by the Magisterium. @ A fresh reading of Jesus=teaching (including help from Jewish authors) might reorient the discussion of morality. Jim Wallis, a genuinely conservative Christian, points out that the bible has a lot to say about taking care of the poor and the dispossessed. It has very little to say about sex (it does condemn divorce but it does not have a word for homosexuality).

The Catholic church can be a powerfully conservative force for economic justice against the claims of a conservatism stuck somewhere around 1900. The Catholic church has a terribly mixed record on war and state executions but its deepest roots, which have been surfacing in recent decades, are in teachings of non-violence and the protection of the vulnerable. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic church seems so obsessed with sex that its voice on everything else is drowned out. The Catholic church is burdened with the negative and abstruse language of the nineteenth century (sodomy, onanism, masturbation, contraception, abortion, sado-masochism...) which makes an intelligent discussion of sex almost impossible.

The solution is not the reactionary attitudes of the twentieth century which have produced more chaos than liberation. The need is to combine modern understandings of sex with ancient wisdom found in such places as Christian, Jewish and Buddhist teachings about discipline of life, respect for the body, and the need to accept sex as integral to a healthy life.

As the present pedophilia scandal in the Catholic church has revealed, Catholic bishops do not have much credibility when it comes to telling people how to behave sexually. The sexual problems quickly became an authority problem. There are important things in the church's long tradition that would be a valuable contribution to a contemporary discussion of sexuality. But a little humility will be needed by Pope Benedict XVI to move away from Joseph Ratzinger's position on moral norms (which) can be infallibly taught by the Magisterium. @ If Catholic bishops wish to teach Catholics, let alone people who are not Catholic, they will have to recover deeper roots of their own tradition and engage in real

conversation with Catholic scholars and with leaders of other religions.
LOSING OUR RELIGION
By John Zimmerman

The Family Research Council recently declared: "The filibuster was once used to protest racial bias, and it is now being used against people of faith." The Democrats' response: "I cannot imagine that God...is going to take the time to debate the filibuster in heaven," said Sen. Richard Durban. "God does not take part in partisan politics," echoed the Senate minority leader, Harry Reid.

That's bad history and even worse politics. Every great movement for social justice in the United States has been powered by religious sentiment. Instead of demanding that conservatives omit religion from politics, liberals should reclaim the religious mantle themselves.

Start with the battle against slavery in the early 1800s. "I accuse the land of my nativity of insulting the majesty of heaven with the grossest mockery that was ever exhibited to man," thundered William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist. "Slavery wasn't simply unfair or inequitable, terms of choice for today's Democrats. It was an iniquity, a sin against God. So was the brutal exploitation of American laborers after the Civil War, when robber barons piled up millions of dollars in profit while workers languished in poverty. That's why the United Mine Workers Journal cited the Bible in an 1894 attack on greedy mine operators. "What was right in the time of Moses, Mordecai and Ehud will be right forever," the UMW raged. "God shall save the children of the needy and shall break into pieces the oppressor."

At the 1912 convention of the Progressive Party, which endorsed women's suffrage and a federal income tax, delegates sang "Onward Christian Soldiers." During the Depression, Democrats routinely cited the Sermon on the Mount - "Blessed are the meek for they shall possess the earth" - on behalf of welfare relief and other New Deal measures. Christian rhetoric suffused the African-American civil rights struggle after World War II. "If we are wrong, God almighty is wrong," Martin Luther King, Jr. declared in 1955. "If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth." To King, segregation and racial injustice weren't simply bad policy, "to borrow another Democratic aphorism. They were base, evil and sinful: an abomination against God as well as against man.

Back then, remember, it was King's opponents who argued that religion didn't belong in politics. "Preachers are not called to be politicians but soul winners," cautioned Jerry Falwell in 1965, condemning King and other ministers for their civil rights activism. "Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals.

The gospel does not clean up the outside but regenerates the inside. @

During the next decade, Mr. Falwell would shift course and lead religious conservatives into politics. At the same time, political liberals abandoned their religious appeals. So now Republicans say that God is on their side, while Democrats say that God does not take sides.

And that's why the Republicans keep winning. We live in the most devout wealthy democracy on the face of the earth. You might celebrate that fact, you might deplore it, but you cannot deny it. For a policy to be right or wrong, there must be a reason. And for the vast majority of Americans, that reason will invoke their faith.

Instead of telling Republicans to leave their religion out of the judicial nomination battle, the Democrats should challenge the nominations on religious grounds. One of the nominees, Janice Rogers Brown, has suggested that minimum-wage laws might be unconstitutional; a second one, William G. Myers III, has cast doubt upon the constitutionality of the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts. All of these federal regulations interfere, you see, with the right to property, which these jurists see as sacrosanct.

But there's another view, derived from Scripture itself, that says they are wrong; that poverty and pollution - like slavery - insult the majesty of heaven; that God shall save the children of the needy; that the meek shall inherit the earth; and that Jesus was more than a utopian dreamer. It says that the Lord wants us to share our wealth, and to care for each other.

And if the Democrats can't bring themselves to say that, God save us all.

OTHER PEOPLE'S RELIGION

By Judith Shulevitz

Americans don't like religious intolerance, and who can blame them? When backed by state power, it can lead to murder and mayhem. People who disparage other faiths no longer come off as commendably pious, as they did centuries ago; now they just seem boorish. So naturally, when Long Angeles school officials discovered anti-semitic commentary in an edition of the Qur'an donated to school libraries by a local Islamic foundation, they pulled the books off the shelf. Then to emphasize that they were not discriminating against Islam or protecting the feelings of Jews only, they announced the formation of a committee to review the commentaries accompanying all religious texts in their collection. The idea is to get rid of any matter reflecting adversely on persons because of their race, color, creed, national origin, ancestry, sex or occupation. @

Here's the problem with the district's fair-mindedness: It fails to grasp an inevitable part of religion. Most world religions originally preached intolerance of other religions. To take its mission statement at its word, the committee would have to expunge from school libraries the holy books of at least the three major creeds in this country, since their primary texts and annotations thereof are often suffused with antipathy toward unbelievers, as well as toward such nationalities as, say, the Egyptians and the Canaanites, and occupations like prostitute, money lender and tyrant. To scrub even the footnotes of Scripture of intolerance, you have to erase religious history.

Consider the Qur'an. The offending commentary accompanies the second chapter, in which Muhammad, speaking for Allah, reviews the history of monotheism up until his day so as to demonstrate the superiority of Islam to Judaism and Christianity. He embraces the prophets of those religions, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but rejects their followers, who in his opinion misunderstood the prophetic messages. What's his evidence? The backsliding chronicled in biblical texts, for one, and the Jews' refusal to embrace Islam for another.

This sounds self-serving, but you have to see it from the perspective of the believer committed to the truth of the new religion. He would consider deliberately obtuse a person who recognized the one God but denied his latest revelation. If God is one and his message is also one and fundamentally indivisible, surely mankind should be one community, wrote the University of Chicago scholar Fazlur Rahman, explaining that the Qur'an condemned Jews and Christians - but particularly Jews - as sectarians who betrayed the universal nature of monotheistic truth.

In the edition banned by the Los Angeles school district, - one of the most popular translations of the Qur'an in the English speaking world - the translator, writing in 1934, expounds on the troubling verses in ways that seem in no way out of keeping with their denunciatory tone. The Jews in their arrogance claimed that all wisdom and all knowledge of Allah were enclosed in their hearts, he writes. Their claim was not only arrogance but blasphemy. In reality they were men without faith.

You would have to be pretty thick-skinned not to bristle at this, especially if you were Jewish, but Jews who do not want their own sacred writings removed from library shelves should probably remain calm. Founding religious documents almost always disparage previous or competing religions in order to prove the need for the one they are trying to establish. This holds especially true for monotheistic religions, which assert that they are in possession of unique knowledge about God. A footnote to an edition of the Torah used in most

Conservative synagogues until recently, for example, explains that the Canaanites had to be conquered because of the savage cruelty and foul licentiousness of their lives and cult. When it comes to speaking ill of Jews, the New Testament is at least as bad as the Qur'an; so is some modern day Christian exegesis.

One way to deal with unpalatable remarks in sacred books is to frame them with the kind of scholarly commentary that puts those remarks into a safely historical perspective. (This seems particularly prudent when the people attacked are still extant today, as is the case with the Jews). Some scholars who support the Los Angeles school board's decision say that what's called for is a more responsible - meaning, historical - edition of the Qur'an. There is a well intentioned but presumptuous demand. Not all religions are willing to distance themselves through scholarship from their own literature, and it seems intolerant to insist that they must. Judaism, though it backed away from much of its xenophobia during its rabbinic period, did not welcome what 19th century German historians called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* - the scientific study of Judaism - until the twentieth century, and even now many orthodox Jews reject it. Mainstream Christian commentary on the Old and New Testaments remained openly anti-semitic until almost recently.

There aren't many editions of the Qur'an that could satisfy Los Angeles school officials. If we want to understand how the faithful perceive their faith, we would do better to look at how they represent it to themselves than to demand that they undergo a crash course in Enlightenment thought for our benefit. Our laws do not require that religions sanitize themselves so as to suit our modern sensibilities. John Locke, in his Letter Concerning Toleration says the civil authorities should forbid only that which is not lawful in the ordinary course of life, nor in any private house. To attack someone physically because of his religion, or blow up a building in which he works, is a punishable offense. To denigrate that religion is not.

And thank God for that. If we were weren't allowed to disagree passionately about our beliefs, what could we disagree about? Our hair styles? Religious freedom requires as much elbow room as intellectual freedom, notwithstanding the intensity of feeling aroused by theological debate. Maybe the school officials were right to think that such discussions don't belong in public schools. But I'm skeptical. Young people are at least as intelligent as the rest of us. With instruction they ought to be able to grasp that systems of belief can be at once appealing and repugnant, and that the student's job is to discriminate between those qualities. That's what discrimination - the good kind - is for.

Alternative Religious Education, Box 1405, Montauk NY 11954

Online copies: www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/news.html