

July 7, 2013

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

American Religion

It is my sad impression that much of what passes for evangelism in this country is, in fact, only an exercise in religious consumerism, where various religious bodies exhibit their wares and compete with one another for larger shares of the shopping population. In such a context the pastor is chiefly a sales representative, whose major concern is customer satisfaction. I mean, exactly how does a pastor "reprove, rebuke, exhort" (2 Timothy 4:2) in a setting where "the customer is always right"?

The consumerism of popular American religion is what accounts for that most abysmal of modern religious experiments, the "seeker-friendly" congregation, where congregants are chiefly made to feel welcome and affirmed, no matter what their style of life or state of conscience.

A common expression of this distressing phenomenon is the youth-oriented variety, where the standards of both belief and worship are determined by the preferences of the immature, the naïve, and the narcissistic. Thomas E. Bergler has examined this phenomenon in his recent *The Juvenalization of American Christianity*. In congregations where this spirit prevails, he says, there is more emphasis on individual choice and "personal pilgrimage" than on truth and the tenets of the Creed.

On the other hand, we should not pretend that such deviations represent a new corruption of religion in America. In fact, ours has always been what Ross Douthat calls "a nation of heretics." The expression comes from the subtitle of his book, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*.

Thanks to the popularization of shoddy historical research—Douthat mentions Elaine Pagels and Dan Brown—much doubt has been cast on the warranty and substance of the teaching of Jesus, a fact that encourages believers to place a greater, but seriously unwarranted, confidence on their own religious sense. That is to say, the real source of authority in much of American religion today is not the objective teaching of the Bible but an internal and uninformed religious sentiment. The God of Holy Scripture, the God of judgment and grace, has largely been replaced by what the sociologist Christian Smith calls "a

combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist.” The Christian Faith, in other words, has been abandoned for—his expression—“Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

A chief exponent of this new “evangelism” is Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of *Eat, Pray, Love* and promoter of the “God Within” theory. Gilbert writes, “God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.” This is the only divinity, says Gilbert, you need to consult; everything else is optional and ancillary. In the course of this internal quest, it is legitimate to consult whatever spiritual resources may be helpful—including the insights of traditional religions—but the self remains the sole source of authority.

Commenting on Gilbert’s approach, Douthat remarks that if “the prosperity Gospel makes the divine sound like your broker; the theology of the God Within makes him sound like your shrink.”

Again, however, the roots of the problem lie deeper than anything within our living memory. Indeed, those roots were planted by the very men who left us the American Constitution. Almost to a man, those who formed our nation on the basis of that Constitution were “theistic rationalists,” a term I borrow from Gregg L. Frazer’s book, *The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution*. In this work Frazer demonstrates that virtually none of America’s political founders believed in the divinity of Christ, the authority of Scripture, or any other distinctive feature of the Nicene Creed. In short, these men did not represent anything vaguely approximating what goes by the name “Judeo-Christian.”

If America can be said to have religious ancestors who truly were Christians, we should probably think of the men and women associated with the two “great awakenings” of the 18th and 19th centuries, along with the self-sacrificing frontier preachers (I keep two portraits of Jackson Kemper over my desk) and, most of all, the early pilgrims who arrived in this land for the explicit purpose of serving God. Only such folks make sense of the expression, “one nation under God.”

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