

Protagonist Corner

Losing Our Ideals

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Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if Iraq were similar to Afghanistan—if a bad regime was thrown out, people were liberated, food could come in, borders could be opened, repression could stop, prisons could be opened? I mean, it would just be *fabulous*.

I've been pondering those words spoken by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a Pentagon briefing this last summer. Setting aside—at least for the moment—his choice of analogies (given competing warlords, daily violence, and a less-than-stable new government, Afghanistan hardly seems like the fabulous society Rumsfeld envisions) and the means by which he is willing to achieve that society, I have to admit a certain attraction to the values implicit in that comment: a just society of liberated, tolerant, and well-fed people. And I say this not simply because I happen to belong to a society which, at least in comparison to Afghanistan under the Taliban or Iraq under Saddam Hussein, seems to embody those values, but because I think those ideals are worth believing in and working for whether one is a U.S. citizen or not.

At the same time I've been pondering those words, I've been reading through statements and position papers from the various mainline churches, seminaries, and ecumenical organizations, all of which criticize the very project Rumsfeld was promoting when he made his comment: unilateral and preemptive action to overthrow a sovereign government. Though these church statements differ in tone, audience, and, to a lesser degree, constructive suggested alternatives to war with Iraq, they nevertheless share important similarities with each other. That, I imagine, is a good thing. Mainline churches ought to present a united front to their members and our national leaders; call it ecumenical multilateralism.

However, these documents—including, perhaps rather embarrassingly, the one I helped to pen—also share important similarities with statements, typified by Rumsfeld's reverie above, made by the very national leaders they are arguing against. That may not be such a good thing, for it may reveal very real weaknesses in arguments on all sides of this issue—weaknesses to which those of us who claim citizenship in both the United States of America and heaven ought to pay attention. For while these similarities may imply points of commonality that could make future conversations more productive, they may simultaneously reveal the paucity of intellectual resources that all sides are using in this most important of national debates.

Begin with the following: arguments both for and against war with Iraq are premised on moral claims. That statement becomes less of a truism the more one reflects on it. While mainline churches have tended to conflate their theological positions with the moral implications of those positions, there is no necessary reason why this must be the case. Even within the Christian tradition—provided one uses those words generously—I can imagine theological positions without any interesting moral implications. Some forms of quietism or antinomianism, for example, could

hardly have anything morally interesting to say about the impending war. And governments certainly can, have, and will practice a version of *realpolitik* that gives scant attention to moral considerations. But both our ecclesial leaders and our national ones have chosen to couch their arguments in the form of, “This is the *right* thing to do.” Moreover, most mainline church leaders seem willing to admit that the administration is making moral claims rather than argue that it is using moral language to cover up its true motives. After all, church documents consistently argue that the administration’s plan is wrong, not that the administration is lying.

The fact that both sides premise their arguments on moral claims is not especially revealing—or, rather, what it reveals may have to do with nothing more than the historical accident that the United States is strongly influenced by a Judeo-Christian ethic that occupies itself with a particular type of morally-linked language. So let me specify some of the similarities within that moral language that may be more revealing.

First, both sides mix religious and non-religious language in their arguments; indeed, in some places, the Bush administration uses clearer religious language than do the churches. Hence, President Bush can suggest that America is the light of the world (probably surprising news to Jesus as he is portrayed by John), or that America is a light set on a hill for all to see (ditto to the community of disciples portrayed by Matthew), and members of his administration and its supporters can use the language of good and evil to describe themselves and their opponents. Yet at the same time, they also turn to more secular language (e.g., self defense, regional and international stability, and various other *casus belli*) to describe their purposes and the means by which they hope to realize them. Likewise, ecclesial bodies mix religiously-freighted language about peace, reconciliation, and the rejection of violence with arguments that are accessible to non-religious folks (e.g., self defense, regional and international stability, and various other just war arguments) in order to explain why we ought to oppose war with Iraq.

A second similarity—one related to, though not the same as, the first—is that both sides appeal to moral ideals when making their respective cases. Moral language can appeal to laws or consequences or analogies or even narratives to make its case—and, at times, both our political and ecclesial leaders make such appeals. But their more basic appeals are to specific sets of ideals that they hold as basic, profound, and relevant. So political leaders, *a la* Secretary Rumsfeld, appeal to ideals like democracy, freedom, and peace through global stability, while religious leaders appeal to ideals like genuine and non-coerced multilateralism, non-violent international relations, and peace through acts of reconciliation and forgiveness. To take just two examples, the Interfaith Alliance asks President Bush “to establish our nation as a model international peacemaker,” (“Joint Letter to President Bush on Military Action in Iraq,” www.interfaithalliance.org/resource/iraq/ltr) and the presidents of the Graduate Theological Union in San Francisco urge their constituencies “to seek the things that make for peace” (“An Open Letter from the Graduate Theological Union Presidents to the Leaders of Our Religious Communities,” www.sksm.edu/openletter).

The implications of appealing to ideals are profound and they constitute the third, fourth, and fifth similarities between the arguments for and against war with Iraq. The third similarity is the sense of frustration, growing on both sides, that they are not being understood. This frustration expresses itself in the motives that lead into public statements, the way the statements get phrased, and, especially, the way we view our

opponents. On the one side, those favoring war see those who oppose it as softhearted and naïve at best and weak-willed political opportunists at worst. On the other side, those opposing the war see those who favor it as irrational patriots at best and weak-moraled political opportunists at worst. What other explanations can there be for those who don't grasp the self-obvious but mutually exclusive conclusions that the way to peace might include war or that this war won't bring peace? When ideals drive public statements, charitable readings of opponents and their procedures fade from view. As a result, debates between sides tend to produce more smoke than light.

Fourth, appeals to moral ideals tend to mask less innocuous and often more disturbing actual motives. Thus, appeals to democracy and human rights hide not only the quest for cheap, secure oil (a desire that is probably overstated by those opposed to the war), but also desires for global dominance, political advantage, or revenge. Likewise, appeals to peace and reconciliation can hide not only a rather odious self-righteousness, but also the desperate fear that we mainline religious types have lost our public influence or, even worse, the ears of our congregations. It is hard to disagree with ideals, so as long as we phrase our statements in those terms, anyone who hears them ought either to support us or be understood as ignorant or evil—which we must not be by virtue of our disagreement with them. That may be a comforting thought, but it doesn't square especially well with Paul's claims about the intransigence of human sinfulness.

Finally, appeal to moral ideals tends to evince a belief in a rather too-simple set of hopes about human well-being and our capacity to create and sustain it. So at the turn of the twenty-first century, we hear echoes of the liberal theology that came at the turn of the twentieth. Then we heard of the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, and the inevitable march of human progress toward the Kingdom of God. Now we hear either of the establishment of a secure nation through the elimination of tyrants and outlaw regimes and the creation and promotion of democratic and tolerant societies like ours, or we hear of the creation of a just and stable world through a system of international governance that can rely primarily on nonviolent methods to achieve peace. I exaggerate here—but I do so precisely to make my point: shorn of the insistence that they continually bind themselves back to the stubborn facts of human existence, ideals can lead us to conclusions that are theologically ethereal, historically inadequate, and politically irrelevant. Thus, like those who laid claim to the ideals of one hundred years ago only to be confronted with “the war to end all wars”—which didn't—we may be in for a shock when we find that our ideals fail to have much pull on the way people and nations actually go about their affairs. History is gritty business, and ideals that float above it may not end up having much bearing on it.

Truth be told, if this war is prevented, it will more likely be done so by the world's political complexity than by the mainline churches' moral clarity. North Korean treaty-breaking, French and Russian self-interest (leading to U.S. self-interest in keeping these allies happy), Israeli bellicosity, and the like are more likely to befuddle U.S. aspirations to war than public statements are to convert them. Likewise, if this war occurs, it is more likely to fail because Iraq is politically and sociologically ill-equipped to become a fresh, young democracy, its regional neighbors wouldn't be that happy with such a democracy if it existed, and the U.S. is unwilling to spend the political, economic, and conceptual capital necessary to bring such a vision to fruition. That is, what will keep the war from either happening or succeeding is the world's

complexity, not a sudden realization of how enlightened we can all become.

This doesn't mean that the church ought to stop making public statements; they can still serve valuable pedagogical and prophetic roles in both the church and the nation. At the end of this essay, I still like what we wrote and agree with what we did at Columbia Theological Seminary. But the churches ought not mourn their failures if war happens and they ought not claim their successes if it is prevented, for in either case, the churches are left to do the very thing to which they have been called all along: to discern what God is doing in the world, in the church, and in the lives of their members, and to try, as best they can, to respond in obedience.

Nor does it mean that any of us—church or nation—ought to lose our ideals. Visions of better things nourish our souls and motivate our actions. But we ought not think that having ideals gives us clarity about how to morally pursue them, and we definitely should not confuse our ideals about the way things ought to be with God's work in turning the world into what it will be. Our ideals nourish and motivate us; they don't enlighten or privilege us.

And maybe that's the point: what makes the Christian faith interesting and relevant isn't its solutions to the world's problems, but its recognition of the world's complexity, its own limits in dealing with it (including its own faithlessness), and God's ability to work through all of this anyway. So we are called to be faithful—and even to put our own two cents in about how we think the U.S. should act—but within that faith, we need to recognize our own limits and, even more importantly, our overlap with those with whom we disagree. For in an odd way, losing our ideals may an important step in seeing them achieved.