

Notes From Across The Atlantic

From the FAITH Magazine May-June 2005

Richard John Neuhaus

MIRACLES AND MEDICINE

Medical doctors are, all in all, quite seriously religious. This is reflected in a nationwide survey of more than a thousand physicians by the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, directed by Alan Mittleman. Seventy-four percent of doctors believe that miracles have occurred in the past and seventy-three percent believe they can occur today. Fifty-five percent say they have seen healings in their patients that defy medical explanation and that they consider miraculous. Fifty-nine percent say they pray for their patients. The report says physicians tend to be more religious than other professionals “perhaps because of their frequent involvement with matters of life and death”. That will often do it. Christian doctors are more open to miracles than Jewish doctors. It says here, “Such differences do not indicate that Christians are more religious than Jews. They do indicate that Christians tend to be religious in a more traditional way, while Jews are religious in a liberal way.” I’m thinking about it.

UNLIKELY BUSH SUPPORTERS

Tyler Golson is an American in Damascus who teaches the children of the Syrian upper class. He is also a Democrat who supported John Kerry and was surprised to discover that his students were enthusiastically backing Bush. This despite the fact that the U.S. has placed sanctions on Syria and accused it of being part of the terror nexus. Bush is, the students said, a good man, a strong leader and, most important, “a good Christian”. Golson reflects: “And thus I came to realise something that the Democrats could never admit: that there exists a support base for both the Republicans’ domestic and foreign agenda among the very people we thought most opposed current U.S. policy. The cultural background and value systems which inform many of these young Arabs’ outlook on the world mean they will always favour men like Bush over men like Kerry. The tenets of faith, family and, yes, ‘moral issues’ determine the overall political leanings of a considerable number of the Middle East’s future leaders, in rejection of Democratic stump issues like increased liberalism, internationalism and scientific progress. Though Democrats are often quick to criticize their opponents for seeing the issues in stark black and white, ‘us and them’ terms, perhaps they ought to step back from their own obsession with ‘red’ and ‘blue’ dichotomies and recognise this nuance of Middle Eastern reality. Having a truly

even-handed and practical approach to peace in the Arab world means realising that not everyone, and certainly not all of the elites in Arab society, sympathise with the anti-American movements taking place within their own ranks, and that these heartland Arabs could prove a valuable ally in future U.S.–Arab relations.”

‘CARING’ SIDE OF PRO-ABORTIONISTS

After the November election, I speculated that some pro-abortionists will start thinking about modifying their pitch, perhaps by coming out in support of some limits on partial birth abortion. They could then present themselves as “moderately pro-choice” or even, with some linguistic sleight of hand, “moderately pro-life”. Among the first out of the gate is Frances Kissling, founder and head of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFC), an organisation that has received millions of dollars from Ford, Rockefeller and other major foundations to counter the influence of the Catholic Church on the life questions. Kissling, who is sometimes referred to as Frances Quisling, has written a long article in *Conscience*, CFC’s magazine, “Is There Life After Roe? How to Think about the Foetus”, in which she warns pro-choicers that they are losing the battle because they come across as callous and unfeeling toward the fate of the baby who is killed. Pro-choicers should, she says, “present abortion as a complex issue that involves loss—and be saddened by that loss”. Eleanor Smeal, former head of NOW, is not persuaded. “I don’t hear her saying that there is joy sometimes. I think if an eleven-year-old is pregnant, it’s a great relief for her to have an abortion.” Not that Smeal is prepared to limit abortion to troubled eleven-year-olds or, for that matter, to limit it at all. Lynn Paltrow, director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women, a New York-based pro-abortion group, is somewhat more sympathetic to Kissling’s argument. “We definitely need a paradigm shift in the reproductive rights movement,” she says. “We’ve done a terrible job of articulating our beliefs in terms of values.” By values Paltrow means “protecting women from the consequences of being forced to carry unwanted pregnancies.” As best I can make it out, she’s saying that they’ve done a terrible job of articulating their support for abortion in terms of their support for abortion. In her article, Kissling says that pro-abortionists should not, for instance, reflexively fight the Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act, which would require women to be told about the pain experienced by the child being aborted. Kissling says the bill is an opportunity “to show that people can support the right to abortion and care about the foetus at the same time.” They can “honour both law and morality [by] trying to change the legislation to say that foetal anaesthesia should be respectfully offered as an option”. That is the consistent pro-choice position, giving the mother the choice of anaesthetising the baby before having the baby killed. As it happens, the worry of pro-abortionists about the perception that they are callous toward nascent human life is nothing new. The standard pro-abortion text on this is the 1977 book by Magda Denes, *In Necessity and Sorrow*. That was nearly thirty years ago, and over the years the delusion that an unlimited license to commit an unspeakable

evil can be disguised or excused by a display of moral handwringing has become ever less convincing to ever more Americans.

COMPARISON OF VALUES

The “moral values” factor in last November’s election will keep the analysts busy for a long time. Here is some trivia grist to add to the research mills. According to Brandweek, the advertising magazine, a survey of a thousand Americans reveals that 24 percent of Democratic voters but only 20 percent of Republicans admit to having stolen a towel from a hotel. But that difference may be within the margin of error, or maybe Republicans are not as honest in admitting their wrongdoing. More interesting is the finding that 23 percent of Republicans speak to their parents several times a week, compared with 14 percent of Democrats. Four percent of Democrats say they never speak to their parents, compared with only one percent of Republicans. Forty percent of Democrats say they are on “very unfriendly” terms with their ex-wives or husbands, while only 18 percent of Republicans are. Perhaps pertinent to the “pro-family” agenda, nine percent of Republicans have no brothers or sisters, while 14 percent of Democrats are without siblings. These are things I thought you might want to know.

APOLOGIES FROM AMERICAN ANGLICANS

A recent report stated that the bishops of the Episcopal Church, meeting for two days in Salt Lake City (an unlikely religio-cultural juxtaposition), wrestled with the recent Windsor Report on conflicts in the Anglican communion but were not able to come to a resolution. The Windsor Report wanted the Americans to apologise for installing as bishop a man who had left his wife and children to live with his male lover, countenancing the blessing of same-sex unions, and related offences. The Utah meeting expressed “sincere regret for the pain, the hurt and the damage caused to our Anglican bonds by certain actions of our church”. They very notably did not apologize for the certain actions. Said the U.S. presiding bishop Frank Griswold, “We perhaps have not been the most sensitive partners in terms of taking with full seriousness the integrity of other provinces and their struggles.” Perhaps. As Griswold and other Episcopal leaders have suggested on many occasions, the main struggle of Anglicans in Africa and Asia is in growing up and following the example of their American betters in accepting the changed sexual mores of the modern world.

BEING OPEN TO ID

Once again on intelligent design (ID). Professor Terry Noel of California State University writes in the Wall Street Journal: “The reason most scientists reject ID is that it fails to add anything to our understanding. Placing any kind of ‘super-intelligence’ in our explanatory chain of the origins of life simply puts the final question off. If one proposes that some kind of intelligence is behind it all, then one must in all fairness inquire into the origins of that intelligence and so on, an infinite regression.” This is a bit of a puzzle. If one concludes that the evidence suggests ID, then it certainly adds to one’s understanding if one previously thought the evidence did not suggest ID. It follows that one would then reject the rejection of ID. Inquiring into the origins and nature of that intelligence may take one into questions usually described as philosophical and theological rather than scientific. In that case, one either accepts a more humble notion of what can be known by scientific methodology or expands the definition of scientific methodology to encompass all considerations pertinent to the inquiry at hand. Both possibilities are repugnant to many scientists, who therefore reject ID. A livelier scientific curiosity, one is inclined to think, might lead not to infinite regress but to progress toward the infinite. But Prof. Noel may be right: most scientists have made up their minds and decline to think seriously about evidence and arguments suggesting that they may be wrong. That, too, may change, albeit very slowly.

WHAT ARE MUSEUMS FOR?

Identity politics, it seems, has now invaded the museum world. At the Smithsonian’s new National Museum of the American Indian, the general public is permitted to view only some of the material in the collection. Other artifacts can be seen only by people from a specific tribe. Marian Kaminitz, head of conservation, says that native peoples should be the curators, “because they know the material best, as it is the material of their culture. We respect their concerns and interpret the material through what they see as appropriate rather than as a dominating voice from outside the culture.” Indians may in some cases be the best authorities on Indian culture, although, as many scholars have pointed out, American Indian culture as currently admired is in large part the product of non-Indian mythmaking, not least of all by Hollywood . The more important point is that the very idea of the modern museum is founded on a distinctly Western belief that knowledge is universal and a distinctly Western eagerness to learn from other cultures. The Smithsonian is in the odd position—although by no means alone in the odd position—of undermining its own rationale for being. Perhaps the magnificent collections of medieval art in our great museums should be entrusted to the exclusive care and interpretation of devout Christians, or maybe just devout Catholics. Extend the logic to Egyptian,

Chinese and other collections. Or maybe all the stuff should be shipped back to their original owners, as the Greeks demand with respect to the Elgin marbles at the British Museum . Then the museums could all go out of business, leaving the future's understanding of the past in the hands of their ethnic-ideological custodians. Somebody at the Smithsonian needs to get a grip.

HOLLYWOOD POLITICS

The mind of Hollywood , if one may be permitted the expression, wants to be scrupulously fair and balanced. Much was made of the fact that, when it came to the Academy Awards, Hollywood eschewed giving serious consideration to “controversial” films of both the left and the right, meaning Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 and Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ. Mr. Moore’s film, as he repeatedly and proudly declared, was an unabashed piece of partisan propaganda aimed at discrediting and defeating George W. Bush. As movie critic Michael Medved observes, it has the lasting artistic significance of a faded bumper sticker from a failed election campaign. The Passion, by way of contrast, is totally nonpolitical and will almost certainly be viewed as a classic, watched by appreciative audiences for many years into the future. Contrary to Hollywood bias, it is neither conservative nor right-wing within the meaning of our current political polarisations, having earned \$370 million in domestic box office sales in 2004 by drawing huge crowds in states both red and blue. By rejecting both Moore and Gibson, the entertainment mandarins were able to pose as centrists, and were thus free to heap awards on films sympathetically depicting “non-controversial” causes such as abortion (Vera Drake) and mercy killing (Million Dollar Baby, The Sea Inside).