ON SINGING, LAUGHING, WEEPING, AND MUMBLING

by

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The following remarks were offered by Professor Michael McConnell in New York City upon receiving the 2023 Canterbury Medal from the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty on May 25, 2023.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the first, greatest, and most original of the philosophers of post-modernism, wrote of a madman who on a bright morning lights a lantern and runs to the marketplace proclaiming “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! . . . There never was a greater event--and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!”

The effect was profound. For those capable of understanding, “some sun seemed to have set, some old, profound confidence seemed to have changed into doubt.”

In his masterwork, Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche's mythic hero carries the same message—“God is dead!”—throughout the earth, in a parody of the gospels, calling it his “gift” to mankind.

But there is one exception. The work begins with an encounter between Zarathustra and a holy man living alone in the forest. Zarathustra asks the hermit what he does in the forest, and the hermit replies: “I make hymns and sing them; and in making hymns I laugh and weep and mumble: thus do I praise God. With singing, weeping, laughing, and mumbling do I praise the God who is my God.”

The hermit then asks Zarathustra what he had brought as a “gift.” Zarathustra, surprisingly, does not take up this invitation to tell the hermit the terrible truth of the death of God. Instead he says, evasively, “What should I have to give thee! Let me rather hurry hence lest I take aught away from thee!” And Zarathustra leaves the old man to worship in peace.
This is the story of religious faith in the post-modern world.

The first thing we notice about the story is the extraordinary gentleness with which Zarathustra treated the holy man.

This is startlingly out of character for a philosopher who celebrates strength and derides mercy, who tells unflinchingly the hard truths and has no respect for weakness, comfortable lies, and superstitions. Nowhere else in Thus Spake Zarathustra does the hero spare the sensibilities of his hearers.

Nietzsche thus suggests that there is something different about the holy man. While for most men, word of the death of God is a “gift,” for the saint it would “take away” something precious.

And in like manner, the post-modern world is willing to leave the believer in peace, at least while he remains in the forest. Religious belief, even the secular world realizes, is precious to those who have it, and it would be pointless and mean to interfere with it. (Religious liberty clinics are springing up in the strangest places.)

But what we notice next about the story is that the hermit was quaint and wrong. He was behind the times. He simply had not gotten the word. When Zarathustra was alone again, Nietzsche tells us that he marveled to himself, “Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!” The madman carries his lantern into the village in the middle of the day to symbolize just how obvious his message should be to anyone with eyes.

Zarathustra's forbearance thus was not based on any respect for the possible truth of the saint's beliefs. Zarathustra did not entertain that possibility.

He could not.

God is dead.

You cannot argue with facts.

His forbearance was an act of kindness, an indulgence--not the product of a mind open to the possibility that the other possesses a truth.

The third point we notice about the story is that it involves a hermit, living by himself in the forest. The man did not preach or proclaim the word of God.
He did not go into the village. He sang, he laughed, he wept, and—most revealingly—he “mumbled,” but these inarticulate sounds did not communicate except to his god.

Zarathustra's toleration was toward one who neither participated in public life nor entered public discourse. No such forbearance was shown to anyone in the village. If the hermit left the forest and attempted to enter into public discussion and debate, he would be given the news of God's death like everyone else.

Can we recognize in Zarathustra the enlightened attitude toward religious faith in our age?

Religious freedom is to be protected, strongly protected—so long as it is irrelevant to the life of the wider community. We can worship whatever crazy way we want to, in private. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg, as Jefferson would say.

But allow religion to affect the law pertaining to, say, abortion or marriage; or allow religion to affect the way we educate our children in our communities' schools; even allow religion to affect the way we celebrate holidays in public, and there is trouble. Even the mention of God in the Pledge of Allegiance produces a federal case.

To many Americans on the secular left, religion has become not just quaint and discredited, as it appeared to Nietzsche, but an urgent danger to justice and peace.

When these quaint and discredited beliefs spill over into the life of the community, we have crossed the line. Religion, the Supreme Court has told us on more than one occasion, is “a private matter for the individual, the family, and the institutions of private choice.” Religion in public is at best a breach of etiquette, at worst a violation of the law. Religion is privatized and marginalized. It has nothing to offer to the public sphere. The world will not interfere with solitary hermits in the forest, but they must stay out of the village.

That is the post-modern treaty of peace between religion and the powers and principalities of the secular world.

To talk about post-modernism requires us first to talk about modernism. And to talk about modernism is to talk about “liberalism,” which is modernism's
politics. Liberalism is the doctrine (or family of doctrines) that places individual freedom at the center of political aspiration. For the most part, the liberalism we see today is secular liberalism, and some religious intellectuals have grown skeptical of liberalism for that reason. We tend to forget that liberalism was born of concerns about the relations between God, Caesar, and the individual believer.

Liberalism came about when and where it did because the Protestant Reformation made the individual believer the judge of religious truth. One of the great rallying cries of the Reformation was: “God Alone is Lord of the Conscience.” The Protestant Reformers taught that we all have the duty – not just the right but the duty, a duty to God – to search the scriptures for ourselves, to reach our own conclusions, and to render unto God that homage, and that homage only, that we conclude is acceptable to Him. Not what we are told to believe – not what is acceptable to the dominant voices in our culture.

Religion and religious freedom were therefore at the very heart of the liberal project. Liberalism meant many things, but above all it meant that every person has the freedom to worship God in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience. This was the key to achieving both freedom of the mind and civil peace.

Initially, liberalism was understood principally in terms of what we would now call “limited government”: government that is confined to certain limited ends, leaving the rest to private persons in the private sphere. As applied to religion, this meant that the magistrate was given no power to superintend the spiritual health of the citizenry. As applied to the economic sphere, this would lead to the belief in a free-market economy.

Free exercise and free enterprise were two pillars of the liberal state, both standing for limited government.

Liberalism was favorably received, especially on this side of the Atlantic, in part because of its consistency with two central teachings of Protestant Christianity. The first of these is the two-kingsdoms theology of Augustinian thought--a theology carried forward in different ways by Luther and by the Calvinist Reformed tradition to which our Puritan and Presbyterian forebears adhered. The two-kingsdoms theology conceived of man as owing allegiance to two different sets of authorities, the spiritual and the temporal. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” Christ said, “and unto God the things that are God’s.”
The separation of church and state is a modern and secular relic of this more profoundly theological idea.

While theological in its origin, the two-kingsdoms idea lent powerful support to a more general liberal theory of government, because once the government could be limited in one respect, it could be limited in others. The state could no longer be understood as omnicompetent. Government does not pervade everything; politics does not pervade everything; there are different spheres.

This paved the way for a peaceful and diverse society, because we do not have to agree with one another about the most fundamental things in order to work and trade together. The lady at the next desk, or the fellow trying to sell me a pizza, can believe in transubstantiation or predestination or reincarnation, and it does not keep us from collaborating on a law review article or transacting business.

The second theological notion that paved the way for liberalism was the emerging concept of what our Baptists friends called “soul liberty.” This is the belief that faith, to be valid and acceptable to God, must be uncoerced. Under this view, it is literally impossible as a theological matter for government power to improve a citizen's spiritual state.

The idea of soul liberty derives from the doctrine of salvation through grace: the only way that unregenerate man can come to faith and salvation is through the intervention of God. It is worse than useless—it is blasphemous—for an outside party, the government for example, to presume to supplant the free act of God.

The soul liberty idea also paved the way for a broader conception of liberalism. Just as the two-kingsdoms theology points in the direction of limited government, the doctrine of soul liberty implies and leads to liberty in general, or to the “pursuit of Happiness,” as it is put in the Declaration of Independence. In other words, each person is free to pursue the good life in the manner and season most agreeable to his or her conscience, which is the voice of God. If God did not exercise His omnipotent power to coerce Adam and Eve to live according to His precepts, He must have wanted mankind to be free creatures. Surely no earthly authority has a better claim to rule than God Himself. (By the way, I just paraphrased the explicit logic of Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom.)

It is no accident that peoples who accepted this kind of theology were the first to accept liberal political theory. No one would have said at the time of the Founding that liberalism was inconsistent with or hostile to religion or
religious freedom, for religious freedom was both a religiously-grounded idea and one of liberalism’s principal commitments and preoccupations.

But matters did not stay that way. As liberalism developed, it departed from its religious roots. Three particular developments had especially important implications for religious freedom.

The first wave was Scientism and Materialism.

This variant of the Enlightenment retained the Christian notion of the objectivity and unity of truth, but secularized it. The European Christian worldview maintained that there is such a thing as truth, and that it cannot be understood apart from God. The scientific and materialist view retained the belief in truth, but thought that modern science left no room for any belief in God or other nonmaterial cause.

I use the term scientism rather than “science” because I do not think there is any natural or inevitable conflict between religious faith and science, properly understood. I believe that God has revealed himself through both special and general revelation, the scripture and the natural world, and that when our science is comprehensive enough and our Biblical understanding good enough – neither of which is likely to happen this side of the second coming – we will see that the two revelations are simply different ways of communicating the same essential truth.

When I speak of scientism and materialism, I refer to an understanding of the material world in which scientific and material explanation takes the place of religion and becomes a dogma.

This development begins to shove the humanities in general and religious thought in particular to the periphery of the world of the intellect. You can still believe, but it should not affect your work. You can still believe, but religious beliefs will have no connection with the university curriculum, or the real world of intellectual endeavor.

Post-modernism was the second wave.

Post-modernism abandons the notion of objective truth altogether. Science, as well as religion, is deconstructed. All truth is relative. Something may be true for you or true for me, but it cannot be true, period. Not objectively true.

Now, the effect of postmodern thinking on religious thought is a mixed bag. On the one hand, post-modernism leads to a celebration of diversity,
openness to non-scientistic views, including religion. But it leads also to a replacement of reason by power politics, the politics of identity, of resentment, and of a particular conception of liberation—liberation not grounded in the primacy of conscience, which is the voice of God within us, but liberation grounded in the unconstrained self, liberation even from nature.

It is not only God who is Dead, but the truths of human nature are nothing but social constructs.

The belief in old-fashioned truth, especially old-fashioned moral truth, becomes a threat to the new way of life. You can believe in anything you want, except the idea that your God is actually the true God, meaning that other people may be wrong. You can say and do anything you want unless it implies that other people’s self-conception may be wrong.

This leads to what I call “selective multiculturalism,” the third wave. Selective multiculturalism combines extraordinary toleration for conduct and expression that would once have been condemned, with extraordinary intolerance toward conduct and expression that once held cultural sway.

I don’t think I need to give examples. Just consider what can and cannot be said in a college classroom.

We then must confront the most challenging question in the Bible: What then should we do? I have three bits of advice, inspired by Nietzsche’s hermit in the forest:

First: Don’t mumble. It’s okay to laugh and weep and sing, but don’t mumble.

Proclaim the truth boldly. But don’t do it stupidly—when speaking to the natives speak in their language. Translate when possible; don’t sound like a bible thumper or an arrogant prig. Take as your model Paul’s great speech at the Areopagus.

Speaking clearly is hard. But my experience over many decades in academic and public life is that mumbling does not buy you protection. It just puts a target on your back.

Second: Don’t stay in the forest.

Do not spend your life in like-minded bubbles and cocoons. How good and pleasant it is to join together in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. But
come out from the chapel from time to time and venture into the world. You have every bit as much right to be who you are, believe what you believe, and act in accordance with conscience as anyone else in this free, diverse, and liberal republic. But beware: You WILL encounter madmen with lanterns.

Third: Don’t accept Zarathustra’s gift.

He would leave the hermit alone so long as the hermit stayed in his forest. Well, in this post-modern world people are happy to let you worship in peace, most of the time, and it is very tempting to take them up on their offer. But it is a gift you cannot afford to take. It allows you to sing, laugh, weep, and mumble to your heart’s content. But it does not allow you to affirm the truth, and call it that.