

Bill O'Reilly, Culture Warrior, a Book Review

Colleagues,

Don Schedler is on the same graduation class picture as I am – “Concordia Seminary – Class of 1954.” In the 53 years since then he’s been a Lutheran pastor (South Dakota, Kansas and Indiana), has gotten a Ph.D. (Counseling Psychology), and has been in that area of pastoral ministry for 3 decades, specializing in marital and family therapy (New York and Missouri). Now retired and living in California, he’s “working on my golf handicap,” he says, and also serving now and then as “interim pastor/vacancy pastor” for both (sic!) ELCA and LCMS congregations in and around Sacramento. Hospice chaplain ministry is also part of his weekly routine. Don keeps his eyes open to what’s going on in American culture. Couple months ago he asked me when I was going to “say something” about Bill O’Reilly. Always trying to avoid work, I replied immediately, “Why don’t you do it?” He did. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***A book review: CULTURE WARRIOR, By Bill O'Reilly
(Broadway Books: New York, 2006).
219 pp., index. Hardcover,***

\$26 [Amazon.com prices: \$16.38 new, \$10.99 used]

"Caution! You are about to enter THE no spin zone." Thus Mr. O'Reilly (hereafter O'R) begins The O'Reilly Factor every evening on cable TV, the Fox News Channel (FNC), where he has presided as a news editorialist for the last 10 years. In that time his program has become the most watched of all the cable news programs. His "no spin" mantra has no doubt contributed to that success, and his crusade to "look out for the folks" has led him to be hard on child predators and lenient judges alike. His latest book, Culture Warrior, has been on the NY Times Non-Fiction best seller list for at least 16 weeks, (# 1 for a while) and his previous books – The O'Reilly Factor: The Good, the Bad, and the Completely Ridiculous (2000), The No Spin Zone (2001), Who's Looking Out For You? (2003) and The O'Reilly Factor For Kids: A Survival Guide for America's Families (2004)–all reached best-seller status.

So who is O'R, and why should we care? First of all, he's a very successful broadcast journalist with both his cable news show and a radio talk show (who thinks of talk show host, Rush Limbaugh, e.g., as an "entertainer") who has a lengthy history of reporting the news from all over the world, and, secondly, as a widely published author, he has a mature viewpoint that is informed by what he calls "the Judeo-Christian philosophy." He invokes this "philosophy" regularly when fighting the "Merry Christmas war" and other jousts with those whom he labels "secular-progressives," and so, influential as he seems to be, he deserves a look from any in the Christian camp who have a concern for the direction of culture in our country.

O'R was born about 55 years ago to Irish Catholic parents in New York and attended Roman Catholic schools through high school and Marist College (Poughkeepsie, NY) where he majored in history. He was athletic enough to play football in college

and semi-pro baseball afterwards, even trying out for the NY Mets as a pitcher. He has earned two masters degrees, one in Broadcast Journalism (1976) from Boston U., and one in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in '97, where he conceived the basic plan for his TV show at FNC. He has a number of "firsts" in journalistic reporting (following a two-year stint teaching high school in Miami) as he moved from news rooms in Miami to Scranton, to Dallas, to Denver, to Portland (OR), to Hartford, to Boston, and to New York City. He worked with the late Peter Jennings (whom he still admires) on ABC World News Tonight, then moved to CBS on Inside Edition for six years, and finally to FNC, having picked up two Emmys along the way. He's married and has two children.

When O'R writes, then, about the culture he writes as a Roman Catholic layman who attends Mass regularly and is not shy about relating that fact. But when he puts the term "Warrior" alongside the word "Culture," is he consciously playing to the "prayer warrior" folks, and does he thereby lose some folks who are too peaceful to be warriors? At least we can assume that he is building upon the "culture war" theme coined who knows when or where.

The author divides Americans into two categories early in his book – "traditionalists" (or, later, T-warriors) and secular-progressives (or S-P's). He asserts that these two entities are not equal to the labels "conservatives" and "liberals," but finds some of each of the latter two among the T's and the S-P's. Traditionalists are those , "like [O'R] ...who believe the United States was well-founded and has done enormous good for the world," while the "committed forces of the secular progressive movement ... want to change America dramatically: mold it in the image of Western Europe." Throughout the book O'R's definition of the traditionalist does not rise to

anything like a follower of what is known in the Christian church as “The Great Tradition,” nor does he show any awareness of Pelikan’s distinction between “tradition” and “traditionalism” in the thin 1984 volume titled *The Vindication of Tradition*. There Jary Pelikan famously declares that “tradition is the living faith of the dead” while “traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

For O’R traditionalism is based in the Constitution of the US which allowed individual achievement and made us a generous, brave and liberating nation while becoming the strongest and most prosperous nation ever. Indeed he does see flaws in the early fathers of our country and notes that “[a]ll of us are sinners,” but even so “most sinners are fundamentally good people” who are trying to do the right thing. This viewpoint would seem to place O’R’s main thrust in the arena of what Martin E. Marty calls (following José Ortega y Gasset) “civic pedagogy” or possibly even “civil-religious pedagogy.”

In fact, fast forward to the end of his final chapter, where “the code of the traditional warrior” is spelled out:

- Keep your promises.
- Focus on other people, not yourself.
- See the world the way it is, not the way you want it to be.
- Understand and respect Judeo-Christian philosophy.
- Respect the nobility of America.
- Allow yourself to make fact-based judgments.
- Respect and defend private property.
- Develop mental toughness.
- Defend the weak and vulnerable.
- Engage the secular-progressive opposition in a straightforward and honest manner. [p. 206]

Who of us could argue with that?

Having then a tome zealously pushing what this reviewer would call a civil righteousness theme, we can possibly see why he accuses the S-P's of holding out that a widespread belief in a higher power in our nation is one of the causes of social injustice. He sees the S-P's wanting to take "under God" out of the pledge of allegiance and "In God we trust" off our legal tender. They have taken over large parts of the print media and most of Hollywood. This gives us group-think on the editorial pages and immorality on both the wide screen and the cathode ray tube. Secularism dominates the ACLU and has made that organization very dangerous, especially when its attorneys defend, pro bono, outfits like NAMBLA. Lenient judges let heinous sex crimes against children go practically unpunished – O'R derides the new catch phrase, "restorative justice," – and he has pushed hard for state after state to adopt the so-called "Jessica's Law" – named after Jessica Lunsford who was kidnapped by an unregistered sex offender neighbor in Florida, repeatedly raped, and then buried alive in the rapist's back yard. (That offender was recently found guilty by a jury of his peers.) Over half of the states in the US now have on the books mandatory 25-year sentences for such offenders.

So it is a real war in which he engages, as O'R sees it, and he invites his readers to join in. He himself and his ancestors come from a warrior clan in Ireland, but strangely he adopts a Chinese warrior's how-to book, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, as his guide, and even affects the name, "O'Reilly Tzu" in admiration. Then he takes to quoting epigrams at the heads of chapters, most of them from what appears to be a fictitious *The Art of Culture War*, by "O'Reilly Tzu," e.g. (Chapter Four), "To conquer a nation, destroy the values of its people." But of course that's exactly what he thinks is going on – traditional values in our great land are being destroyed by the S-P's, and that has to stop or there will be serious consequences for

future generations.

The author gets quite specific about the S-P's. Traditionalists adhere to the Ten Commandments of Moses, but S-P's have developed a new set of ten – their own! And here they are:

- *Thou Shalt Not Make Any Judgment Regarding Most Private Personal Behavior. Man/Woman Is the Master/Mistress of the Universe and His/Her Gratification Is Paramount.*
- *Thou Shalt Not Worship or Acknowledge God in the Public Square, for Such an Exposition Could Be Offensive to Humankind.*
- *Thou Shalt Take from the Rich and Give to the Poor. No Private Property Is Sacrosanct.*
- *Thou Shalt Circumvent Mother and Father in Personal Issues Such as Abortion and Sex Education in Public Schools.*
- *Thou Shalt Kill if Necessary to Promote Individual Rights in Cases of Abortion and Euthanasia.*
- *Thou Shalt Be Allowed to Bear False Witness Against Thy Neighbor if That Person Stands Against Secular Humanism.*
- *Thou Shalt Not Wage Preemptive War in Any Circumstance.*
- *Thou Shalt Not Impede the Free Movement of Any Human Being on Earth. All Countries Should Be Welcoming Places Without Borders.*
- *Thou Shalt Not Prohibit Narcotics or Impede Personal Gratification in This Area.*
- *Thou Shalt Not Limit the Power of Government in Order to Provide "Prosperity" to All. [pp.70,71]*

If you doubt that this libertine thinking exists, O'R cites a favorite source, The New York Times, and labels it "holy writ for the secular-progressive movement." This newspaper's ethicist is Randy Cohen, a former gag-writer for Rosie O'Donnell's defunct TV talk show, a man who has no formal

training in theology, law, or philosophy. On the matter of what to do about drug dealers in your neighborhood Randy's advice is to "be reluctant to invoke laws that can be both inflexible and ineffectual." In other words, O'R believes Cohen is saying "that good people should decide for themselves what laws should be obeyed." So what kind of country do we want? One where moral relativism is touted on the pages of the presumptive best newspaper in the country? Or not?

The author goes on, in part two of his book, to illustrate some if not all of these ten unholy commandments as they are being followed today. E.g., he highlights the "separation of church and state" argument as a bogus one when it comes to the use of the word "Christmas."

He asserts that the S-P's are in favor of both abortion and euthanasia, thus targeting the most vulnerable in our society.

He points out the pitfalls in fighting as a T-warrior and illustrates how he feels he "lost" against Terri Gross of National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" because he raised his voice in making his "winning points." He believes, by the way, that NPR is a bastion of S-P-ism, and excoriates especially Bill Moyers for carrying the water for the S-P philosophy. In the war on terror he sees a struggle between good and evil, but believes the S-P's are hopeless utopians while the T-warriors have the Bible on their side.

O'R further illustrates S-P thought by naming celebrities and detailing shoot-outs he has had with some of them, like George Clooney, Michael Moore, Susan Sarandon, Alec Baldwin, Nancy Pelosi, et al. The worst part, he says, is that they will not be persuaded, convinced, or mollified by sound argument.

The author is afraid that the philosophy of "moral relativism" which has replaced Christianity in Europe will migrate to our

shores now under the push of the S-P's. This philosophy says that "there is no absolute truth, no certain right and wrong. Everything is 'relative.'" He faults the Roman Catholic Church in Europe for thus far being a non-factor in the culture war.

All of this has made enemies. O'R receives threats of great harm, even death. He has hired security. He does not allow pictures to be taken of his family or residence. Google his name and one of the first items (of about 334,000) reads, "Sweet Jesus, I Hate Bill O'Reilly" under which you will find a self-professed atheist who does a hate-filled review of *Culture Warrior*, as well as a daily rebuttal of O'R's positions. This reviewer saw one tab labeled "Anti-O'Reilly" with some 138,000 items identified under it.

Now when it comes to defining traditional Americans and Judeo-Christian Philosophy, it is a bit hard to see what the author means, outside of his T-warrior code cited above. He does write, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King from his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

"Did I read that right? 'Our Judeo-Christian heritage'? ... Dr. King understood that to mean the traditional tenets of freedom for all, justice for all, and generosity of spirit and with material things." (p.145)

Then, as he bemoans the fact that Christian groups are "outgunned" by the S-P's, O'R opines that non-religious Americans have to be led back to traditionalism because it is in their best interest.

"The most powerful nonreligious argument against the S-P agenda is that it is simply better public policy for the United States to stay close to the vision of the Founders, which includes independence from big government, hard work, personal

responsibility, and looking out for your neighbor.” [p. 174]

So it is not the Christian religion (though he wishes Roman Catholic priests would take a stand) but the Judeo-Christian philosophy which will lead the way if we only promulgate it. O’R believes that the founders of our republic wanted “God-fearing” principles to be in place which would keep people in line as a practical matter of governing, while current S-P’s claim the opposite, namely, that spirituality was, and is, to be a purely private matter.

*Taken as a whole, while re-reading Culture Warrior this reviewer regularly found himself thinking of off-ramps to other writers such as C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*; H. Richard Niebuhr in his *Christ and Culture*; Ernest Becker in his final work *Escape From Evil*; and others already mentioned above. I find support for O’R’s division of people into two camps from Pope Benedict XVI, cited by Mustafa Akyol in the March ’07 issue of *First Things*:*

“The true contrariety which characterizes the world of today is not that among diverse religious cultures, but that between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on the one hand, and the great religious cultures on the other.” [FT, # 171, p.15]

While not the exact bifurcation O’R likes, yet this quote has secularization on one pole, as O’R does. The other pole – “great religious cultures” – doesn’t quite fit, since O’R thinks of the US as a Christian nation. What is missing in both classifications is any motivation other than law for Americans to do good works – just do right because it’s the right thing to do. For those of us who live and die by the gospel of Christ, this is not sufficient.

Melanchthon's discussion in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession in the articles on justification and free will distinguishes clearly between just doing right (civil righteousness) and the righteousness which is by faith. He writes,

"God wants those who live according to the flesh to be restrained by such civil discipline, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments, and penalties. And to a certain extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own powers... God even honors it with temporal rewards. Still, it ought not to be praised at Christ's expense." (The Book of Concord, Apology IV, Kolb & Wengert, p. 124:22-24)

In a somewhat different context and much earlier in the Christian era, Justin Martyr (who was converted to Christianity in 132 A.D.) also appealed to reason in the prolog of his First Apology before the Emperor Antoninus Pius. He said to the emperor, "Men truly pious and philosophical are led by their reasons to honor and love only what is true, and refuse to follow traditional opinions, when they are false. ...the lover of truth himself must always, even under the threat of death, and regardless of his own life, choose to do and say what is right." Addressing the emperor in that manner assumes a righteousness of reason on the emperor's part to which one can appeal in the sphere of political and cultural discourse. Might such an appeal to reason as a motivation describe O'R's work?

O'R sets out to urge a Judeo-Christian philosophy upon us, and thus it may not be fair to hold him to a higher standard, i.e. to ask him to navigate between two separate motivations. One can question, however, whether his push toward civil righteousness by means of reason will bear fruit. Certainly as

a #1 best seller for umpteen weeks, and now in April number 21 on the NYTimes list, his argument, bolstered by illustrations of outrages upon “the folks,” has gained traction in the public’s mind.

Yet one cannot read this book without becoming fearful for the rising generations of Americans if the “emancipation of man from God” (Benedict XVI) into a totally secular society is imported from Europe to the new world. To be sure, no one can be thus “emancipated,” for each of us constructs our own god (so Luther, Large Catechism, First Commandment). But O’R’s urgency in encouraging right behavior by means of a civil righteousness, captured in this book’s T-warrior code, ought not to be missed, especially as O’R does not call on church leaders to attempt to “speak truth to power” or otherwise try to be “prophetic” in the public square. Rather he is speaking “to the folks” and encouraging us as citizens to keep his reading of the original thrust of our Founding Fathers alive and strong, that being defined in his mind (as earlier and agreeing with M.L.King): freedom for all, justice for all, generosity of spirit, hard work, personal responsibility, and looking out for your neighbor.

I was thinking Luther might approve, but now I’m not sure he would. An old, old friend of mine (did I say “old?”) who peeked at this typescript, suggested a metaphor of Luther’s that I had not recalled in this context. It’s the one about the two foxes running in exactly opposite directions – one fox being the 16th C. Roman traditionalists, the other being the radical Schwärmer. Luther said if you look closely, you see that their tails are tied together! Could it be that O’R’s “T-warriors” and “secular-progressives” have their tails tied together?

Looking again at the “codes” of the T’s and the S-P’s one sees exhortations, thou shalt’s, and thou shalt not’s – law – but

where to find the power to do them we are not told, except to respect the philosophy which presumably made this country great and whose greatness is slipping away into a secularism which destroys that Judeo-Christian philosophy.

It is Saturday of Holy Week as this reader does a final edit of this review; the LBW daily lectionary for today presents, as a Reading III, these words of Paul to the Romans, ch. 8: "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh...." This condemnation found its completion on the cross in the flesh of Jesus, and so say also commentators G. Stöckhardt and Anders Nygren. Here we have much more than a philosophy – we have new life given by the Spirit of God and power to set our minds on things of the Spirit. Paul continues, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot;...."

Such an impossibility would seem to doom O'R's project. But, again, is it fair to hold him to a standard not contemplated in his program when he set out to write? Coming back to Melanchthon, one might wonder if his discussion of civil righteousness under the head of justification in the Apology will help toward an answer. At the point of discussing what constitutes true righteousness, he introduces the righteousness of the law (or the righteousness of reason) because of how easily it masquerades as the real thing. While praising "honorable works prescribed in the Decalogue," Melanchthon asserts that it is "... false that people are accounted righteous before God because of the righteousness of reason." (Kolb & Wengert, p. 124:26.) So the Apology is clear that two motives for doing good are right reason and right faith, the first being for "those who live according to the flesh" and the second motive being the trust in Christ which moves us to love. O'R is addressing the first – in his book he does not (cannot?)

take us toward Christ – how well he uses right reason is the question.

Even Niebuhr in his (Calvinistic?) reading of Luther's take on cultural goals can be faulted for not distinguishing between the two kinds of motive mentioned by Melanchthon. Here's how Niebuhr summarized Luther's "non-parallelistic dualism" in Christ and Culture chapter five, "Christ and Culture in Paradox:"

"More than any great Christian leader before him, Luther affirmed the life in culture as the sphere in which Christ could and ought to be followed; and more than any other he discerned that the rules to be followed in the cultural life were independent of Christian or church law. Though philosophy offered no road to faith, yet the faithful man could take the philosophic road to such goals as were attainable by that way." [p. 174]

His phrase "independent of Christian or church law" is suspect in the way it mixes up people of faith with people of reason. It is exactly church law (the Decalog) that is for people of reason (living acc. to the flesh) in God's left-hand administration of society, while for those under the Gospel there is no law except that which always accuses.

To be sure, those who attempt to do right(eously) will find that they end up being accused by such an impossible-to-keep decalog as O'R proposes, or else their consciences will excuse them (Rm. 1). Without Christ such accusation leads to despair – without Christ such excusing leads to self-righteousness. It has been opined that we Americans already have enough of the latter. Would despair of doing right(eously) have a good outcome for our nation?

If he succeeds in his campaign, Mr. O'Reilly may have awakened "the folks" to either self-accusations or self-righteousness. Would either of these be good for the U.S. of A.? To be awakened by the accusations of the law of God – could we thereby be led to repentance?

Taken as a push toward civic-righteousness, Culture Warrior may have some value for "the folks," even usefulness not contemplated by the author. Taken as a cure for the culture woes of our day, it does not go far enough in its diagnosis for the person in Christ. (E.g., O'R's take on sinfulness noted earlier betrays his Roman Catholic roots in that he believes, really, we're all fundamentally pretty good folks.) But taken as part of a conversation in the sphere of the common people, it may be delineating the twin dangers of the loss of the best of the past – call that tradition – and the advent of a stifling strait jacket of politically correct speech and conduct which wants to push the voice of right and wrong out of the public square – call that secular-progressivism.

A culture war exists. Whether one wants to be, as the author defines them, a T-warrior (in spite of certain 'war' connotations) or a secular-progressive, or none of the above, I leave to anyone interested in picking up on O'R's obviously popular productions in radio, TV, and print media. He does seem to be a present force to be reckoned with (among a number of other authors following in his train) in a discussion of our current culture.

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