

Repentance: Coping with God the Critic

For the prophet Amos the question was rhetorical and the answer obvious. "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?"[3:6] But it wasn't obvious to his hearers. Nor, it seems, are the rhetorical trumpets and local evils obvious to us in these United States. Here's a recent quintet in alphabetical order:

K is for Kosovo

L is for Littleton

M is for Monica (or Milosevic)

N is for NRA (or NATO)

O is for Oklahoma tornadoes (that's OKC again! Last time was 1995)

And that's just in the past few days. God has only 21 letters left in our alphabet.

Like Amos I am not a prophet, nor the son of one, but I have been reading the Hebrew scriptures for personal edification these days. You don't have to be very smart to notice the non-Amos, anti-Amos, diagnosis (especially since Littleton) that's gushing over our national psyche. If only the term "psyche" (soul) were rendered, as it once was, the God-turf in human affairs. God does get mentioned—though rarely—in our national soul-searching (?) but usually in the objective case. That's what people say about God, God at the end of the sentence. One example is that high schooler's confession of her faith in God seconds before her murder—which no commentator seems to know what to do with.

But have any of our public soul-searchers, the Amoses of our day, put God in the nominative case, as the original Amos did? God at the beginning of a sentence, God the subject of the sentence: “the LORD has done it.” Amos’ sort of soul-searching is not what such souls say about God, but what God “has done” and continually is doing to such souls—and to their respective bodies and lives and nations and... God the subject, maybe even God the verb.

Well, you can’t expect media voices to speak such language in our pluralist secular culture. OK, but what if they (or some of them) did? On that point Amos lived in such a time as ours. Up north where God had plunked him down “they” didn’t analyze or comprehend public events that way either. He’s a loner there in Samaria with his God-talk in the nominative case. “They” have better explanations for all the evidence he cites for God the Nominative. So it isn’t really today’s secularity or pluralism that keeps God from being subject in our sentences. Amos’s word for it was plain old unfaith. Which was very much the same 3 millennia ago in Israel as it is in the USA in 1999.

I printed the word LORD above with all caps, as English versions do to signal that the Hebrew term is Yahweh. Not just a generic deity, but the God REALLY behind our universe, the “true” God we earthlings confront behind the masks [Luther’s term] of daily life events. This LORD is not merely God the Creator, but also God the Critic, and only thereafter God the Rescuer. Amos doesn’t interpret God (objective case) to the people, but interprets the people’s recent history by linking it to God the Nominative. He merely quotes God’s speeches: “I withheld the rain from you. I smote you with blight. I destroyed your vineyards. I sent the pestilence. I slew your young men. I overthrew you.”

And as if that isn’t bad enough, after every one of those “I-

statements” comes the even more lethal refrain, “yet you did not return to me.”

“Turn” and “return” is normal Hebrew language for “repent.” Repenting is nothing so fuzzy as I once was taught, “feeling sorry for your sins,” but a ‘fessing up to the truth of the critic’s critique and making a U-turn. If God isn’t our critic in the mini- and maxi- apocalypses on the front-page today, then who is? But what should America, our country, repent of? Where have we gone wrong? Ay, there’s the rub. Unless some real Amoses (=outsiders) are around, we’ll not be helped by answering our own question. The outsiders are there who could help us, many within the USA. But even those inside our land are outside the attention vector of the makers and shakers. Many are as odd-ball as Amos. They have no credentials, “not a prophet, nor a PK, a prophet’s kid.” They are readily dismissed: “Go back to Judah where you belong.”

Even if the US may well have been “right” on many national actions in the past, our self-righteousness about those matters has always been an offense—not just to our fellow world citizens, but to God the Nominative. That’s bad enough as self-righteousness always is, but with us (perhaps because of our legend as a Christian nation?) it expands to cover nearly everything American. And the last estate of that nation is worst than the first. So how do you call such a people to repentance? The Hebrew prophets represent one way. But their track-record is not encouraging. Basically they all failed to lead their hearers into the U-turn. Or if there was repentance it didn’t last long. Another staccato refrain is: “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD gave them into the hand of the [fill in the blank] for 40 years.”

Lest there be some doubt, I’m not saying that the murdered high-schoolers or the tornado victims were getting their personally

deserved come-uppance from God. The prophetic perspective is that God's "law of sin and death" cranks out its karma "visiting the iniquities of the fathers [a nation's makers and shakers] upon the children to the third and fourth generation." Of course, innocents get slaughtered. But their deaths derive from those daddies who didn't repent and thus flipped the switch for the juggernaut to roll. We cringe at the injustice of the consequences for the kids. The prophets did too. But they claimed that our enlightened critical finger pointing back at God was mistaken. Yes, God did it, but the daddies invoked the deity to do it.

If precedents for nation-wide repentance are not promising, even when the "pros" called for it, what then? First of all, as Jonah learned (the hard way!): who really knows until it's tried? After God finally got Jonah there via the scenic route, even superpower Nineveh repented. That didn't initially please this surly prophet until the LORD goaded him with that gourd and 'splained it to him.

Suppose Daniel Schorr, veteran news interpreter for two generations of Americans, were to draw on his Hebrew heritage and "go prophetic" once. Not hellfire and brimstone, but just like Amos with words something like this: "There's a third level to our national trauma, which I think American Jews, Christians, and Muslims too could comprehend. Drawing on the tradition of these 'Abrahamic faiths' we can diagnose America's dilemma thus: The first level is behavioral, the evil we are doing to each other from highway rage to gunning down high-school kids to NATO strikes, all of which "take out" the righteous along with the unrighteous. But that's just symptom.

"Deeper still is the second level, the interior, call it the human heart. We've got a nationwide cardiac disease, those bruised and battered, worn and weary and wary, sick hearts that

generate such behavior. These are not healed by any of our national panaceas—Wall Street's boom, Viagra, air strikes, or behavioral mod programs of re-education even with the best of therapists and beaucoup bucks. Why? Because our nation's cardiac disease is itself still but a symptom.

“Underlying even that depth diagnosis is a still deeper one, the root of the sick tree and its bad fruit. Call it what Jews, Christians and Muslims call it: our God-problem. That's not first of all what we think and do about God, whether we are a nation of believers or not. No, the prophets call this God the Nominative. To cope with God the Nominative there is only one way. One word. Repent. Just how as a nation to do that will take some figuring out. For we are woefully out of practice. But if we could hear God the Nominative calling us to do so, we'd already be a giant step down the U-turn road.”

I don't know how to get such counsel to Daniel Schorr. If any of you readers do, well But even if he never gets the suggestion or gets the idea on his own, the rest of us could do this in our smaller worlds of daily work. Swaying the masses is not to be gainsaid, but in prophet's perspective the remnant counts too.

I think I've mentioned this before in an earlier issue of ThTh: In 1529 Luther called for such continent-wide repentance in “Christian” Europe vis-a-vis Suleiman the Magnificent and his 600 thousand Muslim troops outside the gates of Vienna. His analysis of the military realities showed two Goliaths outside the gates of Vienna. One was Suleiman and his up-to-then invincible hordes. The other was God, who had designated Suleiman as the “the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury” [Is 10:5] against a phony Christian Europe. Luther's proposed strategy: divide the enemies. “Take care” of God first. Repent. That's the only way to cope with God the Nominative when God is

critic. God regularly backs off when sinners U-turn. Thereafter with Suleiman bereft of his divine ally, he might be beaten in battle, though the prognosis for that was not good.

Luther didn't expect Europe to do a Nineveh, the entire city repenting in sackcloth and ashes. But he held out hope that if a few did it, a remnant, God just might count that as good enough for all. There are no statistics about who did or didn't repent. Maybe it was only Luther (let's hope) and a few who read his treatise. This much, however, is history: Suleiman never attacked Vienna. Instead he turned around and went back home.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder