

The Folk Religion of “God Bless America” [FROGBA] – A Crossings-style Analysis

Colleagues,

It was not exactly a quiet week-end just passed here in our household on the banks of the Mississippi. For Saturday I flew to Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Illinois, to discuss “Theology of the Cross,” some of which discussion may show up in future ThTh postings. Sunday a.m. Marie and I concluded our Adult Forum series, “Biblical Themes in Today’s Asian and African Christian Art” at Second Presbyterian Church here in St. Louis. [N.B. Have slide show; will travel.] Second Pres is the “second church” our kids (Nathan, wife Ellen, Peter, Lizzy and Lucy) regularly attend each Sunday after worshipping in the early service at Bethel Lutheran. [Ask our grandkids about double predestination some time!] Second Pres is Ellen’s home base.

Then came Monday afternoon, for presentation #4 with some mission-committed folks here in St. Louis. They’re good guys—yes, all guys—some my former students. They’d asked me to join them in walking/talking our way through the syllabus I’d put together entitled: “In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?”

Everything went swimmingly for the first three of these Monday sessions: Why Jesus for Muslims? For Hindus? For Buddhists? At the final session this Monday it was: Why Jesus for believers in the Folk Religion of “God Bless America?” Readings for the session were recent ThTh postings, four of them, on this subject, which many of you know. Hardly surprising, consensus did not emerge. Prompted by the unclarity of the debate—*mea culpa!*—I’ve groused about what I might have done better. Here’s

the product below. It's doubtless still not perfectly clear. Of if clear, still not convincing to all. But it's better than I did on Monday, I think. I intend to send it to the participants. But you Crossings folks get it first.

The pattern for the first 3 sessions was to work out the distinctive paradigms offered by Islam, by Hinduism, by Buddhism for diagnosing the human malady and then for articulating "good news" to heal it. Thereafter in each case we then asked the "Christ-necessity" question: Why Jesus for people living in this religious paradigm? What is there about Jesus that is "good" and "new" [=Good News] for them? In, with, and under, of course, we were working with the six-step Crossings paradigm for diagnosis and prognosis, not unknown to you readers.

Here's my re-write for what I wished I'd done better on Monday. It comes in three chapters.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

The Folk Religion of "God Bless America" [FROGBA] – Its diagnosis and proposed healing fo the human malady. First as it surfaces in America's enemies. Then as it surfaces in Americans.

CHAPTER ONE: OUR ENEMIES

The Human Problem According to FROGBA.

Step 1. Initial diagnosis – *Wicked acts.*

Our enemies do evil things—tyrannize/destroy people, their own

and others. They threaten the whole world, destroying life with terror, un-freedom, human rights violations, unchecked autocracy.

Step 2. Deeper diagnosis – *Wicked hearts.*

Not committed to freedom, human rights, democracy—which produce the stuff of abundance. They too love the “stuff” that Americans have and they don’t. Animated (in the heart) by jealousy, hatred, revenge, etc. focused against America.

Step 3. Final diagnosis – *Agents of, Captive to, the Power of Evil*

The deep root is more difficult to designate. Sometimes signalled to be supernatural— Evil itself: Our enemies are themselves enslaved to the power of evil. Is escape therefrom possible for them? Not clear. Most likely not. Demonic powers don’t willingly let go of their captives. Trapped by Evil (maybe even willingly committed to it) they are far from God and his goodness. Nobody says this very loudly in “secular” America, but allied with evil, they are surely not linked to the God who blesses. God is not for them but against them.

SOLUTION FOR THE PROBLEM of our enemies FROGBA’s prognosis for healing

Step 4. (Healing the root malady, the final diagnosis #3 above) – *Conquest of Evil*

There is no realistic access to overcome the supernatural aspect of evil. [Though if we are on God’s side, God’s supernatural power is also on our side.] But evil’s human agents are accessible to us. Therefore a Superpower for the good battles the (“supernatural”?) power for evil by conquering the human agents of the current axis of evil. People formerly tyrannized by these evil agents are liberated: given democracy, freedom, human rights—all the things they always desired, but seldom

could have before. Now “God blesses these formerly unblessed folks.” God’s mediator of such blessing? You fill in the blank.

Step 5. (From this “root” solution follows healing for the deeper diagnosis #2 above) – *New Hearts*

Thereby the formerly enemy people experience a change-of-heart. They learn to love democracy, freedom, human rights, maybe even global capitalism. They also (it may take time) begin to enjoy the economic perks that accompany democracy, things they always longed for. They also love America too in gratitude for their liberation. They become good people in the family of nations. They become committed to the values that made America great. God blesses them with new hearts. They too bless America.

Step 6. (From such new hearts comes healing for the Initial Diagnosis #1) – *New Lives*

From such “new” hearts flow new and good—not evil—works, a new society where democratic structures, democratic leaders and democratic habits of the heart become the daily-life ethos of now liberated people. They enjoy and live the good life. Their formerly tragic life has a happy end. God blesses them in the same way as God has for centuries been blessing America. A new world order finally arrives.

CHAPTER TWO: OURSELVES

OUR PROBLEM According to FROGBA

Step 1. Initial diagnosis: – *Bad actions.*

Americans behaving and acting contrary to the democratic values of the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” Failing to practice—at home and abroad—the blessings of freedom, human rights, democracy (maybe capitalism too). Caving in to enemies seeking to destroy this American way of life and all that the

flag stands for. [In 2003 that equals caving in to terrorists and others threatening us with WMD.] Being wimpy in our response of these values. Not carrying a big stick—nor using it. Not “finishing the job” our destiny calls us to do: “to make the [whole] world safe for democracy.”

Step 2. Deeper diagnosis – *The Heart-Problem (underlying such behaviors)*

Americans themselves lacking the inner commitment to America’s ideals: freedom, human rights, democracy, capitalism—which produce the stuff of abundance. Instead of confidence in America, fearing the terrorists. Animated by “Angst.” Weak willed. Lack of courage.

Step 3. Final diagnosis – *In Trouble with Providence*

Such hearts and such behaviors amount to fracture (on our part) of God’s covenant with America; our obligations to “God and country” to carry through on our Manifest Destiny. Finally ingratitude for God’s blessing America in our great and glorious past. Ultimately “un-faith in God,” the Deist God of “God bless America.” Thereby Americans lose touch with the “God who blesses America.”

SOLUTION FOR THE PROBLEM FROGBA’S “Good News” for healing

Step 4. (Healing the root malady, the final diagnosis #3 above) – *Return to our Covenant with Providence.*

Concerted action to regain the historic values of America. Thus Americans reconnect with Providence, the God who blesses America. Return to the Deist God of “In God we Trust” and the image of America’s national myth—our calling to be the New Israel, a beacon to the Nations, God’s chosen crusader for Good in a world of tyrants—beginning with King George in the 18th century up through Hitler, Hirohito, Stalin, and now Osama and

Saddam. Regaining the blessings of GBA.

Step 5. (From this “root” solution follows healing for the deeper diagnosis #2 above) – *New Hearts*

Renewed commitment to the values of America’s past, explicit in our great national heroes. Courageous hearts, not paralyzed by terrorists, re-committed to democracy, freedom, human rights, maybe even global capitalism—in our own land and for all the world. Internal dedication to “finish the job” of this godly assignment. Pledging our allegiance. Being faith-full to the God who blesses America.

Step 6. (From such new hearts comes healing for the Initial Diagnosis #1) – *Finishing the Job*

From such “new” hearts flow new and good (not evil) works, courageous not wimpy. Active work to finish the job, both here at home and in creating a New World Order for all—protected by Pax Americana. In this new world democratic structures, democratic leaders and democratic habits of the heart become the daily-life ethos of now liberated peoples. They enjoy and live the good life. Their formerly tragic life has a happy end. God’s blessing America becomes God blessing all peoples of the world. They too bless the God who blesses them. But with tyrants still in power, this is no easy task. It sometimes calls for war wherein Americans readily sacrifice their lives to preserve liberty for Americans and extend it, eventually for all others in the world.

CHAPTER THREE. Theological Analysis of FROGBA

Why Jesus? for folks living according to FROGBA?

What’s Good News (both “good” and “new”) in the Jesus-kerygma

that FROGBA doesn't know?

First comes some Bad News, more deadly Bad News that FROGBA simply ignores. And FROGBA must ignore it, since it has no resources for coping with bad news so deep. The bad news is a more drastic, yes, more terrifying, depth diagnosis at Step #3 in the sequence. The "God-problem" is much much worse. And FROGBA includes the God-problem in its own diagnoses. FROGBA is engaged in "theology," talking about God, even about Bad News in America's relationship with Providence, even calling upon God to bless America.

According to the Christian Gospel, the God-problem (expressed here in one of many Biblical images) is that God is not only the One who blesses America, but is also America's Critic. The gist of his critique is how badly (un-faithfully) we've used our blessings. No people in Biblical history—not just the villainous ones, but even the Chosen People—ever passed the test. If for no other reason than that God's exam is simply a pass/fail exam. And the standard for passing is 100%. 99% is an "F". Remember what the text examines. How well have you done in "loving the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind – all the time?"

When Lincoln called both sides in the Civil War to repentance, he acknowledged God's pass/fail standard. And if Providence, he said, adjudged us as failing, it was not "God bless America" in the 1860s, but God cursing America with the War between the States. To wit, God giving us our just deserts. That was Lincoln's depth diagnosis of Step #3 then. Are we in any better shape before That Judge's bench today, remembering that even 99% is failure? You may want to dispute the fairness of the Judge's ruling. And that is a normal human response. That was exactly Adam & Eve's protest before the Bench in the primordial courtroom scene in Genesis 3: "Not fair!" But to no avail. They

were banished from the garden. The judge stayed on the bench.

Repentance in Eden face-to-face with God could have been simple, saying back to God what God was saying to them: "God, you are right; we are wrong." Which, sad to say, Adam and Eve didn't do, couldn't do. You have to trust God in order to say that, and such trust they no longer had. So they never got to the second possible sentence: "God, do you have any other word for us, for us admitted sinners?" To which God, had they made that inquiry, might well have said: "Thought you'd never ask!"

That situation "necessitates Christ," as the Augsburg reformers put it. Then, and now—and always—when sinners (as solitary souls or as nations) stand before the bench, and ask about "any other word" from God, there is a positive response. It is a "second" word from God that "trumps" the failed exam. The name of the remedy, so claims the Christian gospel, is Jesus, the crucified and risen Rescuer. His intervention on our behalf sent paradoxically by the same Judge who reads us the riot act—so the Gospel's claim—rescues all who stand before the Bench "guilty as charged."

Talk about "Good"! Talk about "New"! And—no surprise to Crossings aficionados—when the root-diagnosis of Step #3 is healed, healing arises through the heart of the tree and into the branches to bear new fruits, fruits of healing. So how might this "real" Gospel repentance and faith be preached to folks hooked on FROGBA? [Remember they are just as prominent inside the American churches as outside.] Perhaps something like this:

Diagnosis:

Step one. For all our blessings received, we've not been good stewards. When voices at home and abroad say America has been anything but a blessing to them, in many cases they are right.

Step two. Pride and self-reliance despite our Providence-talk is at the center of our national faith. What our “heart is hanging on” is our own American god. Not “true” God at all. And we surely do not as a nation “fear God.” Our fear of the terrorists signals that. Nor do we trust in him—as our current mania for security signals. We trust our own strength for our own survival.

Step three. To which God says: “You flunked the test, and we now move to sentencing and execution of justice. My ‘final’ warnings didn’t get your attention. In the language of Amos 4, ‘I sent you WTC towers demolition, Columbia demolition, and umpteen earlier vexations; yet you did not return to me. Therefore, prepare to meet your God, O America.’” Or the words of Jesus when towers collapsed once before and killed the innocent: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” God continues: “Complain, if you will, that I’m not being fair. That very complaint validates my charge that you are opposed to me and my policies. I’m using the same exam on you that I’ve used on every empire throughout world history. They all flunked it too. So long as you do not repent, your failing grade (and its lethal consequences) remains. Worse still, you’ll never get to the rescue that I have here in my other hand.” Which is . . .

Step four: The “good” and the “new” of the crucified and risen Jesus. Liberates from the failed exam with a freedom beyond that which Americans ever think about: Freedom with God!

Step five: Therefore right now “Repent and believe this Good News.” [It’s hard to imagine that an entire multi-mixed nation would do it, though the Empire of Nineveh in Jonah’s time is said to have done so. But if even a remnant did so, becoming thus a “faithful” remnant, God has been known to expand the list of beneficiaries far beyond the few who were righteous—sometimes nation-wide.]

Step six: Now the grace-imperatives: Hustle that Good News in the world you live in. Liberated in every dimension of life by this “repent and believe,” go to work in personal callings and public life to fashion a society, both locally and globally, where the work of God’s “left-hand” shapes the ethos of daily life. Three specs of God’s left-hand operations for you to implement (for starters) are: law of preservation, law of equity justice, the priority of the whole over any single part. ‘Course it won’t be easy. Labor and sweat and opposition. But your labor and sweat is not in vain. Arising from repentance-and-faith, such labor and sweat builds on God’s promise—even when it’s “apocalypse now.” Heaven and earth will pass away, Christ says—and that includes America—but humans hooked to his promise won’t. We have his word for it.