

The Folk Religion of “God Bless America” – Revisited

Colleagues,

Two weeks ago ThTh 244 examined FROGBA, The Folk Religion of God Bless America. A number of you responded. None so extensively, however, as Jeffrey Anderson, himself a recent post-er on these pages, viz., ThTh 240 of January 16. The FROGBA posting 244 came in three sections, as you may remember. Chapter 1 was FROGBA’s diagnosis of the malady of America’s enemies and FROGBA’s proposed healing thereof. Chapter 2 was FROGBA’s analysis of America’s own current malady and FROGBA’s proposed healing thereof. Chapter 3 was my Crossings-style analysis of a nation living by faith in FROGBA and my proposal for the healing offered by the “real” Gospel.

Jeff offered me a re-write of chapter 3, a “meta-analysis” that went deeper than I did—both on the bad news and on the good news side of the chart. I think he’s right. Jesus once said that the “student is not above the teacher.” Jeff would not claim to be above Jesus, but in this case I think he’s exceeded his one-time seminary teacher.

Enjoy!

Ed Schroeder

Jeff’s Meta-analysis:

Ed, Several times you have mentioned that good Christian folks

(even Crossings folks?) have resisted your theological analysis of 9/11/01 events. Many of these people have affirmed other Crossings-style diagnoses and prognoses. But when you lay out your diagnosis and prognosis of America's spiritual state, they balk. So I ask, is this because you are missing the mark? Or is it because you are hitting the nail on the head? I suspect (and here I squirm, too) it is because you are hitting the nail on the head. In that case, how can the Good News in the Prognosis be "so good" that we can actually begin to acknowledge the verity of the Bad News in the Diagnosis? Here is my modest re-write of your "Chapter Three" diagnosis and prognosis. In it I am trying to verbalize some levels of diagnosis that may be hidden to our usual three-step analysis. And if that deeper, multifaceted dilemma is not fully exposed, then neither the diagnosis nor the prognosis will be compelling (nor will the Good News be as scandalous as the Good News really is). So here is my attempt to "hit the nail on the head."

Diagnosis: Clinging to the American Dream

Step One. – Troubled.

For almost a whole century we have not been dreaming the American Dream, rather we have been living the American Dream. We have found immense wealth and happiness. We did it! And we have even tried to share some of this bounty and blessing with the rest of the world. But now comes the rub. We are getting criticism. Detractors accuse us of greed and waste and hoarding. Terrorists invade our secure shores and blast our skyscrapers. And our skyrocketing economy takes a nosedive. Something is wrong with this picture. The dream is no longer sweet.

Step Two. – Desperate.

Our hearts were easy in the 90's. We trusted that we had it

made. We lived like gods. We played like gods. We quit reading the Bible, and learned to read the ticker tape. We built temples for the new gods, bigger than any church that was ever built. The Force was with us. The Energy of the universe was harnessed for our good. But this all changed so quickly. And our confidence is shaken. We are getting scared. Fear is taking root in our hearts. However, we are still in the shock of disbelief. Our gods won't fail us, we say. It can't be true, we claim. Bring on the guns – we'll show them you don't mess with the American gods. But, nevertheless, our fear is accelerating. Our wealth is shrinking. We can't even find the terrorists who snipe at us. And in our growing desperation we try to dash back to the God of our Fathers. We sing God Bless America. But as we sing, our tears betray us. We are scared when we sing it. We grieve those good old days of faith that are long gone. We hardly know the God of our Fathers. Much less do we know how to trust or honor her.

Step Three. – Abandoned.

So even as we begin to see that our 20th century gods are abandoning us, we also begin to recognize that we have abandoned the God of our Fathers, and that he is now abandoning us as well. And his wrath is seen all around. Pipsqueaks take potshots at us and succeed. Critics rant about our godlessness and we cannot answer them. We see God's warnings in recent years, but we can't even imagine how we could have done anything differently. We want to pray, but we can't. We want to believe, but we couldn't believe in a supernatural being even if we wanted to...even though we DO want to. Our gods are crumbling fast, and the Triune God is already gone. No wonder we cannot get on board with a Crossings diagnosis of our situation: We would have to face that ultimate wrath of being totally abandoned – that God is gone.

Prognosis: Clung to by God.

Step Four. – Rediscovered by God.

The kind of Messiah we need is not just a rescuer from terrorists or national collapse, but a Messiah who can reconnect us to the God whom we 21st century folks cannot even conceive of. In other words, we need not just a Messiah to reintroduce us to God, but a God who will show himself to us. And that kind of God is not first seen in miracles or victories or mighty whirlwinds, but in the flesh. Born in a stable, laid in a manger, crucified on a cross. Only such a totally human God can be seen by devastated 21st century folk. That is God for you. That is a God who comes all the way to rediscover you. That is God for the abandoned soul of modern man.

Step Five. – At Home with God.

Having been rediscovered by God, we rediscover God's house. And his house is not principally the sports stadiums of the USA where folks sing God Bless America. This God is a peripatetic God. She is at home with her people in every place imaginable. Not just in Judea, but in Samaria. Not just in Jerusalem, but to the ends of the earth. God bless Iraq. God bless Korea. God bless us every one. Do you believe that the God who was born in Bethlehem was for everyone? Repent and believe it. That is the truth. It is that good. In fact, it is even better than that . . .

Step Six. – God's new Economy.

In Greek, "economy" means management of the household. "Wealth management" is for the good of the whole household of God. Liberty and Justice are for "all God's family." And that "all" must keep expanding. When our forefathers said "all" they meant all white, land-owning, males. Our courts have expanded it to mean "all USA citizens." God's new economy is

much simpler. "All" means "All." God's gifts are for all. And just as God's "natural resources" are for all, so also her table fellowship is for all. There is a place at the family table for each one of God's children on the face of the earth (and beyond). In God's new economy "they" are welcome at "my" table, and "I" am welcome at "their" table. The intimacy of table fellowship will break every social and national boundary. This is not some "impossible mission." It is simply what happens when the population of the world hears about the human God who came among them, and took up a cross for them, and invited them to his thanksgiving meal. It is the way the world looks when God is present. To paraphrase E.S. (and JC): "All other economies will pass away, but God's household never will. And that's a promise."

*Peace and Joy,
Jeff.*