

Theology of Freedom in President Bush's Inaugural Address 2005

Colleagues,

Freedom was the mantra of President Bush's Inaugural Address last week. Twenty times (20x) he used the word. Fifteen times (15x) he spoke of "liberty." That's what America is all about. Freedom "is the mission that created our nation." "Now it is the . . . calling of our time . . . with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." The resources for America's achieving that goal are twofold: first "the power of our ideals" and second "our influence" [euphemism for military power?] "though not unlimited, but . . . considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom's cause."

The turf where unfreedom still reigns is outside the USA. There was no reference to "unfreedom" in the USA. In America freedom is intact. No "fallen world" here. The "fallen world" of unfreedom is them, not us. In this speech Bush applied his Manichaeian theology to freedom. Us good guys, them not yet so good. But in this speech (except for the villains) it was mercy for the not-yet-so-good victims of unfreedom. America is in good health when it comes to freedom, but many of you are ill. Since we are so selflessly generous, we will help you get healed. And we have "considerable influence" to bring that about.

The Biblical proverb comes to mind: Physician, heal thyself. But our leaders are blind to our nation's illness, and they speak for the nation as a whole—the blind leading the blind. So our national physicians cannot be our healers. Not only in leading, but in healing, the blind cannot heal the blind.

As Jesus told his critics in John 9, unless there is someone “sighted” on the scene, you can’t even see who is blind. And the pericope ends with this riddle: Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

When the blind claim to be sighted, their malady metastasizes. I’ve not seen such stern Biblical metaphors in the public media. Some that I’ve seen have, however, called for a “reality check” on what Bush said. Here in St. Louis an editorial said: “We don’t share his illusion that America’s power and goodness can triumph everywhere. The wreckage of the idealistic crusades of Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson are harsh reminders of what can happen when heady idealism comes into contact with the realities of the world.”

Two words in that last phrase, “idealism” and “realities,” deserve a closer look.

IDEALISM

Idealism, classic philosophical idealism beginning with Immanuel Kant, is where the American notion of freedom comes from. It was transmitted to us by the English deists, whom we call “founding fathers,” who wrote it into our founding charters—and into the American psyche. But that freedom is not what Luther wrote about in his classic essay on Christian Freedom, nor what Jesus in John’s gospel (and Paul after him) are proclaiming when they say: “If God’s Son makes you free, that’s real freedom.”

Bush did make a pitch toward Biblical rootage as he sought to ground “America’s ideal [sic!] of freedom” in “the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount.” But then, of course in pluralistic America, he HAD TO add “the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people.” The common thread in all of

that is idealism's freedom, not Christian freedom.

REALISM

Which brings up the "realities" word. The "reality" of God envisioned in those "truths" just mentioned is God the legislator, God the rulegiver for how we are to live our lives. And God, yes, the least common denominator God of all these "varied faiths," is "for" freedom, and against unfreedom. But does that God ever leave the legislative bench and move on down the line in the process to being judge, and after verdict-rendering, to be the one who executes those verdicts—even as executioner? Not really. And surely not for America. But the God speaking in the Bible surely does. And American religion presses the mute button on that one. Because if God ever were to be so operative INSIDE world history—which we Americans find hard to imagine—then he surely would NOT do something so drastic to us. Maybe to the evil empires—and that carried out by us good guys as God's agents. But surely not to the nation that sings God Bless America, and puts "In God we trust" right on our money.

Needed is a reality check. And the convictions diverge about what's really real and what isn't. So what else is new? In Jesus' day the ones he called "blind leaders" said they had a clear view of what reality was. In the days of the OT prophets it was the same. The God-called prophets said: "Folks, the Day of Yahweh is rolling toward us, soon to roll over us." The Shalom-prophets said: "Don't believe them. Our kings and priests (state and church) have everything in hand and God is for us, not against us. God bless our native land." The deeper anti-nomianism of American religion is not disobeying God's legislation (though there is enough of that!), but dismissing him as judicial critic and sentence-executioner.

President Bush's closing words were: "May God bless you, and may he watch over the United States of America." Despite his

Evangelical faith, Bush seems not to remember that invoking God to “watch over” us is dangerous. Granted, its intended meaning is protection. But saying “God, keep your eye on me”—unless you have real righteousness—is the prayer of a fool. And if that righteousness is self-grounded (as is the righteousness of the USA), then “illusion,” though technically accurate, is too soft a word. It is sheer madness. Better to say, God, look the other way. Willy-nilly Bush is asking God to check us out, to examine, to scrutinize, to measure us by divine criteria. In all the recorded national histories in the Bible—not just Israel and Judah, but also the superpowers of Babylon, Assyria, and finally Rome—they all failed the test. “You have been weighed and found wanting.” And the ax was laid to the roots. Better the rest of us should pray: God, please ignore President Bush’s final petition—unless your chastening brings us to repentance.

Which brings up this sentence from the president: “We have seen our vulnerability [he’d just referred to the “day of fire” on 9/11/01]—and we have seen its deepest source.” I held my breath. Is he going to talk about God, the real depth dimension to 9/11? But not so. The next sentence led us astray about that Deepest Source of our vulnerability. It was not God at all. “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny, prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat.”

Human enemies and their hate-filled ideologies. That’s the “deepest” diagnosis. Here’s the cure. “There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment . . . and that is the force of human freedom.” And where is that force incarnated today? There is only one possible answer.

This is America’s gospel of salvation. Compared to the genuine Gospel, it under-diagnoses the malady—call it illusion—and

consequently offers healing that is also illusion. If God is ignored as the problem, it's no surprise that God won't figure in on the solution either. The SOURCE for America's "day of fire"—so Jesus, and all the authentic prophets before him—is the very God America invokes for blessing. Blessing and its opposite, cursing, are divine prerogatives. God's ambidextrous. And the curse of a "day of fire," the prophets' "Day of the Lord," comes from the Creator.

At one point Bush came close to seeing God's hand in executing justice in the world (though not fiery justice for the USA), but then he backed away: "History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty." God did get into the sentence, but not as Author on the justice agenda, only on the freedom one. The "but" in the sentence signals something possibly adversative between justice and freedom in Bush's thought . But suppose God is the Author of both—fiery justice and fiery freedom. That's the uniform Biblical witness.

The World Trade Center crumbling on that day of fire, viewed Biblically, can only be seen as "ebb and flow of God's justice." Biblical monotheism allows for no other conclusion. "I kill and I make alive. No other deity but me," says God in Deut. 32:39. The good-guys vs. bad-guys of Manichaeism has a good god and a bad one in the mix. Thus it has a blueprint to keep Good God out of any day of fire. The source of all devastation is the cosmic Evil Empire and its earthly minions. Not so the monotheistic commitment of the Christian faith. "I kill and I make alive. No other deity but me."

Christian theology predicates both terms to God. World history, our history, also right now, also for and in the USA, is God's justice in action down on the ground. Granted, justice and freedom are different, but better to look for the link that

connects them rather than the “but” that separates them. And the place where God’s role in retributive justice and God’s role in human freedom intersect is at the Good Friday crossing. And the upshot of that crossing, according to Christian proclamation, is Good News.

Faith in Freedom.

Freedom is a big word in the vocabulary of the Gospel. But that freedom was NOT what President Bush was talking about, though it’s likely that many American Christians thought he was. Even though Bush didn’t use the dicey word “crusade,” it was a “crusade for freedom” speech with America as God’s agent to extend that freedom world-wide.

Even more, it was a faith-in-freedom speech. From the bully pulpit we heard a powerful sermon for the gospel of American freedom. That freedom – not Gospel freedom – is the faith-object that Americans hang their hearts on. It is the Gospel of FROGBA, the folk religion of God bless America. Is that an “other” Gospel? I think so.

He said: “We go forward with complete confidence [note “fide,” the “faith” at the center of con-fide-nce] in the eventual triumph of freedom.” Even though he did once say, “Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation,” paragraph after paragraph proclaimed the opposite. The world, so said Bush, should trust the USA as the source for their freedom. He may not have said it in so many words, but the message was clear. Despite Guantanamo, despite Abu Ghraib, “Trust us. Trust us for your freedom. We have faith in ourselves; you should too.” That may not quite be proclaiming the USA as the God of history, but it’s demonically close.

America’s illusion about freedom, our exported freedom, came home this week in an NPR piece featuring American soldiers in

Iraq reading their own poetry crafted on location. From one voice came this refrain to every stanza he wrote:

“Why do you want to kill me?
I came to set you free.”

One plausible Iraqi answer to this American might be: The freedom you came with, accompanied by your “considerable influence,” has already killed 100K of us. And you still ask why we want to kill you? Isn’t this justice? Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth—corpse for a corpse. And the equity ratio is still way out of balance. Your refrain is not just illusion; it’s delusion.

Marie is listening to the PBS program on Auschwitz as I write this on Wednesday evening. I’m trying not to listen. But the refrain keeps coming: “How could they possibly have been so hoodwinked? And so many of them Christian?”

In the era of the early church the Christians who spoke Latin said, “Aut Caesar, aut Christus.” Either Caesar or Christ. Either Caesar is God or Christ is God. And it is an either-or. You can’t hang your heart on both at the same time. Nor can it be for American Christians. It’s Joshua at Shechem: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” For Christians in the USA it is a time for confessing. It’s “aut – aut.”

The homosexual hassle that is wasting the substance of American denominations across the board amounts to fiddling while Christian faith burns out and the FROGBA Gospel takes over. Where is any church commission working on this primal agenda? Luther’s word as the Christian Gospel faded away in Europe already in his day, even in Reformation territory, was “Platzregen.” The Gospel is a passing thunder shower. God sends it to parched fields that need it, but if the field says, “Thanks, but no thanks, we have other sources,” God moves the

shower elsewhere—and “a famine of hearing the word of God” (Amos 8:11) sets in. That’s the deepest source of our national vulnerability.

For a look at the Gospel’s radically different freedom GO to an early ThTh posting, now archived on the website <www.crossings.org>. Click on Dec. 18, 1998. I hope to work from that essay for next week’s posting.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder