

Two Conflicting Texts on the Fourth of July

Colleagues, Two contradictory texts got hyped in public in the USA on the Fourth of July. I noticed that out loud to Marie and she said: "Oh, Oh, I see a Curmudgeon Column coming for this week's Thursday Theology." Well, maybe.

America's Independence Day was on Sunday this year. Of the two "public" texts that got hyped that day one was spoken in church, one in the world. But the subject was the same. In the church were St. Paul's words in the Sunday's Epistle and "I never BOAST of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the world were the words from New York City on that Sunday: "In a ceremony filled with PRIDE . . . officials laid a 20-ton slab of granite Sunday as the cornerstone of a new tower at the site of the WTC." Pride and boasting may not be exact synonyms, but they're close enough. Boasts there were too in NYC. But it was another Lord who was getting boasted.

NY Governor George Pataki interpreted the event: "The terrorists who attacked us hoped to break our spirit, instead they broke our hearts. How badly they underestimated the resiliency of this city and the resolve of these United States."

Well, George, a "broken and contrite heart" is what God calls for in the penitential psalms. Is there any evidence of any of that in the USA since 9-11-01? Of course, there was the required ritual nod to God in the ceremonies—"a bagpipe procession playing 'God Bless America.'" But any awareness of any "word" from God like Jesus's words at the crumbled ruins of the tower of Siloam—"Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish"? Not at all. That would contradict our pitiable puffings of pride.

But repentance, though it does crucify pride, is the way to LIVE. Its opposite is the way to die.

Pataki's reference to "they underestimated" elicits reflection too. It's not "they," George, who are our nation's "estimators." The ONE who "estimates" us is the same one who bestowed on us the "inalienable rights" we hype on the Fourth of July. The way God estimates pride is constant throughout the scriptures—and throughout world history: "You have been weighed and found wanting." Just for fun I looked up all Biblical references to pride/proud in my Bible concordance. Exactly 100. I counted. And nary a one commends it. 100% of 100 references.

And some of them are very, very tough. Paul puts pride right next to God-haters in his list of vices in Romans 1. Mary's Magnificat is the standard take: "God scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts." James and Peter both quote the same proverb [was it church wisdom or the world's wisdom? Could have been something that "everybody knows"]: "God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble."

Of course, Pataki is not the villain. He speaks for all of us US citizens "We're proud to be Americans." But if God is agin it, and there are no exceptionsthen what? "We're humble to be Americans?" It sounds like an oxymoron—literally "sharp-nonsense." Here's where St. Mary's "imagination of their hearts" figures in. It's about images, self-images, and the locale is in our hearts. We've got a great family story about the word "imagination." A decade or more ago Granddaughter Lizzy, not yet in school, was sitting next to "Opa" at a family supper gathering. I engaged her in conversation and in one sentence she used the "big" word "imagination," which I'd never heard before from her. "And what is imagination, Lizzy?" I asked. Already then a pensive person and not fast to talk—obviously from her grandmother's genes—she eventually said: "It's a kind of

thinking, Opa. But it's different. You use pictures." We all said Wow!

Pride is a kind of thinking. In pictures. Pictures we have in our heart about ourselves. The Bible's 100 no-nos make it perfectly clear that these are faulty pictures. Reality is something else. How often did we hear that about America's self-image in our recent four months away in SE Asia!

A faulty self-image is not automatically theologically lethal, but when such "imagination" moves "into the heart," it is. For the heart is by Biblical definition God's turf, God's exclusive turf—posted with a big "No Trespassing" sign. Paul's lining up pride with "God-haters" may strike us as harsh, but Jesus used the H-word too in Matthew 6. You cannot serve two masters at the same time. Can't have two different heart-occupants at the same time. Any claim to be able to do so is self-deception. De facto you love the one and hate the other, cling to the one and despise the other. Pride puts me, my country, my whatever, in the God-box of the heart. All other pretenders to that turf—especially the Rightful Owner—are hated. Jesus said so.

And we are eternalizing our national pride. "Freedom Tower," a new tower of Babel—1776 feet yet! whatchutzpah! what hybris!—to replace the one(s) that God destroyed. That sounds more like bondage than a celebration of freedom. Bondage to our national ego and our FROGBA. And a set-up for God saying: "Guess I'll have to do it again, the Babel-breakdown, the Siloam-seismics, since they didn't repent, but went on even more madly in their national ego-addiction." [FROGBA = Folk Religion of God Bless America]

And to call it "Freedom Tower" yet. Reminds me of the powerful book that came out after WWII by Milton Mayer about the German people during the Nazi era. Title: "They Thought They Were

Free.” An American Jew of German descent (and thus language ability) goes to Germany early after WW II has ended to find who “THE Nazi” really is. And he can’t find THAT one. Instead he finds ten Nazi men—from all walks of life—who become his friends (his term). None of them were bigwigs, but all were committed to Hitler’s cause in their run-of-the-mill daily lives as “kleine Leute” (small folks) in Germany.

And they all “thought they were free.” They were not manipulated by propaganda, for most of them thought Goebbels (Hitler’s PR point man) a fool. Sure Hitler wasn’t perfect either, but he was moving in the right direction. Germany was in real danger. The threatening destroyers (terrorists?) of the day were the Marxists, the misguided democrats of the failed Weimar Republic and the Jews. Something had to be done. Something decisive. Something severe. Pre-emptive strikes made perfect sense. For they are out there to destroy us and our way of life. If we don’t, they will.

Yes, Hitler did some awful things. The first ones were only “mildly” awful, but they didn’t seem bad enough to go to the streets and protest. The next one was worse. But we didn’t protest the last one and this one was only a bit more wicked than that one was. So, OK. And then, the next one, a bit worse . . . And we swallowed hard and went back to work. And then the next one. And then, and then, and then.

And they thought they were free. “Freiheit” has always been a major slogan in post-medieval Germany—possibly linked to Luther hyping freedom in his Reformation rhetoric. And freedom was a big word in Hitler’s rhetoric too. And in the rhetoric of America. It appears in almost every sound-byte of our nation’s current president (with pride not far behind). And “they thought they were free.”

Christian freedom, the sort that Luther hyped, is the freedom to be humble. It doesn't come naturally. It necessitates evicting my ego (my nation's ego) from my heart and having God-in-Christ move back in. That's why Luther can open his classic treatise on "Christian Freedom" with this paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord, master of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly humble servant of all, subject to all."

To pick up with Paul's words, Boasting in the Lord Christ who has liberated me from all alien ownerships (my own ego one of the biggies) that enslave me, I'm free to be humble. I.e., free to place myself at others' feet—all others—and not lord it over anyone.

But for such freedom to happen hearts need to be purged of alien owners and re-occupied by the Rightful One. Could there be a smidgin of that freedom—to put oneself under, not over, other people, other nations—for a whole nation even if the national heart is pre-occupied by other tenants? No Biblical texts I can think of are optimistic about that. There might be a "left-hand" possibility to gather from the ancient Greeks. A halfway house perhaps. They didn't get touched by Christ's re-occupation program or the prophetic forerunners thereof, but they did learn that hybris-in-humans was dead certain to wind up with dead humans. So moderation (restraint) & wisdom ("street smarts") were their proposed alternatives to hybris. Sometimes in some people they work, but not all the time for all the people. The tragedies of the Greek theater proclaim that some people never learn—and no one "always" learns.

So as good as Greek wisdom is, we need better wisdom. One that could generate "humility in being an American." Paul's "boasting in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ" is a place to start. He anchors this in the "wisdom" of the "foolishness of the cross," and contrasts it with what the Greeks of his day were seeking.

So there are going to be oxymorons, paradoxes—between one boasting and another, between one freedom and another, between one servitude and another. It all depends on who the occupation force is—not in Iraq, but in the hearts of Americans.

“Humble to be an American.” Hmm. As Luther regularly asked: What does this mean? If we could articulate that, could Kerry & Edwards campaign on such a national theology? That would really be a clear choice.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder