

Religious Liberty and License

By Gardner C. Taylor

A sermon for Religious Liberty Day 2003

"... Ye shall be as gods" Genesis 3:5

The central lure in the Eden account of our human beginning was the temptation to exceed our humanity and to "be as gods." Midst the luscious fruit and the endless springtime, a slimy presence strikes at the most vulnerable element in the human makeup, "ye shall be as gods." All of history since supplies tragic evidence that this continues to lie at the heart of the human problem. We mortals are created a little lower than God, a lofty status, but in our attitudes and actions we tend to forget the "little lower" and seek the glory which cannot be forcibly seized — the status and prerogatives of very God.

My friend, Robert Handy, who taught church history at New York's Union Theological Seminary, in a bicentennial article in 1976, pointed out the claim of "speciality" in much of the history of America, actually going back to its English antecedent. The reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) "was a time when," as Winthrop Hudson put it, "returning exiles devoted their energies to making clear England's identity as a chosen people." It was kin to the theme which John Winthrop uttered on board the Arabella as it sailed toward Massachusetts, "we shall find that the God of Israel is among us ... when he shall make us a praise and glory... for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

Jonathan Edwards took up the same line of reasoning in the Great Awakening of the 18th century when he said, "America has received the true religion of the old continent." Abraham Lincoln was a little more modest when in 1861 he spoke of America as the Almighty's "almost chosen people."

One hears that theme at the dawn of the 20th century from Senator Albert J. Beveridge, who saw it as God's plan in "the eternal movement of the American people toward the mastery of the world." Robert Bellah, the sociology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, points out this theme as addressed by Herman Melville when he wrote that "the rest of the nations must soon be in our rear."

The great blessings of religious liberty, the freedom of every person to worship God "under his vine and under his fig tree" can become the overreaching that is license, lack of due restraint, the inability to make the distinction between being made a "little lower" than God and being God.

This is the peril America faces today. Recently on television one of the gurus of conservatism spoke in a Ted Koppel interview as this being the "American Century." We are in danger of seeing our blessings as license. To be sure, America has enjoyed an ever-brighter history and an expanding sense of human worth and dignity. Our democratic

pilgrimage represents the grandest political emprise in human history. Never before have people of so many diverse backgrounds, of such varying political faiths and religious beliefs been brought together, with the abomination of human slavery in the mixture, and given the mandate to contract a society of mutuality, liberty and opportunity.

That mandate is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. One reads the words of this grandest and most eloquent of political creeds with a lift of the spirit and a gasp of wonder.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation ô We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness ...

In the gathering experience and sensibility of passing time, one would want to look askance at some of the language contained in the Declaration of Independence. A growing awareness of gender regard would make us want to substitute the word "people" for "men." It is more than merely mischievous to point out that the term "separate and equal" was purloined by the United States Supreme Court in its infamous Plessy vs. Ferguson decision that there could be "separate but equal" facilities for blacks and whites, substituting the conjunction "but" for the one in the Declaration, "and." Still, there is in the Declaration of Independence a subtle recognition of religious liberty. This occurs in the words "endowed by their Creator," not by any Congress or Parliament.

There have been grievous blights on the American undertaking. One mentions, hopefully with shame, the indefensible injustice visited on the original Americans, the Indians, as in the "Trail of Tears" when more than 100,000 Indian people were moved from the "Great Smokies" and herded toward what is now Oklahoma. The sin of human slavery and its entail, too often endorsed by Christian denominations and the cause of their schisms of region, remains a continuing shame and pain.

Through all of that history, liberty ô secular and religious ô has soldiered on until it is now basic in the American society. The sense of greatness which such liberty has bestowed on America tempts its people with a feeling of superiority and "speciality," which may be the regnant danger now faced by our society. Many Americans do not recognize the peril in preeminence in things material and military. It is the danger of license ô the hubris of thinking "our way or the highway."

The graveyard of nations is filled with once great powers who strutted across the stage of history. Their sin was the fatal one of feeling that they were beyond judgment and beyond question. This is one of the problems of preeminence, perhaps the chief problem. There is today no major opposing power through whose presence we might be restrained and

halted in our feeling of license, of freedom to act arbitrarily without regard to the sensibilities, justified or not, of other nations, the temptation to speak and act with arrogance toward other national communities.

It is at this point that a truly free religious presence in the nation can exercise its God-given genius. America, all unknowingly, may in these troubled times be most in need of that religious counsel which warns that "pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

The stakes could not be higher than they are now for the future of this bright presence in history, which we lovingly call "America."

Beyond cavil, now is the time, as never before, when the Christian community must look at our country *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the gaze of eternity, and under the judging presence of our God who has made himself most clearly seen in the work and words of our Lord Jesus Christ with his stern warning of "what shall it profit a man (or nation) to gain the whole world and lose his (its) own soul."

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