

December 31, 2001

Tanks at the Manger?

On the Sunday before Christmas, a telling cartoon by Steve Breen of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* appeared in many newspapers. Two American women are looking at a manger scene of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. A few animals are gathered, and on each side of the barn stands a modern tank. One woman explains to the other, "I thought the tanks gave it more of a Holy Land look."

The cartoon brings a smile not simply because tanks are an anachronism but because American Christians have celebrated Christmas as a holiday without political significance for so long that the tanks now seem out of place, just as a McDonald's or a Starbucks store would seem out of place.

But how often in the last 2500 years has Bethlehem been the scene of quiet worship disconnected from the affairs of state, from warfare, from political contention over the right way to order day-to-day life in the promised land? If not tanks at the manger scene, what about some of King Herod's law-enforcement officials?

Perhaps the year 2001, with its deteriorating "peace" negotiations in the Middle East and war in Afghanistan, will remind us that religions are not non-political and that politics is not non-religious. Jesus was, after all, announced and received by his followers as the Messiah, the Christ, the King of the Jews. His life was so freighted with political significance that Herod tried to have him killed in infancy. And regional authorities finally crucified him because they believed he was a threat to the establishment.

Well, say many modernists, religious politics is precisely the problem. When Christ was thought to be politically important, Church leaders sponsored crusades to the Holy Land. The problem with Islam is that it is such a political religion. And the mistake of many Jews who pushed for the creation of the state of Israel is that they turned their religion back into a political movement. The only hope for real peace on earth is to be found in confining religious expressions to private quarters, detached from political and military affairs.

This plea for a non-religious politics is faulty, however, because it fails to see that religions are ways of life and not simply ways of worship. And it fails to recognize the encompassing claims of secularism, which advocates a way of life that includes rules about how other people's religions should be confined to private life. Secularism is as religious as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are political.

Freud spoke of religion as "the future of an illusion." Today we should talk about non-religious politics and non-political religions as illusory. The question that all the diverse ways of life in our world must face is this: Which way of life can do greatest justice in public life to all ways of life? Which way of life treasures among its deepest principles the obligation to serve its highest authority by giving equal political and legal protection to people of all faiths?

The Christian gospel certainly proclaims that Christ is King above all kings, the only ultimate sovereign over every sphere of life. But the Christian gospel also makes clear that only Jesus Christ, not his followers, may enact God's final judgment on earth. In fact, in obedience to this very Christ, his followers are obligated to live at peace with everyone insofar as they bear responsibility. The proper mode of public behavior for Christ's disciples is to serve their neighbors as they would be served.

Will Christians heed these political implications of the gospel? Will Muslims come to accept the full and equal treatment of all faiths in public life? And will secularists advocate equal opportunity for religious ways of life in public and not only in private? These are among the most important and inevitably religious political questions for 2002 and beyond.

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