

Theology and the Contract with America

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Since the elections of last November swept away many of the familiar fixtures of the American political system, the new House of Representatives has been busily at work attempting to enact into law the ten or so promises which had been made by Republican candidates during the campaign--promises lumped together under the rubric of a "contract with America." In the intervening months, political pundits have made a cottage industry out of trying to understand the message the electorate seemed to be sending when it "turned the rascals out" and placed the legislative branch of government in new hands, all the while expressing amazement at the effectiveness of the House of Representatives and cynicism about the long-term consequences of the measures passed by the new House.

Like many Americans, I have watched the entire process with some bemusement, some apprehension, and occasional anger. Like many Americans, I would find it difficult, if asked to name the clauses in the Contract with America. Like most Americans, I am not yet certain just what it all means, nor am I convinced that what we are watching is not just one more iteration of the conventional political game. Nonetheless, I must admit that the new House of Representatives, its new leadership and particularly its new speaker have focused my attention in powerful and significant ways.

Now that the first hundred days of the new congress are behind us, and the revolutionaries on the right have passed most of their promises on to a reluctant Senate, I would like to take a few moments to reflect with you about the meaning of the events we have been witnessing. You will be glad to know that I do not intend to discuss the details of the famous or infamous "contract." As I have already suggested, I am not sure I could even list its clauses. Rather, I would like to explore what seem to me to be some underlying assumptions behind the political upheaval of last November and the legislative agenda which it has brought to the country.

Let me begin by saying that despite the fear in some quarters that the influence of religion has been declining in this country, and in spite of the doctrine of the separation of church and state, it is still as true today as it ever was that the politics in this country cannot be understood or evaluated apart from a recognition of the religious convictions which shape the national mind set at any given moment. What I would like to do in the time we have together today is to explore the myth, the theology which I believe informs and shapes much of the political reality of contemporary society, and then suggest a different myth, and different theology by which to grapple with the challenges which confront us.

America is a Christian nation. That is the claim of the religious right. It is also an accurate description. Any reading of our history would ratify that conclusion. While there have always been alternative voices abroad in the land--Native Americans, influences from Africa, Jews, freethinkers, to name but a few--those alternative voices have been heard against the back drop of America as a Christian nation. What is more, America has been a Protestant, Puritan nation. Its form of government and the assumptions upon which it was built are to be discovered in the practices of the Puritan Calvinist churches as much as in the writings of Locke and other enlightenment figures. Our strengths, our excesses, our sometimes demonic behavior are all equally rooted in that tradition.

Fortunately for our history, Christianity has been a faith which is capable of offering a variety of diverse theologies and supporting a variety of diverse visions. Therefore, to understand the nation at any given time, it is helpful to ask what theology, what myth, what motivating, structuring religious vision informs the national agenda at that moment. If we address that question to the times in which we find ourselves, I would suggest that much of the driving force behind recent political developments may be found in the convergence of two powerful mythic images: One of these is the myth of the fall, what is called "fall-redemption theology;" the other is the myth of an on-rushing apocalypse, an on-rushing end-time when the world as we have known it shall have ceased to be.

The latter myth draws much of its strength from the coincidence of the calendar. We are approaching the end of a millennium and in the back of the minds of many people raised within the Christian world-view is a formless expectation that there is some mystical significance to this approaching event--that it is more than just one day turning into another, one year turning into another, one century turning into another. Rather it is both a time of ending and of new beginning with overtones of fear and expectation, which color, in ways not always clear to us, how we see the world, lending a sense of unexamined urgency to every problem, to everything we undertake.

The dominant force in the world view of many people, however, is the myth of the fall, the theology of fall and redemption. You know the myth of the fall. It is impossible to grow up in our society and not know it. Once upon a time, human beings lived in a perfect world, a paradise. In that paradise, all human needs were met. What is more, they were met without any exertion on the part of any human individual. At night the rains came up from the ground and watered the earth; rivers of clear sweet waters flowed through an earth which was everywhere a garden; every plant and tree and herb which was good for human beings grew and flourished and was there for the taking; human beings lived at peace with each other and with all the rest of creation and there was neither pain nor death nor fear nor hatred anywhere on the earth. And then, into that perfection slithered some evil thing--a serpent, perhaps--whispering into the human ear the great heresy that pleasant though this! garden might be, things could be better.

At that moment, under the force of that subversive suggestion, the human animal took hold of its own destiny, reached up to grasp the forbidden fruit and in that act destroyed paradise. Driven from the garden, the human animal became a wretched and despised creature, preying upon human beings and other creatures alike, constantly trying to build

its own paradise in a blighted and demeaned world, and inevitably failing because the task is forever beyond human abilities. Humanity's only hope is to repent, to confess the arrogance and pride which led to the primal act of rebellion, and hope that a compassionate god might restore the human community to the garden from which, because of arrogance, it had been expelled.

As I have listened to much of the political rhetoric which has surrounded the efforts to enact the "Contract With America," I have heard echoes of this ancient story. The political energy that the contract draws upon emerges from a conviction that sometime in the past there was a better world--perhaps it existed when Dwight Eisenhower was president, perhaps it existed before Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, perhaps one must go all the way back to Jefferson or even Washington--but once upon a time there was a better world, a world in which government was small and limited and efficient and inexpensive and run on a part-time basis by citizen patriots. It was a government which knew its function--to defend against external enemies and to deliver the mail--which did not over-reach, which did not embark upon social experiments or concern itself with questions about the equitable distribution of resources, or the justice of conventional social arrangements. It was a government which knew better than to meddle with paradise. And then something happened. Was it the chartering of the national bank, or the building of the first national road? Was it Lincoln's suspending the writ of habeas corpus? Was it anti-trust legislation? Or perhaps it was the massive interference with the natural course of things during the Great Depression. Or maybe it was as recent as Lyndon Johnson's dream of a Great Society.

In any case, the serpent entered the garden. The government began to believe that it had a mandate to improve upon the garden that had been planted by the founding generation. It began to interfere in the lives of its citizens, to suggest that in a complex world the old individualism must be subordinated to the commonweal, that it was appropriate for government to tax those who had the most in order to assist those who had the least, that it was appropriate for government, in the name of peace and order, to limit the rights of citizens to amass private arsenals, that it was the duty of government to ensure that all citizens had access to the rights and opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship and, where local custom and practice had restricted those rights, to intervene in the name of justice.

In the process, government grew large and complex and powerful, bureaucratic, and incompetent and unfeeling, distant and tyrannical and costly. In time, nothing worked any more and evil grew upon the land. Programs designed to help people out of poverty and dependency only confirmed them in their misery. Vast sums of money were extracted from the most productive and competent people and wasted like water poured into the bureaucratic desert. Old values were scorned and ridiculed and ancient liberties were trampled upon and rabble from other lands, who did not speak our language or share our traditions invaded our borders and despoiled the land. Political leaders stopped listening. And nothing worked any more. We had fallen from grace; we had been expelled from paradise; we had been driven from the garden as a consequence of our own arrogance. And our only hope was to repent, to repeal the consequences of our prideful actions, to

dismantle government and return it to the! simple, limited form it had had in the days of our greatness, trusting that if we were truly repentant, perhaps we might find our way back, past our terrible errors, to that pristine world envisioned and created by the founders.

That, I submit to you, is the theology behind the election results of last November, and that is the source of much of the political energy which has driven events since. Let me hasten to assure you that the myth of the fall and the dream of a return to Eden is not confined to one political party or one part of the political spectrum. However, despite the fact that it is widely embraced, this particular myth flies in the face of reality.

Everything we know about the world tells us that time does not tarry; neither does it move back. It is almost certain that paradise never existed, but even if it had, the nature of the universe is such that having once left the garden there can be for us no way back. We cannot wish away our history, or not know what we have come to know, or deny the reality of the world we have constructed. We have no alternative but to begin where we are, as we are. That is why the revolutionaries on the right, who rail against government and seek to reduce the size of government and return to the days of the citizen politician inevitably begin to sound and act more and more like ordinary politicians as they bargain and compromise and work to enact their program--because that is what they are; that is what history and circumstances have made them. Despite their venerable pedigree, the myth of the fall and the theology of fall and redemption are simply the wrong stories. They offer false alternatives and impossible goals because they are constructed upon a world-view which is simply wrong.

Let me tell you another story. Once upon a time, in the fullness of time, out of the dust of long-dead stars, a planet coalesced and began to orbit a stable, middling star. Because the planet was just the right size and because its orbit was just the right distance from the star, and because the tilt of the axis of the planet was just right to generate seasons, the planet, as it cooled, developed a magnetic field, collected an atmosphere, accumulated water, captured a moon, and began to incubate life. At first the life forms were small and simple and moderately efficient. But they were also monotonous and dull and unexciting. In time the small and the simple became larger and more complex and even more efficient. And with these changes came vastly greater potential and unexpected developments and exciting complications. In time, these life forms developed self-consciousness and the ability to aggregate experience, to remember the past and to anticipate the future. And they filled the world, adding intentionality to the processes which had bodied forth existence.

At every step in these changes, something of the past was lost and abandoned in exchange for new possibilities and new opportunities. And the something lost was lost forever. There was never any way to revive an extinct species, or restore a lost environment, or to remake a choice, or to recover yesterday. There was only the ability to learn from the past, to dream of a different tomorrow, to work to make the dream a reality. And with the passage of time that is what happened. Life moved in the direction of greater and greater complexity. Life invented ethics and morality that it might judge

between various alternatives. And life judged those moral and ethical standards in light of new dreams and hopes. From the moment the planet first coalesced and even before that moment, nothing had ever been static and nothing would ever be static. Each moment, rich with its accomplishments and its failures, led inexorably into the next moment, and there never was a way to go back, to recover the past, to regain a lost simplicity. If there was a paradise, it is was in the dream and it could be gained--in part at least--only by going forward, for there was no other way.

This is the myth, the theology I would bring to the political debate and discussion. And it is in terms of this evolutionary, developmental myth that I would wrestle with the political and social questions which confront us in these times. Is it true that the welfare system has failed its major goal? I would ask what is that goal, and how, building upon what we know and what we have accomplished, do we move from here to create a system which recognizes that we all are responsible for each other, which understands that in some real sense all government is a welfare system, which admits that we all benefit from government programs, and which affirms that it ill behooves those of us who have benefited the most from the system to begrudge the crumbs which fall from our table. The question is how do we move from this point, from where we are now to create a welfare system which serves the poor at least as well as we have been served? We cannot go back; the question is, how sh! all we go forward. Our past cannot be repealed. It must become the foundation for the future.

By the same token, what does it mean to claim that the government is too large? In a universe which moves inexorably from simplicity to complexity, in a world grown complex beyond our grandparents imagination, how much government is the right amount of government? In a world become a global village, in which disease, ignorance, economic and technical and political trends all know no national boundaries, what does it mean to say that government is too large. Or what does it mean to say that the government is too expensive? How much is it worth to ensure the welfare, the health, the security, the education of the people? Perhaps it is time to develop new priorities for the use of government resources and new focus for government programs, but does anyone really believe that we would be well served by a government which could all be housed in the Executive Office Building as it was before the Second World War, or carried around in a stove-pipe hat as Lincoln did? The dream of going backward is a folly. We cannot go back; the question is how shall we go forward. Our past cannot be repealed. It must become the foundation for the future.

In every instance, this is the theology, the mythology I would bring to bear upon the complex and difficult questions which confront us--not a Christian theology of fall and redemption, but a theology of emergent process ever evolving from what was to what is to what will be, a mythology which affirms the path by which we have come, which accepts the inevitable limitations and imperfections of the world in which we find ourselves, and seeks not to regain a paradise lost, but to engage in the ever-evolving journey which is our challenge and our hope. I do not despair of the present. I refuse to believe that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. I do not accept that we have exhausted our creativity, our determination, our ability to dream and to accomplish those

dreams. I believe that the same forces which brought us into being and have sustained us in being still lure into a future beyond our hopes or our fears. That is the religious vision these times call for, the basis for creative politics, the foundation of a vital covenant between the past out of which we emerged, the world in which we find ourselves and the future which beckons us.