

The Soapbox



November 2004

A good friend recently encouraged me to keep writing these *Soapbox* pieces. It's been a long time since the last one, I know. You may recall I created this format in order to climb on a soapbox from time to time to share with you my thinking and reflections on various topics, in hopes, of course, that these were topics of interest to you as well.

Of course I know this whole thing is quite presumptuous of me, and I know as well you get a lot to read, as I do. But just maybe this effort will help us think together on some of the issues of our day. Lord knows our world needs a lot of reflection these days, and Christians, I believe, need to be actively in the mix. And so if these thoughts stimulate something in your own thinking, I'd love to hear from you as well.

So, for this *Soapbox #5*, here are some thoughts about the strategy of the shapers of our culture to airbrush Easter right off our cultural map.

I wrote recently elsewhere about an experience I had on Easter morning last spring. I padded out my front door very early to pick up my newspapers and found myself exuberant and expectant on this holy day. It was a beautiful day in Seattle, the sun shining early and the flowers and trees blooming wildly. This is the day, I thought, when two billion Christians all over the globe will shout and sing that our Lord is risen, all of us caught up in the profound mystery that changed everything.

And then I scanned through my papers, *The New York Times* and *The Seattle Times*, and I realized there was not one word about Easter in either paper. *The Seattle Times* had a rather strange article on offbeat notions of prayer that was intended, I guess, to be a kind of grudging or glancing notice that something religious was going on this day. But it wasn't Easter we were talking about. People don't go to church in our region, the writer wanted to remind us again, but they do pray, somehow at least.

Fifty million Americans went to see *The Passion of the Christ*, with another 50 million expected before its impact is all over. There are two billion Christians in the world. And yet we have no mention in our papers that Easter is news on Easter morning?

My point is this: The leading cultural voices of our time seek to airbrush Easter right off our cultural maps, and I believe such revisionism is dangerous. To airbrush Easter out of our awareness is to write a new story for the culture, and we are charting new and unknown territory. We are watching the deconstruction of our history, the writing of a new story in decidedly secular terms, and with relentless, sometimes thoughtless, and breathtaking speed, we are headed toward a culture we know very little about.

As you may know, Europe is trying to draw up a new constitution, and many of the political leaders involved are arguing fiercely that there should be no mention of Christian influence on Europe's past. In a recent article in *First Things*, the Catholic historian George

Weigel talks at length about this “deliberate act of historical amnesia.” In other words, “a millennium and a half of Christianity’s contributions to the European understanding of human rights and democracy” should receive no recognition, either about the past or for the future. Amazing.

“To deny that Christianity,” says Weigel, “had anything to do with the evolution of free, law-governed, and prosperous European societies is more than a question of falsifying the past; *it is also a matter of creating a future in which moral truth has no role in governance, in the determination of public policy, in understandings of justice, and in the definition of that freedom which democracy is intended to embody*” [emphasis mine]. Indeed, by cutting off the Christian roots that shaped and sustained the culture we enjoy, we are writing a new story that will define new values by which we will live in the future.

In the early part of the 20th century, the great Southern writer Flannery O’Connor understood these issues well. In “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” one of the great short stories in all of American literature, we find this extraordinary figure called the Misfit, an escaped convict that is on the run. Just before he launches the chilling, cold-blooded annihilation of an innocent family, he reflects, of all things, on the resurrection of Jesus.

“The resurrection changed everything,” the Misfit pronounces. When Jesus was raised from the dead “he thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,’ he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.”

So many of the profound values we enjoy as a culture — values that have made us a decent society, even despite our great failures — values such as individual freedom, freedom to practice religion (any religion), liberty for all, respect for human dignity, equality, kindness, civility, care for the poor, personal rights, the rule of law, the right to elect our leaders, and even the separation of church and state — emerged out of the faith and the vision and the wisdom of people who believed that the Jesus of Easter changed everything. Maybe I am simplifying a bit, but the decent culture we enjoy was shaped for the most part by Easter people.

That’s the positive side of a culture where Easter matters. The dangerous side, when Easter faith is out of sight and out of mind, is that we lose the vitality, charity, hopefulness, goodness, morality, and a notion of truth that such faith provides. And once we make the choice, as the Misfit reminds us, that Easter no longer matters, then all we have left is our own pleasure, and we might as well indulge in meanness as anything else. The Misfit has his finger on what things will look like with such a future: We might as well enjoy “the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.” Nietzsche said something like this too. Our Easter-less newspapers tell this story every day.

At Seattle Pacific University, our mission is to try to find a voice that can speak into this pattern of secularization, this moment of deconstruction of our history and our culture, this time when our culture-shapers want to airbrush Easter out of existence and write a new story for our future. We are working hard at this mission, and we are hopeful we can make an impact.

Well, thanks for letting me speak from the soapbox again. I’d love to hear from you on these matters too.



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