

THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT THE COMMON GOOD

January 19, 2011

Paul on Political, Moral, and Religious Divisions

If I remember correctly, there once was a time when, by his own admission, Paul Krugman was not particularly active in public debate about policy issues confronting the country and the world.

But for at least the last decade or so, no one, I think it is fair to say, would accuse the Nobel Prize winner in Economics who teaches at Princeton and contributes twice weekly columns for the New York Times of being un-opinionated.

No one, that is, has to work hard determining where Krugman stands on a whole host of contentious issues of public policy based on his economic philosophy and technical expertise.

So it was a genuine change of pace when, recently, Professor Paul, stepped back from taking sides and told “a tale of two moralities” (New York Times, January 13, 2011).

Responding affirmatively to President Obama’s plea for Americans to “expand our moral imaginations,” Krugman still suggested that this would require more than policy tinkering:

“But the truth is that we are a deeply divided nation and are likely to remain one for a long time. By all means, let’s listen to each other more carefully; but what we’ll discover, I fear, is how far apart we are. For the great divide in our politics isn’t really about pragmatic issues, about which policies work best; it’s about differences in those very moral imaginations Mr. Obama urges us to expand, about divergent beliefs over what constitutes justice.”

He then went on to describe, rather fairly and accurately in my judgment, the two moralities that divide us:

“One side of American politics considers the modern welfare state – a private-enterprise economy, but one in which society’s winners are taxed to pay for a social safety net – morally superior to the capitalism red in tooth and claw we had before the New Deal. It’s only right, this side believes, for the affluent to help the less fortunate.”

“The other side believes that people have a right to keep what they earn, and that taxing them to support others, no matter how needy, amounts to theft. That’s what lies behind the modern right’s fondness for violent rhetoric: many activists on the right really do see taxes and regulation as tyrannical impositions on their liberty.”

As Krugman sees it, “there’s no middle ground between these views” and, therefore, calls not for a middle road for both sides to follow but rather an agreement to follow a set of “certain ground rules” that avoids violence and resolves conflicts by the rule of law.

Paul Krugman is conceding that an appeal to reason through accepted means of persuasion is not going to work at this stage of our American democracy. All we can do is agree to disagree with some degree of minimal civility.

Another Paul, long ago, faced the challenge of fundamental divisions among people sharing the same space.

The Apostle wrote to a divided Corinthian church – which, by the way, he had been instrumental in founding – that he had received reports of “quarrels among you.” Some members of the Corinthian community identified themselves with one leader or another, which probably meant that they also towed the line on the differing ideologies and moral philosophies of those leaders.

This Paul was writing to find a way to deal with those divisions.

And like his contemporary namesake, this ancient Paul invested no hope in appeals to reason or persuasion.

But he did not settle just for ground rules and an appeal to the rule of law. Instead, having the advantage of common authority among all the parties, St. Paul wrote: “By the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I appeal to all of you to be in agreement and that there be no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (I Corinthians 1: 10)

True, there might still be arguments about what the Gospel of Jesus Christ entailed, even if that Gospel appeared to be foolishness to the rest of the world. But there could and should be unity in the Corinthian Christian community about the meaning and power of the cross – of the giving up of self for the sake of others in the service of God’s reign in an inclusive community of love.

Our modern American community doesn’t have an equivalent authority. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights and all the other amendments only provide the framework and the foundational rules and principles by means of which the many and usually divided voices of “we the people” can govern ourselves.

So Paul of Princeton may be correct in his assessment and counsel about how to deal with our national and civic divisions.

But that still leaves the question of how Christians today participate in our American democracy, with some guidance from the Paul of Tarsus who addressed the church in Corinth.

My sense is that we followers of Jesus aren't just divided by our loyalties to lesser leaders and factions of Christianity itself, but that we are even more divided by the "tale of two moralities" that Krugman describes. We are, that is, even more divided as Christians by our loyalty to the lesser gods of particular political and economic ideologies than we are to Jesus Christ, to the cross of Jesus Christ and all that it represents, and to his proclamation of the Reign of God.

That loyalty to what should be our common authority as disciples of Jesus has, we need to recognize, political and economic and social implications and consequences in a civil polity in which the people rule.

But we will never find even a semblance of unity on those matters so long as our greater loyalties are to lesser gods.