

Reflections on a Holiday

by Craig E. Tenke

***Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD;
and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.***

***And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;
and you shall teach them diligently to your children,
and shall talk of them when you sit in your house,
and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down,
and when you rise.***

***And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand,
and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.***

***And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house
and on your gates. Deut. 6: 4-9***

There's comfort and security in tried and true traditions. They tie us to lives and events that are much broader and more enduring than our own. Our American traditions are, quite literally, imprinted on our personalities. Yet, our traditions should nurture and focus our relationships to God and man, without becoming automatic or an end in themselves. With this in mind, I invite you to briefly reflect on how history and experience interact in tradition, along the sometimes fuzzy line between faith and idolatry.

In the days before the infamous hurricane of '38 passed over our church, my grandparents were newcomers to the community. They brought my mother to a congregation on the south shore of Long Island that was already two centuries old. The denomination of which it was a part just happened to have been founded on the principle of "constitutional republicanism" at a time when its own government was arguably

the most powerful intercolonial organization on the continent. Through this church, their great-grandchildren inherited a direct link to the Revolutionary War, which was known in some quarters as "the Presbyterian Rebellion."

I grew up proud of being a Presbyterian. We had strong, American traditions and a clear awareness of God, but we weren't superstitious or uninformed. In a conservative, rural township with only one political party, I was raised hearing the grumblings of elders about issues ranging from our denomination's stand on Angela Davis to all of the "fifty cent words" that Chuck Cozadd used in his sermons. One of these sermons was based on Jean Paul Sartre's play, "No Exit," an atheist's portrayal of hell as "other people" that somehow was reshaped into a paradox of faith and hope in my young mind. I learned that, ever and always, our God is alive and well

in a world of ever-increasing complexity, and I came to think of the real "Law of God" – not words about God, but rather the "living Word of God" – as no less concrete than the law of gravity.

In the cold war era, my spiritual life was cultivated by a congregation that included technicians, engineers and scientists among the priesthood of believers. The congregation was, and still is, family – both literally and metaphorically. I learned hard lessons about our stewardship of the earth by playing down the creek, where snapping turtles, big enough to carry off wheelbarrows, used to rule the muck we called "quicksand," and the supernatural sounds of whip-poor-wills owned the firefly night. Long before cell phones, I was rarely too far away to be retrieved by a matronly holler. I learned that Jesus loves the little children, that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, that we must love and forgive our



enemies. I learned these things under the threat of a nuclear mushroom cloud, mere miles from the Brookhaven National Lab. I learned them as I played in the shadow of nuclear warheads, ready to strike from secret sites nearby. I learned them as I played under the sonic booms of Grumman's new war machines, flying from where they've since reassembled flight 800.

Through all of this, I held onto my pride as an American, arm-in-arm with my pride as a Presbyterian. And as I began to mature, I learned that to be an adult meant to accept the gap between moral belief and moral action. Only recently have I begun to seriously consider the possibility that the conservative,

moral tension, between what is and what should be, might sometimes just be an excuse to *not* follow Christ into the difficult places, places where a cross isn't just a clean, white symbol, but rather a place of death, where we faithful followers betrayed the innocent to crucifixion, and then just ran away. In fact, maybe, just maybe, part of my pride wasn't based so much on my faith in either God or in liberty after all, but was rather a form of idolatry, an image carved in the form of myself, a stumbling block for a just and lasting peace, and an offense to the very Word of God...

Each Memorial Day, after the parade through town, there's a service at the war memorial in the cemetery – a memorial my father helped design and place. Mrs. James B.M. Bulloch is no longer alive to “pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,” in her unique and distinctively patriotic style, but somehow I still managed to bring up another generation with the tradition. They began sitting in a big “Radio Flyer” wagon, waving their flags as the veterans and bands and fire engines paraded

by. Each year, we remind them of the sacrifices made on our behalf by those who went before us, and by those who are still in jeopardy on foreign soil. Each year, we reflect on the meaning of America, and give thanks for the values we share in common with those whose different backgrounds and faiths collectively make up America. What the speeches lack in eloquence is made up for by the dedication of the dwindling numbers of those who go, year after year, to express their gratitude and respect through tradition.

Memorial Day is a day to recognize the sacrifices that have been made for our nation. It's also a reminder to each of us to rededicate ourselves to service. We remember and honor our fallen veterans for their sacrifice and their works, and we hold them up as an example for us all. Yet, even as the Lord has given us different gifts, so are there different forms of service...

And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." Matt. 22: 37-40



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