



September 2013

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MACHIAVELLI AND FRIENDS

By Ron Allen

Niccolo Machiavelli, the fifteenth century Italian philosopher and writer, is credited as the father of modern political theory. He is famous for his many proverbs, one of which is this: *“It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both.”* He also said: *“Politics have no relation to morals.”*

Machiavelli was such a shrewd observer of human nature that his name has now become synonymous with political cunning and duplicity. He counseled: *“If you wish to be evil and get away with it, you need to take great care to appear to be committed to morality and religion; to core values of great, even cosmic, importance.”* Those who have an interest in the political process in their country today are often dismayed at the spectacle of persons in public life, trying very hard to follow Machiavelli’s advice.

It is far too rare to find a politician who—wittingly or otherwise—is capable of restraining him/her self from the expedient of appearing to be devout, even while pursuing a suspect and perhaps even a godless agenda. People in public office seem to have figured out that religion grants its devotees a sense of things so worthwhile as to require unconditional reverence. This sense of ultimate values calls men and women to acknowledge them in their lives; to commit themselves to a lifelong striving to practice them.

In the U.K. there is a political party called the British National Party (B. N. P.). The BNP seeks every chance to claim an alliance with Christianity by asserting that its ideal of a ‘white’ society is based on Christian values.

There are similar white supremacist groups in Europe and in North America. Some of them have links to Nazism and to the Klan. They like to say they have a Christian rationale for their ideas. The elaborate penal system set up by the British which resulted in the forced transportation of 160,000 prisoners to Australia, was oiled and maintained with the help of religion. Christian churchmen formed part of the machinery, and some of the cruelest enforcers were clergymen. In the Americas, slave-owners frequently defended their exploitation of Africans with references to Scripture (Ephesians 2:5; Titus 2:9; Genesis 9:25-27).

It will not have escaped the notice of some, among which are the most vocal opponents of gun control, and many who are deeply religious. On the other hand, there are many opponents thereof who seek equal backing for their point of

view in the altruism that religion provides.

There are those who call for drastic action to mitigate climate change on grounds that earth’s fragile ecosystems are of consummate worth to God. Others cite Scripture in support of a view that climate-change science is a product of unbelief; of nature worship or straight-out paganism.

History demonstrates that even when a minority in a population subscribe to a faith, Machiavellian persons will cynically exploit the power of religious conviction for their own ends. Because of religion’s power to marshal the various elements of personality, integrating and concentrating their capacities in favor of perceived values, evil’s first trick in the book is to make evil appear good by clothing it in religious dress.

This ruse is not the preserve of atheists, egomaniacs, or psychopaths. It is the preferred strategy of many who call themselves ‘God fearers.’ Professed believers and their institutions are in choice position to exploit religion for dubious purposes. One such dubious purpose might be the obsessive promotion of their own sectarian dogmas.

This begs the question: When is religion bad? What is bad religion? **Bad religion is one which promotes an action, a plan, a law, an idea as being so ultimate and necessary as to require absolute commitment, total loyalty and complete obedience—to a point at which the observance of that ideal entails indifference to the safety, support, welling-being and progress of persons and groups of persons who cannot or will not conform to it.**

Examples of bad religion occur in both Christianity and Islam. Both have, at times, taught that assent to correct

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“But Jonah was greatly distressed and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity’” (Jonah 4:1, 2).

This shocking prayer was addressed to God by a man with long experience of God’s steadfast love. His familiarity with God’s predilection for mercy had been freshly brought home to him since God had chosen to overlook Jonah’s militant abdication, both of duty and of communion with God. An examination of this prayer shows that Jonah, even as he personally rejoiced in, and benefited from God’s compassion, yet begrudged the same to other people, not of his ilk. In fact, he was determined to press this miserliness to the extent of hoping that God would exterminate the people of Nineveh, so they would not exist anymore as a summons to the duty of love; as an invitation to imitate the grace of God.


When repentance broke out in Nineveh, it was accompanied by a call for the people to abandon their cruel and aggressive ways, and to stop preying on one another. Violence relinquished meant the exchange of competition, suspicion and division, for coming together in trust and mutual regard.

As a youth I worked in the Australian sheep, beef, and grain industry. In order to successfully handle large numbers of sheep it was necessary to have the assistance of sheep-dogs. None of my dogs would have won any awards at dog shows.

However they were well enough trained to be useful.

Sheep numbering many thousands have to be mustered. The purpose of a muster is to round up every last sheep from the grazing areas, form them into a mob so they can be moved together into yards for handling.

Young dogs had zeal, but not according to knowledge. All they knew was that sheep could be chased. It was a job to restrain a fresh pup from randomly rushing at the sheep, scattering them in all directions, and so sabotaging the muster. Occasionally a single animal would break away in fright. This would be a temptation for a dog to pursue it—not with a view to retrieving it and bringing it back to the mob, which is what human parties desire—but just to chase it. It took a while for a trainee dog to learn that the purpose of the muster is not to harass the sheep, not to divide them or hunt them, but to unify them, get them all together.

God does not seek to harass or scatter humans, but to bring them together. If my dedication to God is such that it inspires me to separate myself from my fellow human beings; if my consecration to God is divisive; if I think I do God service by trying to get away from people who I do not know, do not understand and do not like; if I think I serve God by trying to exclude people from God’s great love—then I am part of what people mean when they say that religion causes trouble in the world. 

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doctrine is necessary for eternal salvation. This has been promoted as a virtue of paramount worth. Torture and massacres have been brought to bear against people for entertaining wrong beliefs.

Christians have labeled Moslems ‘unbelievers’ and have gone to war against them on that basis—and vice versa. Sadly, Christians have encouraged prejudice against Jews; labeling them Christ-killers.

Christendom came to the New World and tried hard to impose its belief system on ancient societies and cultures. Indigenous people were pressured into conforming to mysteries they did not understand. So-called goodness became an instrument of oppression.

Any religion, insisting on conformity to a point of view or a manner of conduct which ends in the disadvantage or marginalization of individuals or groups and the strengthening of indifference to particular individuals or groups—is not a good religion.

Unless religion supplies and generates a moral impetus for the consideration and defense of all persons and *all* classes, it is bad religion.

In the decade leading to the Second World War, loyalty to the Fuehrer was promoted as an ultimate value for Germans. It was a virtue above all virtues. It was not long before the inadequacy of this much touted ideal began to be evident. It was accompanied by speeches and editorials stigmatizing subgroups in German society—mainly Jews. Increasingly, →

GOODNEWS *Unlimited*

Good News Unlimited magazine is published every month by Good News Unlimited, P.O. Box 6687, Auburn, CA, USA 95604-6687.

Good News Unlimited is an interdenominational Christian organization proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ and his kingdom of grace. Special emphasis is placed on the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ’s righteousness alone. GNU also links the gospel to the needs of the whole person, to life-style, and preventive medicine.

Good News Unlimited magazine also seeks to keep readers up-to-date on all aspects of GNU’s ministries. This includes news on national and international radio broadcasts; public seminars, congresses, and Bible schools within the USA (as well as

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Good News Unlimited is a nonprofit religious corporation supported solely by donations from those who believe in its ministries. Gifts are tax deductible in the USA and Canada. An annual review of GNU’s accounts is made by an external auditor. All regular donors to GNU may receive a financial statement on request.

Good News Unlimited is reached by phone at 530.823.9690. Fax 530.823.5338. E-mail gnu@goodnewsunlimited.org.

This magazine is free upon request.

September, 2013
Vol. 32, No. 9

Published by Good News Unlimited

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these were isolated and blamed for that nation's every ill. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, it was easier and even popular to execrate Jews publicly. With terrible success, a whole race of people was excised from the human commonwealth. The notion of mutual respect and obligation was still held to be a vital element in German society, but in the case of Jews it was canceled.

This happened. It was action taken with the help of a fanatical nationalism promoted with the aid of a religious fervor at mass rallies.

It was heralded as a value to be pursued at all costs. Loyalty to nation is a good idea, but it is too small a value to be revered totally. We are attracted to the concept of loyalty to nation. We would probably not vote for a politician who did not promise to the interests of our nation first. National self interest has our approval. But there is no reason why our nation should be valued more than any other.

Loyalty to family is good. When we say we believe in family values, we usually mean *our* family—not anyone else's. But there is no reason why my family should be valued above yours.

A religion may be judged good or evil depending on whether or not it upholds a belief and a commitment to a cardinal truth: all humans are of equal worth and ought to be treated with equal compassion, tolerance and good will. A religion that calls this proposition into question, by advocating a godly enthusiasm issuing in lack of sympathy to certain individuals or groups who do not subscribe to that religion's belief system, is a bad religion.

The book of Jonah documents good and bad religion. As if to emphasize the potency and subtlety of religion's role in human affairs, the archetypal *good* religion occurs in a place where no one would have expected to find it.

After Jonah preaches in Nineveh at God's request, the people turn to the Lord wholeheartedly, and en masse. The king calls on his people to put on sackcloth and appeal to God for mercy. He goes further: "*Let the people give up their evil ways and their violence*" (Jonah 3:8). He uses the same word, *violence*, as occurs in Genesis 6 where the whole world was so *full of violence* that God was sorry he had created it.

In Scripture, violence happens when one person or one people opportunistically deny to other persons or peoples the

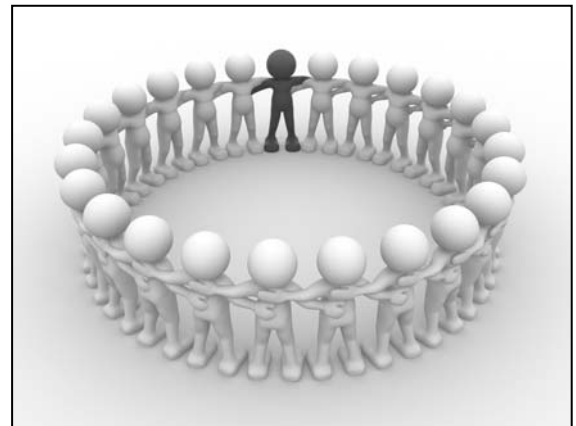


rights and liberties they demand for themselves. In Micah 6:12, the man who uses false weights to tip the scales in favor of his commercial interests, acts violently. The man who does not protect a vulnerable person—an alien or a stranger—commits an inaction which is inherently violent (Jeremiah 22:3).

Assyrian aggression against Israel had been condemned by Israel's prophets (Isaiah 1:13, 14; Nahum 3:1, 19). Cruelty was Assyria's (Nineveh's) national characteristic. When Nineveh turned to the Lord, its king seems to know that mere fasting

accompanied by the traditional symbols of mourning (wearing of sackcloth) will not suffice. He seems to know that an all-inclusive, across-the-board show of religious sentiment will, on its own, just not cut it. He seems to be aware that earnestness in religion, unaccompanied by a revolutionary change in the conduct of human relationships, will be an empty earnestness.

Kings of antiquity were often terrible people. Their power was absolute. Persons who worked in the royal court could lose their heads at the drop of a hat. The monarch lorded himself over his people. The people were totally expendable. Yet in Nineveh, when the ordinary people repent, the king jettisons his grandeur and his power over his people to become one with them; a fellow penitent. Before God he is no more than any of his subjects. His pretensions vanish. He knows that before the Lord God the greatest and the least are alike at God's disposal.



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The heartfelt seeking after God that takes place in Nineveh reverses the antagonisms and inhumanities of its populace. Violence undoes the intrinsic connection between all mankind. True contrition (true religion) revitalizes it. Wherever the genuine article occurs, there is an awakening of brotherhood; there a momentum toward mutuality and fellow-feeling.

The king is right to call for an end to violence. In doing so he echoes the best insights of Israel's prophets. They have

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The worship that God wants is this: caring for orphans or widows who need help and keeping yourself free from the world's evil. This is the kind of worship that God accepts as pure and good. (E.R. V.)

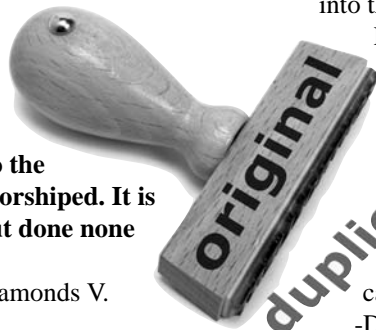
THE GENUINE ARTICLE and its COUNTERFEIT

by Desmond Ford

Order is heaven's first law, and organization is needed in religious matters. God had himself organized the first generation of Judaism at the time of its redemption from Egypt. But all institutions are prone to become idolatrous, self-perpetuating structures wherein means become ends. The spirit and essence can so easily evaporate so that only a dead carcass remains. **Unless the Spirit of God continues to be heard and obeyed, religious organization becomes a tool of hell rather than of heaven.** That Spirit is unpredictable, free in the fullest sense, and often apparently arbitrary to our carnal senses. Furthermore, he seems dangerously radical at times.

Twenty centuries testify to the rapid ossification of religious institutions. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* we find the parable of the Grand Inquisitor who, on encountering one day the returned Christ, bade him depart lest he upset the people. **Group after group has come to the place where it crucifies what it once worshiped. It is always done in respectable fashion, but done none the less.**

-Desmond Ford: *Kaleidoscope of Diamonds V*. II., pp. 50, 51.



So now the chief priests bustle Christ into the presence of Pontius Pilate. He has come up from the seaside; something he does not often do. Jerusalem was too grey a place, too dull a place for the Roman governor. He preferred a society more flamboyant, more exciting. When he did come, he stayed in the palace of Herod. This is where Christ is taken.

But the Jews have a problem. They are afraid of being defiled. Their traditions, not Scripture, created the problem. So they arrive at the great estate with its many parks, a beautiful broad way, and little lakes surrounded by beautiful trees. After going down the main concourse, they knock on the door of an impressive building and push their prisoner through the door into the house of the heathen. Now they will be able to keep the

Passover. **This is typical of all false religion, which concerns itself more with externals than internals.**

One can know whether one has the real thing by searching one's heart to see whether there is more concern with faith, hope and love, rather than outward forms. Outward forms

have their place when they reflect the heart, but otherwise they are useless. And worse than useless, they can be destructive.

-Desmond Ford: *JESUS ONLY*, P. 155. 

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already observed that fellowship with God cannot be had without fellowship with man. The king almost repeats the words of Joel: *"Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and with weeping and with mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments"* (Joel 2:12,13). See also Isaiah 58: 8, 9; Amos 5:21-24.

By calling for repentance, made real by the renunciation of violence, and the enactment of social justice, the Assyrian king identifies the heart of true religion. He puts his finger on the key element which, when absent, renders religion not a help but a hindrance, not a blessing but a curse, not light, life and beauty but darkness and death.

While it is perhaps unexpected that a prototype of genuine religion should emerge from pagan ranks, even more surprising—bewildering even—is the model of bad religion coming from a people with plenty of opportunity to know better. Further, the particular example is something of an expert in religious matters. He is a man whose job is to prick the consciences of his people so that they will show what true reverence for God can do for the world.

But the curious fact is, Jonah has no interest in the spiritual progress of the people of Nineveh. When he finally joins God's work in that great city and witnesses its turning to the Lord. He gives the lie to his religious profession by his distaste for the outbreak of genuine spirituality in Nineveh. It is not what he wants to see. He seems to prefer that Nineveh remain godless and violent and well away from Israel.

When I read the story of Jonah, I need to be honest enough to admit that there is that in me, which is not in the least

offended by Jonah's aversion for the people of Nineveh. There is that in me that would accommodate Jonah's lack of interest in true religion—especially when it occurs among people he doesn't like, and whom he wants nothing to do with. How easy for me to satisfy myself with a religious zeal, with 'high' principles that call for my loyalty as a churchman with creedal benchmarks and loyalties—without having to think about the people in that great city (the world that knows nothing of Jesus).

Here then is the watershed between a religious mindset that is bad, and one that is good; between a religion that provides safe haven for hostile and violent tendencies, and one that turns people toward each other in humility, compassion, kindness, and trust.

The genuine article in religion is probably not what you think. If God has a bias, it is in favor of "other sheep, not of this fold." A bias toward lost sheep, stragglers, breakaways, aliens, and strangers. 