

C.S.Lewis and Professor Haldane - VI

By: Robert L. Withers

Lewis writes in his reply to Professor Haldane:

I am a democrat. [Lewis is speaking of democracy, not a political party] Professor Haldane thinks I am not, but he bases his opinion on a passage in Out of the Silent Planet where I am discussing, not the relations of a species to itself (politics) but the relations of one species to another...

*I am a democrat because I believe that no man or group of men is good enough to be trusted with uncontrolled power over others. And the higher the pretensions of such power, the more dangerous I think it both to the rulers and to the subjects. Hence Theocracy is the worst of all governments. **If we must have a tyrant a robber baron is far better than an inquisitor.** The baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity at some point may be sated; and since he dimly knows he is doing wrong he may possibly repent. **But the inquisitor who mistakes his own cruelty and lust of power and fear for the voice of Heaven will torment us infinitely because he torments us with the approval of his own conscience and his better impulses appear to him as temptations. And since Theocracy is the worst, the nearer any government approaches to Theocracy the worse it will be.** A metaphysic, held by the rulers with the force of a religion, is a bad sign. It forbids them, like the inquisitor, to admit any grain of truth or good in their opponents, it abrogates the ordinary rules of morality, and it gives a seemingly high, super-personal sanction to all the very ordinary human passions by which, like other men, the rulers will frequently be actuated. In a word, it forbids wholesome doubt. **A political programme can never in reality be more than probably right.** We never know all the facts about the present and we can only guess the future. To attach to a party programme – whose highest real claim is to **reasonable prudence** – the sort of assent which we should reserve for demonstrable theorems, is a kind of **intoxication.** [Bold print mine.]*

When I read the above a number of thoughts came to me. The history of the church on earth provides ample evidence that the closer a government moves to a theocracy, or to what amounts to an exclusive relationship with one religious tradition, the more difficult life becomes for those Christian traditions outside the exclusive relationship. While Protestants are often smug about Christians persecuting Christians, raising the specter of the Roman Catholic Inquisition, some Protestant traditions have had blood on their hands from time-to-time, both in Europe and in North America. Additionally, traditions that may not have blood on their hands, may have wielded their position of influence to ban other traditions from their geographic areas, the violation of such bans leading to

fines, imprisonment, or both. My own state, The Commonwealth of Virginia, saw nonconformists fined and imprisoned as a result of the relationship of the Episcopal Church to the Colonial Government. Colonial Massachusetts witnessed those outside the Congregational Church imprisoned, expelled from the colony, and in the case of Quaker Mary Dyer, executed by hanging.

Certainly in the history of the United States of America it would be hard to find a greater moral issue than slavery. (I place alongside slavery the genocide and treatment of American Indians and the sanctity of life in our own time; now that I've written those words they seem to me to be one and the same...I'm going to explore that relationship. Of course, there could be other moral issues of the same gravity – but I'm going to use slavery right now.)

Therefore, one would think that the President of the United States during the American Civil War would be quick to assure himself and his nation that God was on the side of the Union; yet here are oft-quoted words from Lincoln:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party -- and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true -- that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds

I would welcome such humble reflection from the leaders of our current political parties and movements; and it seems to me that those who profess to be the standard bearers of Biblical virtue and morality should be those most inclined to display Biblical humility and an awareness that we are all fractured and imperfect people.