

TOWARD A NEW-STYLE MARRIAGE OF SACRED & SECULAR

Please read first the last ¶ of the today's letter here reproduced: its point is this Thinksheet's point. The opportunity I seized in writing the letter was seized also, not in popular but in technical form, in writing #2300, "The Rocky Marriage of Poetry and Prayer." Here, in #2305, I'm combining the alienation theme of the letter with the marriage analogy of #2300's title. First, a few nitty changes the C.C.TIMES editor made: (1) In ¶1 I wrote not "clergyman" but "clergyperson." Even our liberal daily is beginning to taper off on inclusive language, which may go the way of Esperanto in public life even if the churches cling to it (the churches & their language having at present little cultural influence). ... (2) ¶3 I had "laureate." (3) ¶5 has "equate prayer with poetry" for my "subsume prayer under poetry," which means dominance rather than (as the editor) equality or even identity. And in the ¶'s last sentence, I rendered "not" as boldface.

1. Not to extend the analogy into an allegory, but think about it a little. Marriage, old- or new-style, can end in separation without divorce. You can identify some ways our present sacred/secular relationship is like that. Alienation so great that separation has occurred, not so great as to be describable as divorce. Then think about areas in American life where it's come to divorce between sacred & secular. Eg, Peter Berger's worry about the spiritual deracination of our intelligentsia & thus of the media. (A curious case is a Southern Baptist minister, Bill Moyers, who's committed what C.S.Lewis in a booktitle calls "the great divorce," and [Carl Henry in a letter to me last week] "uses public television to exclude the Judeo-Christian vitalities without reflecting them on their own legitimate terms." [Commenting on the Moyers' six-segment PBS interviews with Jos. Campbell, who divorced himself from his Catholic faith, Carl called Moyers "the worse tragedy," presumably because of M.'s enormous influence as the American media's Mr. Intelligentsia.])

2. The fact that in some species there's no sex was the biological base for Plato's myth of primordial humanity as undifferentiated into male & female. It was an offthewall way of saying that sex (1) is epiphenomenal to our humanity, (2) is a good idea even though it was an afterthought of the gods, & (3) is subject to the human idea(I), which is not an impoverishing indifference or antagonism but an enriching intimacy & union. It was a myth, but it's cultural parallel--the primordial undifferentiatedness of sacred & secular--was & is a fact.

3. Then, beginning with certain Ionian philosophers ca. the 7th c. BC/BCE, the secular began to emerge out of the unity & stand over against the sacred. Reactively, the sacred began to stand over against--&, as having the weight & inertia of tradition, control--the secular. With the Enlightenment, the power-roles began to be reversed. As we approach the end of the 20th c., role-reversal is against in process, various religious revivals--not only fundamentalisms--breaking out in almost all populations. Geoculturally, what we're in for is a **new-style marriage of sacred & secular**--my analogy chosen because a new-style wo/man man relationship is now emerging within many cultures, a more consciously participatory style. **The two creative polarities** are fe/male & sacred/secular. It's sad when either splits into an antinomy; it's glad when either effects a reconciliation; & it's hopeful that from many quarters, not just theology, the sexuality/spirituality/secularity bridge between the two polarities is beginning to be built.

2305 8 Feb 89

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Poetry, prayers could heal breach

Though the press can usually be relied on to have a nose for the new, none of the media made anything much of the one new feature of the Bush inaugural, that he used the same clergyman to envelop the ceremony.

Billy Graham both began and ended the inaugural with prayer. But when at his inaugural John Fitzgerald Kennedy did something new -- have a poet read a poem written for the occasion -- the press fell all over itself to remark on the novelty.

I'm for both prayer and poetry at inaugurals. I agree with Margaret Regan's column that America underhonors poetry, and I suggest a new poet laureat for each inaugural to help correct this deficiency in our culture. But I would not want to see prayer replaced by poetry, in line with our tendency to let the religious element deteriorate into the merely esthetic.

Why have either prayer or poetry at an inaugural? Originally, religion and art were inseparable from politics, and poetry was inseparable from prayer. We should not let that ancient wisdom of unity become neglected and forgotten.

Margaret Regan fails to make reference to that unity by not mentioning the prayers at the Bush inaugural. In regretting the absence of poetry, she appears to equate prayer with poetry: "In the 5th century B.C., no Athenian statesman worth his laurel would omit an invocation of the gods." True, but why does she not recognize that God was invoked at the Bush inaugural? And why does she not confess that Robert Frost, in his JFK inaugural poem, did not invoke the gods, or God?

My point is that in our broken culture, we should seize all opportunities to heal the alienation between the secular and the sacred in both our public and our private lives.

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