

## REPLY TO LUBOMÍR MLČOCH

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Professor Mlčoch's excellent paper arrived too late for me to reply to him along with my reply to Kevin Ryan. I agree entirely with Mlčoch's principal thesis: that without reference to the transcendent, one can not have a morality that is truly humanistic, which also corrects the 'spirit of the age' generation after generation. On a minor point, however, Mlčoch quotes me in a way as though I disagree with him, but the full quote shows that I stand foursquare with him.<sup>1</sup>

Further, like many well-intentioned Europeans, Professor Mlčoch also reads the United States as if it were more like Europe than it is. He does not grasp the acute differences, especially on religious matters, between the

<sup>1</sup> Mlčoch references the Question and Answer portion of *The Corporation: A Theological Inquiry* (AEI Press, 1981) and infers I prefer to place emphasis on the descriptive 'is' instead of the normative 'ought'. The full quote reads as follows:

Questioner: ...You were responding to a question that ends with '...Don't we need a recognition that people are whole, that they have other interests in life besides their area of specialization?'

Mr Novak: Well said. It is beginning to happen. Expertise, as an ideal, has had a very short history. In the 1930s, university professors used to be regarded as absent-minded professors. They were not thought to be experts, or hardly so. It was after World War II, with its great explosion of technical knowledge, that the cultivation of the expert took hold. I can remember at Harvard, in graduate school, being told that it is wrong to be too worried about the 'ought'; the crucial thing is to be right about the 'is'. We were taught the importance of the descriptive and warned against the normative. John Kennedy remarked in 1963, at Yale, that we now know how to solve most of the problems of world poverty; the only question is whether we have the will to do so. To my mind, that was the high point of the hubris of the experts. Ever since then, there has been growing skepticism about them. In a sense, the experts are always wrong when they address a whole problem because, in the nature of the case, they are expert in only one facet of the problem, while nothing in life comes with one facet only.

United States and Europe, not least America's original and still frank and energizing recognition of the role of the transcendent in the public and private life of the United States.

Pope Benedict XVI has lately insisted more than once that the Church needs to study more carefully the tradition of religion and liberty in the United States, which is so different from the traditions of Europe after the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

A recent book just published in Italy recalls a campaign event in 2008, in which one of the major presidential candidates is asked by a fellow Senator at a public hearing: 'Senator, do you believe that God intervenes in history and rewards or punishes people or nations in real time for their behavior?'<sup>3</sup> Such a question is almost unimaginable in any nation in Europe. It hardly raises a ruffle in the United States. Indeed, it is comfortably traditional and well expected.

The assumption behind this question is that the people of the United States are a highly religious people, with a strong historical commitment to the transcendent God of the Jewish and Christian tradition. The very first public document of the new nation, its Declaration of Independence in 1776, appeals to the transcendent God of the Bible at least four times (as Governor, Creator, Judge, and Divine Providence). Further, a favorite name for the new 'experiment in liberty' in the United States was the 'Second Israel'.<sup>4</sup>

The voyage across the sea from Europe to America was taken to echo the flight of the Israelites through the Red Sea. The movement through the Westward Wilderness was understood to parallel the journey of the Israelites across the Desert. The aim of the Pilgrims ('to build a shining City on the Hill') was meant to echo the aim of the People of Israel seeking to re-enter Jerusalem.

One often encounters in European publications writers who mock these extravagant religious claims. In a much more secular culture, such claims seem outlandish, and even dangerous, in any case ridiculous. In

<sup>2</sup> See Benedict XVI's Address to U.S. Bishops, April 16, 2008: 'It strikes me as significant that here in America, unlike many places in Europe, the secular mentality has not been intrinsically opposed to religion. Within the context of the separation of Church and State, American society has always been marked by a fundamental respect for religion and its public role, and, if polls are to be believed, the American people are deeply religious'.

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Gisotti, *God and Obama. Faith and Politics at the White House* (Effatà, 2010) p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Stiles, 'The United States Elevated to Glory and Honour' (1783), in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 83.

the United States, though, now as at the Founding, these claims are expected and demanded.

Today, of course, the nation faces a spiritual crisis. For the last sixty years, a growing group of 'secularizers' has been trying to 'drive religion out of the public square' and to de-Christianize our nation.<sup>5</sup> The great sociologist Peter Berger, one of the world's leading social thinkers, has quipped that if the people of India are among the most religious in the world, and if the most secular people in the world are the Swedes, then America today is best understood as a population of Indians, ruled by an elite of Swedes. We are now engaged, in America, in a great 'culture war', testing whether our nation, or any modern nation, can long continue to dwell under the judgment of the Transcendent, steadily recognized in public speech and action.

In the middle of this battle, even unintentionally, an analysis such as that of Professor Mlčoch furthers the work of the secularizers. He repeats their arguments as if they were true, viz, that the U.S. is a secular nation. He makes life more difficult for those of us insisting on the transcendent values and commitments that have always marked our nation's history.

In short, publicly available evidence does not allow one to claim that the people of the United States, as distinguished sharply from the far more secular peoples of Western Europe, are now secular. On the contrary, the United States was born, and still continues, under the light of eternity, in the full gaze of the Lord Judge of Israel, the God who judges consciences and intentions and soul, not merely outward performance. No doubt His judgment of us needs often to be severe. He has exacted of us even in the century just past, in His justice, an immense treasure in expenses and in blood.

Let me propose to this world-esteemed Academy a modest study of the State documents of the United States from the beginning until now. Their lineage is virtually unbroken in their degree of explicit confession of the Creator, Judge, and Governor in the daily life of this nation and this people. You may hate it, or fear it, simply not understand how it works, or ridicule it. But for better or worse, you cannot deny it.

Allow me to present some of the less familiar, but basic, evidence from history. For example, the General Orders of General Washington to his troops during the seven-year bitter war for Independence – independence from another Christian power, the United Kingdom, whose soldiers read

<sup>5</sup> See Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, 1986).

the same Bible and believed in the same Providence. To take just one example from many: 'Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the Supreme Being, in whose hand Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble Actions'.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing that, the Americans – even the Bible-hating Tom Paine – believed that the God of Liberty, the God of Conscience, could not possibly fail to sustain those fighting for liberty, and to rebuff those (however well-meaning, and within their rights) who were fighting to prevent their independence and their liberty:

I have as little superstition in me as any man living, but my secret opinion has ever been, and still is, that God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to perish, who have so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method which wisdom could invent. Neither have I so much of the infidel in me, as to suppose that He has relinquished the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils; and as I do not, I cannot see on what grounds the king of Britain can look up to heaven for help against us.<sup>7</sup>

Or consider the official, public Proclamations of the Congress every year after the Declaration of Independence, calling for a Day of Repentance, for all the sins of the nation and of its individual members, in order to be able to pray for God's blessing on America, in its original purpose of gaining their liberty.<sup>8</sup> And later of annual Days of Thanksgiving, to note explicitly and to give thanks for the 'signal blessings' by which in month

<sup>6</sup> Jared Sparkes, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 12 (Boston: American Stationers' Company, 1837), 411. For those who do not find it convenient to look into official State documents regarding the sense of the transcendent in the public governmental liturgies of the United States, as well as in popular culture, I have made some available in (an over-long) Appendix (see Appendix 1 of my *Washington's God* [New York: Basic Books, 2006]).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Paine *The American Crisis No. 1* (1776).

<sup>8</sup> See the Congressional Fast Day Proclamation of March 16, 1776: 'In times of impending calamity and distress; when the liberties of America are imminently endangered by the secret machinations and open assaults of an insidious and vindictive administration, it becomes the indispensable duty of these hitherto free and happy colonies, with true penitence of heart, and the most reverent devotion, publicly to acknowledge the overruling providence of God; to confess and deplore our offences against him; and to supplicate his interposition for averting the threatened danger, and prospering our strenuous efforts in the cause of freedom, virtue, and prosperity' (*Journals of the American Congress From 1774 to 1788* [Washington, D.C.: Way and Gideon, 1823]), 1:286-287.

after month the Almighty seemed to rescue, or to save, the American cause, against all odds.<sup>9</sup>

The Americans – or perhaps only an active quarter of them – took up arms heroically against the most powerful navy in all the world, and against one of the two great armies of the world (the other being that of France), even as the Americans began their struggle with no trained army, no navy, and no munitions factory on their side of the ocean. No wonder in the Declaration they placed their hope and reliance ‘upon Divine Providence’ for the success of their arms. What else did they have, except the God of Liberty?

No wonder this people took as the motto to be impressed on their coinage ‘In God We Trust’. Mock them for this if you wish, but do not deny to them their seriousness and the depth of their trust, even in the direst and darkest days of their long experiment. The U.S. is now the longest-lived democratic republic in the world – and the most religious.

If you doubt the depth of the American sense of the transcendent in daily life, check out the Inaugural Address of every President since the beginning. Read Jefferson’s Bill for Religious Liberty and his argument supporting it, which relies heavily on the will of God to make men free, when He need not have, and to judge them by their inner conscience, not solely their outward acts:

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds, that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his Supreme will that free it shall remain, by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint: That all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone.<sup>10</sup>

Read also Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, delivered March 4, 1865, wherein he reflects on the actions of Providence and Divine Justice, in exacting a drop of blood on the battlefield of the great Civil War of 1861-

<sup>9</sup> To see all Congressional documents regarding religion and the founding of the American republic, visit the Library of Congress webpage [www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel04.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel04.html).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *A Bill For Establishing Religious Freedom* (Papers 2: facing 305) June 12, 1779.

1865, one drop for every drop of blood shed by an innocent, unwilling slave held in captivity. That Civil War was the bloodiest war in all history until that time, fought by two Christian armies each sure that its cause was just. In his Second Inaugural Lincoln tried to take the point of view of Divine Justice and Providence, looking down on the cause of each:

It may seem strange that any men should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

Lincoln ended with the most famous refrain: 'With malice toward none, with charity toward all', in his plea for national reconciliation. Not long afterwards he died a martyr. Many have judged that this is the deepest, most truthful, most authentic, and most prudent appeal to the transcendent God by any political leader, in wartime, in all of modern history. It is certainly among the very best.

G.K. Chesterton, the great English convert of the early 20th century, wrote after his voyage to America that America is different from other nations: 'It is a nation with the soul of a Church'. Its Declaration of Independence states its creed. All its political liturgies are staged, expressly, in the light of the transcendent. The Inauguration of America's Presidents is a religious ceremony from start to finish. So are its political speeches on national holidays and, indeed, throughout the year.

Today, crucial holes are being punched in this sense of the transcendent long nourished by public religious traditions of the country. The aggressors during the past sixty years in this determined war against religion are many in the elites of the law, journalism, the movie and television industries, and other elites of the symbol-wielding class.

It is this internal civil war, a cultural war, a war of symbols and self-understanding, that is directly responsible for foisting a regime of abortion off on a unwilling public. The American people have not in any single election in any single district given to abortion their consent. In fact, even today, there are abortion 'clinics' (houses of death) in only thirteen percent of all the counties in the United States. The elites fervently protect the abortion license. But over half the people oppose the current unbounded nine-month legal protection given to abortionists. Right up to the moment when the infant is half born and half still in the womb – and under boundaries far more extreme than in Europe – the American abortionist may practice his disgusting craft.

Analogously, the elites of the U.S. communication industry seem almost never to portray in their films the way in which the ordinary people of the United States, the large majority, actually live their religious lives, how they meet cancer or other anguish in the family, or face the automobile deaths of classmates on the highways, at prayer and in community with their brothers and sisters in the faith. In the media, Americans are portrayed as a pagan people, which in the main they are not.

After September 11, huge majorities of Americans in their grief and shock attended special services in every church and synagogue, and often with candlelight in city squares and on university campuses. And the response of our people with song and flag, for many weeks after September 11, was a robust singing of the most popular of national hymns, 'God Bless America'.

The third stanza of yet another popular hymn, 'America the Beautiful', is my personal favorite, for its description of 'ordered liberty':

O! Beautiful for Pilgrims' feet, whose stern impassioned stress  
 A thoroughfare for freedom built, across the wilderness.  
 America! America! God mend thine every flaw.  
 Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

At the risk of excess, then, let me report just one more stanza, from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, Lincoln's army, the army whose aim was to preserve the Union, so that slavery would be put on the peaceful road to destruction by growing and expanding popular electoral majorities. That stanza runs:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
 With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:  
 As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,  
 While God is marching on.

As it happens, furthermore, Professor Mlčoch's splendid paper came into my hands just on the day when a new poll was released on the religion of the American people, by one of the most respected of all national pollsters, the Rasmussen poll. Fifty-seven percent of adult Americans report that religion is 'very important' in their daily lives, and another twenty-three percent say that it is 'somewhat' important, for a total of eighty percent. Only eighteen percent give the answer one would take as normal in any Western European country, that religion in their daily lives is of 'no importance'. That answer is most frequently given in America by the young and the unmarried.<sup>11</sup> This is, perhaps, as one would expect.

<sup>11</sup> '80% Say Religious Faith is Important to Their Daily Lives', *Rasmussen Reports*, April 25, 2010, [www.rasmussenreports.com/content/view/full/28820](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/content/view/full/28820).

Finally, I cannot refrain from reporting that studies of religious convictions among America's elites, divided into about fifty different professions, show that the least religious elites are journalists and filmmakers for Hollywood and for television, the law profession, and political operatives.<sup>12</sup> The most religious elites are the clergy, the military, professional athletes, and people in business. My hypothesis is that these latter more religious professions daily experience serious contingencies, including (in the military and in sports) injury and death. They are far more attuned to the role of contingency in human events – and, therefore, to the role of Divine Providence in their failures and successes.

To say, after reviewing the abundant, even overwhelming evidence, that the Transcendent does *not* figure in the political culture of the United States, is to fail to grasp the essential way in which Americans have diverged from the example of secular Europe. In matters of religion, Europe is the Western rule; the United States is the exception. But Americans are closer to the multitudes of religious people in the less developed world, and Europe is like a secular island in an ocean of turbulent religious energies, to use the image employed by Jürgen Habermas.

The evidence is overwhelming that large majorities in the United States today, following in the well-worn path of the most important public documents in our national life, appeal often and publicly to the force of the Transcendent in human affairs. Many also try to live faithfully under it. The evidence is equally strong that a significant and most powerful minority are working to overturn that long tradition.

The current struggle between these forces is likely to be long, its outcome uncertain. We can use all the help we can get.

<sup>12</sup> See *Business as a Calling* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 43-44. Poll conducted by Smith College's Center for the Study of Social and Political Change, directed by Stanley Rothman.