

The Pope, Politics, and Christmas

PROSPECTS FOR A MERRY CHRISTMAS IN St. Peter's Square dimmed a bit at news that Jörg Haider would be bringing the tree. A visit by the Austrian politician infamous for his praise of the Third Reich is bound to recall the Pope's meetings in the late 80's with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim (veteran of a German army unit that committed atrocities in World War II). This year's encounter may be even more embarrassing to the Holy See; Haider is not a head of state, nor is he known to be especially religious. Yet there was no diplomatic way for the Vatican to back out. It accepted the pledge of a tree from the province of Carinthia, which Haider governs, back in 1997—long before his party joined the Austrian government, bringing on sanctions from the rest of the European Union. For the governor, of course, the trip to Rome is a magnificent chance to claim international respectability.

CHRISTMAS TREES ARE TRADITIONAL rallying points for politicians, and not just in Europe. Every December the president of the United States lights the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse in Washington. Even in this secular age, no one seems much bothered by the chief magistrate of the Republic associating himself, however indirectly, with religion. The Tannenbaum's origins lie in German paganism (as a winter symbol of immortality), but it's safe to say that most citizens take it as an emblem of Christianity's inescapable holiday. If I were an American Muslim or Jew, I think I would feel at least slightly estranged by the spectacle.

HISTORICALLY, THOUGH, IT'S NOT JEWS, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or members of any other faith who've had the most problem with Christmas. It's Christians themselves. Many early Protestants rejected the holiday not only because it coincided with the ancient Roman feast of Saturnalia—and occasioned gluttony, drunkenness, and debauchery in the best pagan tradition—but because it overshadowed Sunday, the only festival they deemed divinely ordained. Making the Yuletide gay in Calvin's Geneva could get you fined or imprisoned. Puritan England under Oliver Cromwell outlawed Christmas along with its traditional foods. (I like to imagine the seventeenth-century equivalent of a dope dealer peddling mincemeat pie and plum porridge on a London street corner.) Anti-Christmas sentiment prevailed along with Nonconformism in some of England's American colonies, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania; whereas the southern colonies under Anglican domination kept up the "Popish" tradition. It was only in the late nineteenth century, as immigra-

tion made the United States an increasingly Catholic country that the 25th of December became the truly national observance it is today. (I stole most of these facts from Christmas.com, an attractive and well-organized Website with information on how the day is marked around the world.)

SOME CHRISTIANS ARE STILL NOT reconciled to Christmas. A quick Internet search turns up an array of sites attacking the holiday on the basis of scripture and theology. One I found concludes a generally sober and learned disquisition with this blatant inaccuracy: "Christmas remains a monument to the superstition of the Church of Rome. If anyone doubts this proposition, he may turn on a television and watch the Papal Mass on Christmas Eve; the Pope struts around the altar, chants the prescribed words, and holds up the elements so they may be adored by a fawning multitude." Now I doubt that Pope John Paul II has ever strutted anywhere, certainly not in church; but in any case the ailing pontiff won't be doing so this year. He walks slowly and with an effort painful to watch. No one whose heart isn't wholly poisoned against him for sectarian or political reasons can fail to admire his fortitude and manifest love for his flock. Notwithstanding the recent contretemps over a Vatican document stating that churches not in communion with Rome are "not Churches in the proper sense," this pope has presided over unprecedented strides toward Christian unity. (To those who regard the pope as the Antichrist, of course, unity with Rome isn't anything to be thankful for.)

I REMEMBER WATCHING MIDNIGHT mass at St. Peter's, on the TV at my grandmother's house, when I was eleven or twelve years old. I can't remember being terribly interested. It was only six in the afternoon where we were, which robbed the event of much of its drama. I might have been more excited by the sort of New Year's Eve party the pope threw last year to usher in the third millennium. There was a rock concert the first ever in St. Peter's Square, featuring the clean-cut, conservative singer Claudio Baglioni. Some 120,000 showed up to hear the music, watch the fireworks, and hear John Paul's greeting, which he delivered from a window in the apostolic palace above the square: "A happy new year to everyone in the light which shines out from Bethlehem upon the whole universe." More than his words, it was the mere presence of the man, one of the great leaders of the century just ended, that for a brief moment revived Rome's ancient claim to be the center of the civilized world. ❧

Engineering Mediocrity

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That old saying "Watch out, you may get what you ask for" is beginning to haunt those of us who have long hoped for an end to racial preferences. **The vast and subtle apparatus of preferential policies called affirmative action still has a vigorous life in American institutions and workplaces.** Even in places such as California, where group preferences have been outlawed in state institutions, they manage to have an active underground life. Yet now they also have a foredoomed quality about them. State ballot initiatives and a series of circuit court and Supreme Court decisions have made the point that both the wider public and the Constitution are against them.

If preferences themselves now seem doomed, the impulse that generated them in the first place is alive and well. This is the impulse to engineer an appearance of racial equality rather than develop a true equality based on a parity of skills between the races. Since the 1960s American institutions have been under pressure to prove a negative: that they are not racist and do not discriminate against minorities or women. The impulse behind racial preferences is essentially an expedient that allows institutions to win their moral legitimacy as nonracist institutions whether or not the formerly oppressed achieve an actual parity of skills.

The mechanism by which racial preferences engineer "inclusion" is a tolerance of mediocrity in minorities—allowing mediocrity to win for them what only excellence wins for others.

But attacks on preferences have focused more on their unfair racial exclusivity than on the social

engineering by which they function. Now that they are losing favor, we are seeing a new generation of engineering schemes that achieve "inclusion" by extending the tolerance for mediocrity—bringing in more black and brown faces without reference to their race.

What might be called "X percent plans" are an example. California, Texas, and Florida now guarantee university admission to the top 4, 10, and 20 percent, respectively, of all high school graduates. In a segregated state such as Florida, this brings in more black students to the University of Florida because it makes 20 percent of the students in inner-city schools eligible where previously only a small percentage were eligible.

This "raceless" engineering tolerates more mediocrity and relies on segregation to capture the black and brown faces that bring moral authority. It injures these universities more than traditional affirmative action because it extends the tolerance of mediocrity to great numbers of whites in order to get more blacks and Hispanics. Once these flagship state universities are diminished, won't the white flight that happened in K-12 education extend to them? Won't private colleges and universities—where the tolerance of mediocrity can be isolated to minorities—gain prestige at the expense of these public institutions?

If the era of affirmative action is creeping toward an ignominious end, one of its lessons is that **racial disparities ought never be occasions for social engineering.** Absent a hard-earned parity of skills and abilities between the races, "inclusion" is necessarily a corruption.

— Shelby Steele

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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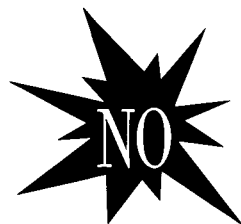
KIDS & TOBACCO

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At Philip Morris USA, we are committed to dealing responsibly with the complex problem of underage smoking. There is no single, easy answer to this issue. Many experts suggest the best way to address underage smoking is through broad-based, integrated approaches that include communications, education, community involvement and access prevention.

As part of our commitment to play a role in reducing underage smoking, we have created a Youth Smoking Prevention Department whose sole purpose is to develop and support programs to help reduce the incidence of youth smoking. We've dedicated significant resources—over \$100 million last year—toward initiatives based on the key components listed above. We are spending another \$100 million against these initiatives in 2000.

Our effort includes support for school-based programs, one of which has been recognized for prevention excellence by the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



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