

# NOTEBOOK

## Hot Air Gods By Curtis White

**T**he most bewildering and yet revealing gesture of a truly fundamental American theology takes place when an individual stands forth and proclaims, "This is my *belief*." Making such a simple and familiar statement implies at least three important things. First, it implies that I have a right to my belief. Whether this right is God-given, one of the laws of nature, or simply something we wrangled politically out of the process of constitution-making, it is something we believe we *have*. Second, my statement carries with it the expectation that you ought to respect my belief, or at least my right to it, even if my belief makes no sense to you at all. Third, and most important, my belief doesn't have to make sense in order to carry legitimacy. On the basis of this belief I not only will claim the right to order my own life but also will feel free, without embarrassment, to enforce my belief universally through the election of politicians and through the sponsorship of legislation, as the battles over abortion, evolution, gay marriage, and school prayer illustrate all too clearly.

Successful though efforts to enshrine private belief in public policy have been in certain regions of the United States, in the larger frame of national life such orthodoxies have no future and very little past. What reigns in our national spectacle is the pluralistic assumption that you have a right to your cockeyed belief and that it is something I am com-

elled to respect and even admire in you, even though what you believe may have very little to do with what I believe. Yahweh and Baal—my God and yours—stroll arm-in-arm, as if to do so were the model of virtue itself.

What we require of belief is not that it make sense but that it be *sincere*. This is so even for our more secular convictions. Recently, for example, National Public Radio revived Edward R. Murrow's "This I Believe" program, thus driving the idea of belief to its trite extreme. Here we can learn that belief is about the little things in life, like Jell-O. Colin Powell, waxing banal, tells us that America is an immigrant country and a land of opportunity. Clearly, this is not the spirituality of a centralized orthodoxy. It is a sort of workshop spirituality that you can get with a cereal-box top and five dollars. And yet in our culture, to suggest that such belief is not deserving of respect makes people *anxious*, an anxiety that expresses itself in the desperate sincerity with which we deliver life's little lessons. This sincerity is surely one part ardor, but it is also a warning. It says, "I've invested a lot of emotional energy in this belief, and in a way I've staked the credibility of my life on it. So if you ridicule it, you can expect a fight."

There is an obvious problem with this form of spirituality: it takes place in isolation. Each of us sits at our computer terminal tapping out our convictions. It's as if we were each our own foreign country and we wanted to know what the people in the land of Ken or Brenda or Eduardo believe.

How quaint their curious customs!  
How fascinating their rituals!

Consequently, it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that our truest belief is the credo of heresy itself. It is heresy without an orthodoxy. It is heresy *as* an orthodoxy. The entitlement to belief is the right of each to his own heresy. Religious freedom has come to this: where everyone is free to believe whatever she likes, there is no real shared conviction at all, and hence no church and certainly no community. Strangely, our freedom to believe has achieved the condition that Nietzsche called nihilism, but by a route he never imagined. For Nietzsche, European nihilism was the failure of any form of belief (a condition that church attendance in Europe presently testifies to). But American nihilism is something different. Our nihilism is our capacity to believe in everything and anything all at once. It's all good!

Ultimately, our beliefs become just another form of what the media call "content." A book is a sales unit. What's in the book is content, which is a matter of utter indifference to the people who are responsible for moving product. Our religious content soon becomes indistinguishable from our financial content and our entertainment content and our sports content, just as the sections of your local newspaper attest. In short, belief becomes a culture-commodity. We shop among competing options for belief.

Once reduced to the status of a commodity, our anything-goes, do-it-yourself spirituality cannot have very much to say about the more directly nihilis-

Curtis White's most recent book is *The Spirit of Disobedience*.

tic conviction that we should all be free to *do* whatever we like as well, each of us pursuing our right to our isolated happinesses. Worse yet: for that form of legal individual known as the corporation, the pursuit of happiness can mean fishing with factory trawlers, clear-cutting forests, and spreading toxins across the countryside with all the zeal of a child sprinkling candies on a cupcake.

In short, the best spiritual environment for free-market corporate malfeasance is one that is as anarchic as its own form of economic reason. After all, we are not accustomed to saying “no” to anyone who proceeds in sincerity, and oh boy is corporate capitalism ever sincere. So we are called upon to respect the businessman’s right to pursue his company’s “happiness” just as we are called upon to respect all forms of personal belief. Ken and his personal convictions out in Omaha have very little to say about the convictions of Monsanto even if he is fated to die from their expression.

As Jean-Paul Sartre understood, the sincerity of belief is mostly about the anxiety that one may not be what one thinks one is. “I am a Christian,” someone says, eyeing uneasily all those others, other Christians especially, who plainly think something very different from what he thinks. As Sartre argued, “every belief is a belief that falls short,” which is also a way of saying that each of the little affirmations of personal belief that are so common in our culture are unwitting confessions of despair. But it is exactly this despair that dares not speak its name, dares not *confess* itself.

**T**o speak this way of American belief—since *no one* speaks this way about American belief—is to suggest that we are strangers to ourselves. But of course the idea that we are in need of a period of self-reflection and self-criticism is welcomed by no one and seems only to stimulate more heat, more *fervor*, more desperate sincerity. We would prefer to be left alone, warmed by our beliefs-that-make-no-sense, whether they are the quotidian platitudes of ordinary Americans, the magical thinking of evangelicals, the mystical thinking

of New Age Gnostics, the teary-eyed patriotism of social conservatives, or the perfervid loyalty of the rich to their free-market Mammon. We are thus the congregation of the Church of the Infinitely Fractured, splendidly alone together. And apparently that’s how we like it. Our pluralism of belief says both to ourselves and to others, “Keep your distance.”

And yet isn’t this all strangely familiar? Aren’t these the false gods that Isaiah and Jeremiah confronted, the cults of the “hot air gods”? The gods that couldn’t scare birds from a cucumber patch? Belief of every kind and cult, self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement of every degree, all flourish. And yet God is abandoned. For first and foremost, “the Lord is a God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18). And that is the problem that we ought to have at heart: our richness of belief masks a culture that is grotesquely unjust.

Western Europeans look with astonishment upon the things that we are willing to say we believe (for instance, our pie-eyed confidence—shared by more than one recent president—that Jesus is coming back and that our Middle East policy can help him on his way), but even more astonishing is what we are willing to do in spite of our beliefs. Several years ago, Norway began identifying corporations with which it had ethical concerns and removing its investments from those firms. It was an international list, but a great number of the businesses were from the United States (including Wal-Mart, most prominently, but also the mining industry and military contractors). Our ambassador to Norway, Benson Whitney (a venture capitalist), noted astutely that Norway’s actions were “an accusation of bad ethics.” He also complained that American companies were being unfairly excluded from Norway’s investment portfolio through unfair screening and “lack of rigor.” But I think it is safe to say that Norway’s pleas for justice have fallen on deaf ears.

And yet those who have ears ought to hear. But hear what? Or perhaps it would be better to say “hear how?” Shall we turn against pluralism and relativism in the name

of obedience to a single authority? I don’t think so. The credibility of univocal meta-narratives of a traditional sort, or any sort, is gone. Those tablets are indeed broken. The innocence that allowed us to come as children to a singular faith, to faith as a revealed Truth, was always a dangerous innocence. But a freedom to believe that is nothing more than *freedom in an abyss* is no less dangerous, as both our domestic and our international antagonisms testify.

**A** more positive way of looking at the situation I have described is to say that through the concept of religious freedom, American political culture has succeeded in mediating the competing claims of true religion and idolatry. If it has not purged the hatred from this distinction, it has at least prohibited most of the violence. And if there is wisdom in this, it is less the wisdom of benevolence than the pragmatism of imperial policing. Our culture is, as economists put it, a “disciplined pluralism.” Historically, we are not unique in this regard. The Persian and Roman empires also endorsed religious freedom so long as it didn’t interfere with the orderly administration of the imperial dispensation: the right to fleece the provinces. In our case, capitalism *accommodates* a pluralism of religion (toward most forms of which it may be intellectually disdainful) so long as its own universal principle—privatization of wealth—is allowed to move forward in plain view and yet as if in secret. What capitalism has successfully obscured is the fact that the competition it prizes is not just between business entities internal to it but between capitalism as such and all other possible systems of value. Capitalism as an ethical system has succeeded in convincing the people living under it that it is not a system at all but a state of nature. In this way, it has managed to remain above the fray of culture war, and restricted those value systems that might compete with it to competing with each other. In short, culture war is a great comfort to capitalism.

Capitalism has been so successful

in this orchestration of reality that it has even created the illusion that, in spite of every fact, the Market works for all of us, or will eventually. In spite of the fact that the poor are ever greater in number, and that education, health care, and retirement are ever more inaccessible, the majority of Americans persist in believing (with all the obliviousness of Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss) that our economic system is "the best of all possible worlds." This is a form of wishful and magical thinking no stranger than the belief that a statue of the Madonna can cry.

The reality that this magical thinking obscures is complex and exists on at least two levels. First, there is the level of culture war itself. Culture war for us is a domestic version of the Cold War, in which every insider is also an outsider and all neighbors are potential enemies. The tragedy of American culture in this regard has been its failure to provide what religious scholar Jan Assmann calls "intercultural translation": the capacity to translate my beliefs into your beliefs and vice versa. Unhappily, we have very little interest in the challenge of translation, largely because we very much wish to remain cordially at one another's throats.

The second reality that needs to be addressed is what one might call the Logos or essential structure of capitalism as a system of values. We need to come to an honest acknowledgment of what capitalism is, and that has been made very clear for us in recent months by the Chinese entrepreneurs who fill our pet food, toothpaste, animal feed, and even our Viagra with toxic filler. For the entrepreneur, such filler is poison only if someone dies; otherwise it's just a profit margin. The game is to take profit as close to the poison line as possible. When on occasion profit spills over into poison and someone dies, there is a wild wringing of hands (and, in China, death sentences), but soon back we go in search of that ideal balance between profit and death. We see very much the same principle at work in industrial agriculture. Just how much herbicide and pesticide can we put down before it starts killing something more than bugs and pigweed? Here we

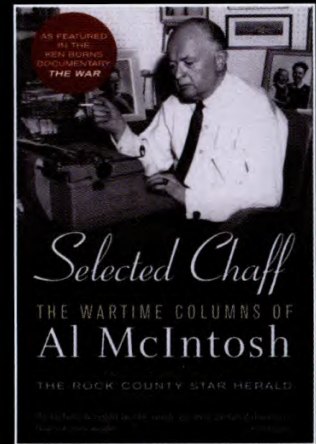
see the creed of "cost/benefit analysis" presided over with loving-kindness by accountants and legions of liability lawyers.

What's called for, then, is an enormous project of translation on two fronts. First, the translation that must take place between groups of believers, and second, the translation that will transform capitalism from a state of nature to an ethical system that must defend its values in, if you'll forgive me this phrase, a competing market of values. In fact, this process of translation can be seen at work already. For example, the recent turn of Christian evangelicals to a politics that includes environmentalism ("Creation care") has "translated" their beliefs into something that they can now share with mainstream environmentalists, pantheists, ecological scientists, and even outdoorsmen. For all these groups, the world is, if not something holy, then something that ought to be the object of great and abiding Care.

To borrow again from the work of Jan Assmann, the process of translation tends toward the abolition of what he calls the "Mosaic distinction": the opposition of the idolatrous and the true. Assmann's project is "part of the general humanist quest for overarching ideas that would help to destroy the boundaries between nations, confessions, religions, and classes and to 'deconstruct' ideological distinctions characterized by hatred, incomprehension, and persecution."

What I would add to Assmann's project is the idea that beyond the Mosaic distinction lies another distinction and another antagonism. This opposition is between those—whether religious or humanist—who see nature and humanity as a culture of *life* and those who see nature and humanity "instrumentally," as *things* to be manipulated rationally and technically in a culture of *profit*. For when at last the evangelical advocate of "Creation care" and the pantheist "nature lover" come together as one, they will see that what stands opposite them is something unmoored from any meaning other than its own relentless internal procedures: the Market God. ■

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