Some thoughts about what is “relevant”

I remain intrigued with the notion, advanced by President Bush during the UN Security Council debate on the Iraqi resolution, that the UN would cease to be “relevant” if it did not do what he wanted. It’s a fascinating definition of relevance, which is normally seen as anything that has to do with matters before us.

Debate over the relevance of particular facts or concerns is an appropriate mainstay of any process toward policy or action. We know that well within the Church. What is relevant in discerning the will of God? Scripture alone? Tradition? Reason? Experience? At what point do we dismiss the one to affirm the other? When, for example, does “thou shalt not kill” become irrelevant? As soon as our President determinedly marches our nation to war? And what understandings of our faith (not our politics) trumped the commandment?

Certainly momentous decisions—in theology as well as in public policy—are rarely neat and tidy, and there is legitimate debate about what is truly relevant. Being so dismissive—as our President has been—is foolish. But what continues to disturb even more is the absence within this administration of humane, life-affirming respect for alternative understandings of what is relevant.

Consider the Bush notion that the major multilateral institution in the world—existing to facilitate international dialogue and to advance peaceful resolution of differences—is irrelevant if it fails to agree to what he wants when he wants it. Consider President Bush’s current argument, that it will be irrelevant if we cannot prove that Iraq has prohibited weapons; demanding that you prove you don’t have something when no one can prove you do forever frustrates students of Logic 101. Is that dilemma irrelevant when our government wants war?

Central to the task of the Church is to advance an alternative vision to what is relevant. The witness of the prophets marked a dramatic declaration that God looks for something other than power to protect the few, the elite, the wealthy—and that’s us as Americans—when God calls us to be the People of God. The message of Jesus challenged us to care for the poor and the marginalized and to be an inclusive community—and that is not us as a nation today—when he calls us to be followers of a God of justice.

This is what is relevant: Treatment for millions of Africans living with AIDS, not drug patent protection. Debt relief to free desperately-needed funds for poverty reduction throughout the Global South, not restrictive financial policies serving the “needs” of wealthy nations. Trade policies that are truly fair to Africa and the Global South, not policies to feed our insatiable greed. Rehabilitation of victims of conflict, not warmongering. And it takes, I might add, little effort to make a domestic listing of relevance just as damning.

This vision of relevance is so dramatically different from what we see in our nation’s political and economic leadership today that we literally must stand up and declare that we as people of faith cannot accept narrow-minded arrogance as the definition of an exclusivist relevance. We must.

Yours faithfully,
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