
Does Moral Theology Have a Role to Play in the Rise of MAGAdom?

Responding here to the posts of Robert Reich, Malcolm Nance, and others on the slimy frauds running our country into the ground on purpose:

Long after my time at Yale Divinity School, I had the very great privilege to be mentored by a towering moral theologian, twice my age. A German conscripted into the Nazi army, submitting to military service was, he felt, the only way he could protect his father—an eminent professor of African Languages—from the persecution of Hitler's sleaziest "theologians". I do not name my mentor here, because I was the recipient of many stories the type about which Germans seldom speak and theologians from free lands do not ask, out of professional courtesy. I have been thinking much of my beloved professor as I watch the deadly antics of the Destructors, many of them the product of fine Ivy League institutions, which, in America's Time of Troubles, have continued to display their true colors.

It is clear that much religious scholarship—so very silent in the face of deplorable actions taken by the illustrious MAGA-hearted "men of faith"—has yet to emerge from its captivity to lies and the shadows of their elite training. We don't see sermons or impassioned truth-telling by our well-educated leaders when the subject of Palestinian genocide is going on right in front of them—think of the endowment, the need to place graduating students within the extant academic power structure (for as long as there is one!).

True enough, the leader of Yale Divinity School bravely questions the unchristian underpinnings of the sadistic policies of our current government (if one could call it that). But calling out the ongoing unprincipled behaviors of Yale Men among the select movers and shakers—be they at SCOTUS or in the Executive Branch—is simply not done. As the inside joke goes, "For God, for Country, and for Yale—but not necessarily in that order". This still stands firm. The occasional visiting professor is allowed to denounce the Christian status quo of tolerance of the profound dismissal of the poor, the outcast, the Jew or Muslim...but they are only visiting. It has been a long time since William Sloane Coffin awed his students and colleagues with his passionate denunciation of the moral debacle of Viet Nam. (It is worth noting, though, that his office was in the Sterling Library, and NOT in the sanctified quad of the Divinity School.)

I must mention one of Yale's proudest theological moments, which came during the broad post-WWII movement to rehabilitate the Nazis whom our governmental departments found so useful to US aspirations of making a new world. Faced with the decision of whether to offer academic asylum to one of "Hitler's Theologians," the toady Nazi apologist Gerhard Kittel—son of prominent Rudolph Kittel who

produced the staggering work of deep scholarship, the *Biblia Hebraica*—the Biblical Scholars refused the easy ‘go along to get along’. Never was a son so painfully different from a father. Gerhard gladly offered his services to Hitler’s “intellectuals” who were scurrying about their business of making Christianity conform to Nazi ideology. He made it his aim to give antisemitism a “respectable” scholarly foundation for his beloved Führer. His exhaustive biased and scurrilous history of early Christianity is just the sort of dark reading that a poseur like J.D. Vance probably keeps beside his bedside as inspirational reading. But among the small but vocal scholars at Yale were genuinely decent men who Just Said No, and would not be moved.

Which brings me back to the Defiance that writers on Substack and elsewhere so vehemently offer to us as an alternative to normalization, collaboration, or despair. They are quite right to do so, along with their recommendations to cling tight to those people and ideals we cherish. Along with that, we must calmly embrace the likelihood of real pain and suffering as a result of our steadfast resistance.

When my mentor went into the Nazi machine, he did so using his profession and status as a pastor as a means of claiming the right to conscientious objection. Because he knew many languages and was mild of manner, he was grudgingly tolerated. After all, having a famous man of letters and faith serving (however grudgingly) was worth something for propaganda purposes, if nothing else. He told me, reminiscing, that on his company’s very first sortie into battle, they were captured—to a man—by the Enemy, and spent the entire war in a Russian P.O.W. camp in Poland. Hogan’s Heroes, it was not. Hunger, humiliation, and torture were the order of the day, though he always insisted that his background in languages softened his treatment.

He set about establishing himself as pastor to the bemused and terrified men of his platoon and became a source of council to the officers leading the German farm boys so far from home. From that position, he set about learning Polish and improving his Russian so that he could serve as go-between for the guards and his commanding officers. With each group he met, no matter which side they were on, he continued to do his job. The leadership of both sides appreciated his presence and, in turn, he was given milder duties than his compatriots: he carried the horses and worked on kitchen duties, dragging great garbage cans of lukewarm soup (a very dignified term for the slimy grey broth) to the barracks and making sure everyone got their fair share. Another duty he acquired was becoming the laundress to the commandants’ and officers’ wives, handling their “dainties” with a care unmatched by any other inmate. Of course, such a duty was meant to humiliate him as “unmanly” and insufficiently warlike, but he laughed at such petty behavior—had no one ever read the New Testament stories of Jesus washing the feet of others, healing the miserable, or blessing a woman with an issue of blood?

"How did you stand it?", I asked. He kept his mind on God, he said, and followed his vocation. When he was working in the stables and brushing the horses, he recited the Psalms in Hebrew—every one of them—to establish a world for himself that was ruled by the soul, in order to forget the travails of a shivering, starving body.

One day, waiting outside the kitchen with a fellow inmate, naked, starving, and shivering, ready to drag a trashcan full of the despised soup to the barracks, he noticed a scrap of newspaper that had arrived in the order of potatoes. He was not so much interested in the war news as in the blank margins around the headline. In a moment when no eyes were upon him, he darted from his rock to retrieve the precious writing supply. But where to hide it to get it safely to his bunks? Folding the scrap as small as possible, he hid it in his fist as he dragged the trashcan. Once inside, he transferred it to a small hole in his infested mattress. From that day forward, he collected paper scraps. Each night, with a pencil stub, he would retrieve the tools of his trade, and carry on writing a book on praise and lament in the Hebrew Psalter, explaining that the lament was a form not just of prayer, but a tool for surviving when it looks like all hope is lost. This book, written on the margins of discarded trash, became one of his most famous contributions to theology of that era.

He broke new ground by proclaiming that praise is nothing but a cruel joke, given the state of the world, unless it comes from the mouth of those who have endured great suffering. Only when the truly miserable among us can praise God do we know that it is real: they have survived to tell the tale.

"You know," he said, "if you have been dragged into participating in one of the most hideous evils in the world perpetrated by your own country, the only acceptable place to be is in a prisoner of war camp."