

Cardinal Keeler - A Very Wise Man

Cardinal Keeler's passion for the church, his cherubic countenance, his joyfulness (in Rome, he once pulled an Oriole cap from under his cassock and gave it to a smiling pope), his many unpublicized acts of kindness to the most vulnerable individuals in the community, his un-ersatz humility, his close friendship with Mother Teresa, his amazing memory for names and faces - essays, if not books, could be written about each of these topics. This brief article proposes to describe another facet of this remarkable man's career - good faith and understanding between Catholics and Jews.

But first, a personal note. Like so many others in Baltimore, my wife, Judge Ellen Heller, and I have enjoyed unforgettable private moments with Cardinal Keeler. In 2001 when we unexpectedly met His Eminence (without clerical collar) on the train to New York and asked him about his plans in New York, he responded that he was collecting a wager. The puzzled expressions on our faces - who could imagine a gambler as cardinal - led to his prompt explanation. Just before the January Superbowl clash between the Ravens and the Giants, Cardinal Keeler and the Cardinal of New York had bet on the game. A Giants victory (impossible) would have resulted in a shipment of crabs from Baltimore to New York. The Ravens victory (35-7) resulted in a free ticket for our Cardinal to attend the Metropolitan Opera in New York, which he was collecting that day. Needless to say, we gently chided Cardinal Keeler for taking advantage of his colleague - the result of that game had been preordained.

The point of the story, however, lies not in his football prescience, but in his catholicity - his interest in matters normally not associated with theology. Since that Amtrak encounter, we have twice been privileged to dine alone with His Eminence at his residence and have witnessed first-hand the wide range of his knowledge. At dinner just a few weeks ago, we were privileged to discuss 16th and 17th century wars, contemporary politics, Dante's Divine Comedy, Renaissance painting, and the virtues of Campari (his favorite drink).

When the Vatican selected the best individual to be the church's spokesman in the United States on Catholic-Jewish relations, its choice of Cardinal Keeler was

universally praised. Hindsight is generally the best gauge of the success of any appointment, and more often than not (especially as to presidents), the glare of hindsight is withering. In this instance, however, as Cardinal Keeler also steps down as the church's leader on Catholic-Jewish relations, the glow of hindsight demonstrates the brilliance of his initial selection.

"Interfaith activities," a phrase often used to describe this branch of His Eminence's work, is a misunderstood process. To cynics or extremists, the concept of interfaith activities is necessarily doomed to failure. "Necessarily" because their first premise is that success will occur only if everyone – or at least all the children of Abraham, (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) – will finally agree on all theological questions. That premise is based on the notion that if only we tried harder, and submerged our egos and emotions, we could discover the "one truth." "One truth," so the cynics and extremists proclaim, because there cannot be "two truths" and certainly not "three truths" on the same subject. One of the postulates must be right, and the others must be wrong. If I am right, you must be wrong. Moreover, my obligation is to prove that you are wrong, and if you refuse to be converted, my obligation is to take arms against you. This approach has resulted in more people having been murdered in religious wars than in any other kind of violence. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Jihads, the pogoms, the Holocaust – all were the result of this attitude. This monopolization of truth, this "we vs. they" approach to all important issues of life, this dislike of the stranger, this condescension (at best), if not antipathy (at worst), to those who disagree with our cherished beliefs – if history has taught us anything, it is that these very attitudes are irreligious and heretical.

Cardinal Keeler is, of course, neither irreligious nor heretical. He believes without reservation in his Church and its teachings. But the beauty of this man lies not only in his reverence for his own Church but also in his respect for others. There is a passage in one of the many great books written by Isaiah Berlin (for me, the most brilliant philosopher of the twentieth century) which captures the essence of Cardinal Keeler:

"to realise the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian."

His Eminence stands for Roman Catholicism unflinchingly, yet he would never claim that Judaism and Islam are wrong or invalid. How does one reconcile those two statements? It is not difficult. It is best described in the phrase “The Dignity of Difference,” the title of a magnificent book by Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. The story of the Tower of Babel acknowledges that any attempt to discover the “one truth” for all people, to impose that “one truth” on everyone is doomed to failure. We must respect the integrity of those whose theology is not the same as ours. Cardinal Keeler is the living embodiment of that respect.

Religion is intended to bring repose to our souls. But when religion is transmuted into a phalanx of spears, it brings no repose, it brings only anger and then violence. No religion may impose its will on others. Cardinal Keeler recognizes that the six billion people who live on our planet are very different from each other and that there is dignity in those differences, a dignity which we must respect.

Jonathan Sacks ascribes the violence of the “I have the one truth” approach to Plato. Plato believed that there was one truth and that if mankind could only emerge from the cave and its shadows, that “one truth” which is good for all time could be discovered. That quixotic quest for Utopia, the belief that people with opposing views can’t possibly both have the truth has bedeviled Western philosophy and theology. On a more mundane level, those who cannot understand the prevalence of 5-4 decisions of the Supreme Court, who claim that there must be a “right” answer, are all descendents of Plato. Western religion has been haunted by Plato’s ghost. “It’s time we exorcised Plato’s ghost, clearly and unequivocally.” Or, as Justice Holmes once wrote “Certainty generally is illusion and repose is not the destiny of man.”

It is easy for many to voice these sentiments. It is not easy for leaders of great religions to voice these sentiments. William Cardinal Keeler has been an outstanding exception to the rule. May he continue, in his so-called “retirement,” to be an inspiration to all of us.

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