RELIGION

Michael Novak, winner of this year's Templeton Prize, says there is an antireligious bigotry loose in the land

Religionist Sees a 'Christophobic' Elite

By Ron Scherer
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THE winner of the $1 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion says he is "outraged" that the United States government acted so hastily in attacking the Branch Davidian group in Waco, Texas.

"If that was a feminist group, or a gay group, or a hundred different kinds of groups, they would have been much more cautious," says Michael Novak, a leading Roman Catholic thinker, author, and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

Mr. Novak says he believes the government felt justified in its action against the Davidians "as long as they could call them 'religious nuts.' " This attitude, Novak says, is part of a wider bigotry against evangelicals and other fundamentalists. "People say insulting things about them. They wouldn't allow them to say things like that about other human beings," he says.

To Novak, an anti-religious attitude in government is not surprising in a democracy.

The secular forces in society, he says, "have a case of 'Christophobia.' " He relates this anti-Christian and anti-Jewish view to the fact that "People who want to do something very different don't like the feeling of being judged ... so they have to throw off Judaism and Christianity."

In Novak's view, this anti-religion attitude is most apparent among the nation's elite, especially among professionals like journalists, lawyers, and filmmakers. He finds these groups out of touch with mainstream America.

For example, most polls find that Americans are among the most religious people in the world. "But you would never guess that from our movies.... When was the last time you saw a movie that treated religion – Jewish, Christian, Islamic – with any kind of seriousness?" he asks.

One of his favorite examples is from New York Post movie critic Michael Medved who went to Hollywood parties and asked people how many Americans attend church. Most partygoers guessed only 1 or 2 percent. Only one person guessed as high as 10 percent. The real number is 43 percent, Novak says, adding that this means more people go to church than watch the Super Bowl. "But Hollywood doesn't know that," he says.

Novak says that the anti-religious attitudes are part of a broader trend toward moral relativism in America. He observes that many people find it hard to accept the concept of truth. "They don't think there are any truths.... They think everything is opinion," he says.

KAREN MARSHALL

NOVAK: *'All Christian and Jewish religions are conservative ... in the sense that they keep remembering what they are there for,' he says.*

He links relativism to such events as the rise of Hitler and Mussolini. "That's what the dictators said – that there is no right, there is no wrong, there is just power and will," Novak says. If society accepts this premise, then people "will do what they want, and no one will meet their responsibilities."

Novak warns that moral decadence, not external enemies, will be the danger faced by free societies in the next century.

Even though Novak does not countenance homosexuality, he would not outlaw it, since he opposes governmental meddling in people's private lives.

"I am perfectly willing to go along with tolerance," he says. "But you can't make me say that acts that I think are evil are good." The state should not treat homosexuals and heterosexuals as equals, he says. "I think the heterosexual family provides such important benefits," he says. "You need to strengthen that all you can; it's very fragile."

Novak expects that people will disagree with him. If homosexuality becomes a public issue, with each side operating according to its conscience, then he advocates putting the issue to a vote "as civilly as you can."

A vote may also be necessary, Novak says, on abortion. To Novak, abortion is "an act of private violence." To him, it breaks a democratic compact. "We would consent to a government, and give the government the monopoly of violence – provided it protected our rights," he says. "This is the first case where the state is allowing private citizens to take violence into their own hands and destroy life in the womb."

If the state allows such violence at the beginning of life, Novak wonders if it eventually will allow violence at the end of life. "People will use the same logic," he says, "so defending the boundaries of life and death from the hand of the state is very important. You cannot allow the state to make that decision. The state has to be on the side of life."

Let the people choose

It is a tough argument in a democracy, and Novak accepts that parts of the country may favor abortion rights and other parts oppose them. "We need to keep the issue close to the people and not let the judges make the decision," he says.

When it comes to other issues involving Roman Catholics, Novak is most concerned about what he calls "the adolescent behavior" of better-educated Catholics who have become anti-clerical and anti-Pope. He cites an encyclical Pope John Paul II recently wrote about the relationship between truth and liberty. "No philosopher since Kierkegaard has done anything so profound and exact ... but if you talk to Catholic audiences about it, they poke fun at it," he says.

Novak defends his orthodoxy as a spiritual imperative. "I think every religion needs to do that.... All Christian and Jewish religions are conservative and traditional in the sense that they keep remembering what they are there for," he says. It is not surprising that the people he admires, like clergyman Reinhold Niebuhr, began on the left politically but moved to the right. That is what happened to Novak.

A liberal turns right

When he was at Stanford University from 1968-69, he supported the radical anti-Vietnam-war students. He then moved to an experimental college, the State University of New York (SUNY) at Westbury, where he says "the most right-wing students were for Gene McCarthy [the liberal Democratic presidential candidate] and the rest felt the elections were a bourgeois illusion, and you shouldn't dignify them by taking them seriously."

At SUNY he became critical of the political left. And although he was still anti-Vietnam, he began to wonder what would happen once the US pulled out. After he saw the calamity befalling Vietnam's boat people, "I felt like I had blood on my hands," he says.

As a result of his criticism of the left, Novak says he was politically excommunicated by his friends. "When I wrote things, people turned on my articles. I lost friends," he says.

Novak's writing, especially about institutions, has had a significant impact. His 1982 book, "The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism," was used by dissidents in Czechoslovakia.

President Alfredo Cristiani of El Salvador once said he was inspired by the book to work for a just peace in his country. The Solidarity labor movement in Poland voted to publish the book – a move some say turned it away from socialism.

It is not unusual for Templeton Prize winners to hold positions at odds with others. The 1991 winner was Lord Jakobovits, the former Chief Rabbi for Britain. Rabbi Jakobovits is known for his support for prayer in public schools and his flexibility on the issue of trading territory for peace in the Middle East. Templeton announced its latest award March 8.

Church Growth Slows in United States

CHURCH growth appears to be flattening out in the United States.

Not one of the nation's 10 largest church bodies reported a membership decline of more than 1 percent in the new "Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1994." But neither were there any signs of dramatic church growth: Most churches reported increases of less than 1 percent.

For churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention, coming off a generation of rapid increases that helped it become the nation's largest Protestant denomination, the church-growth figures seem to indicate a spiritual malaise.

"We're crying out to God for a fresh touch for our land. We pray that it will fall upon Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Baptists," said the Rev. Mark Coppenger, a Southern Baptist spokesman. "That's our main agenda right now – revival in America."

The church membership figures, collected by the National Council of Churches, are not always comparable from denomination to denomination, since most church groups keep their own statistics and use different methods for determining memberships. Some denominations only make estimates. But the church council says that, absent any questions about religion in the US Census every 10 years, the yearbook data is considered as near an "official" record of denominational statistics as is available.

The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. reported a 2.5 percent membership gain, going from 8 million to 8.2 million members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported a 2.16 percent jump from 1991 to '92, with membership increasing to 4.43 million.

The nation's largest religious group, the Roman Catholic Church, grew 1.63 percent, to 59.2 million members in 1992, the yearbook says.

But most large church bodies reported membership gains or declines of less than 1 percent.

– Associated Press