

BELIEFS *Values*

Radiate respect, not nobility, toward institutions



REV. RONALD P. BYARS

FOCUS ON THEOLOGY

For centuries, one of the ways that monarchs held on to authority was by a process that one might describe as "mystification." They used a variety of devices to give the impression that there really existed such a thing as "nobility" — some indefinable quality transmitted in the blood that endowed its bearers with superior wisdom. Whatever "nobility" might be, it obliged all others to acknowledge it with proper deference.

Judged by ordinary standards of measurement, the king might be a coward, a fool, an adulterer, and a drunk, but possession of royal blood nullified any liabilities. Something similar worked in favor of the authority of popes, mullahs, and, I suppose, the common clergy.

In democratic countries, most of the authorities of the old world disappeared, but there still remained a certain process of mystification. The people retained a guarded respect for persons in authority: the president, members

of Congress, judges, governors, mayors, bishops, school teachers. That respect was not obsequious. Bows, curtsies and the kissing of hands had no place in it. There was also a respect for forebears — for the founders of the nation, for the institutions they created, and for the story of how our predecessors built the society bequeathed to us.

It's clear enough that we live in a "demystified" era. There is no longer any aura that protects from contempt people in authority or those who play a symbolic role.

It's commonly presumed that the president, the senator, the school board member, or the bishop is at least as self-interested as we know ourselves to be.

It would be no surprise, in this cynical time, to discover that such persons have skeletons in their closets — in fact, we're sure that they do. We're only waiting for some ambitious investigative journalist to dig them up!

How did this happen? My guess is that the process of demystification came to a head in the '60s. The Civil Rights movement exposed the racial hypocrisy first of the South, then of the North. The war in Vietnam disillusioned a whole generation who saw in that bloody conflict all losses and no conceivable gain. The rage that

accompanies helplessness fell first on one president, then his successor. A generation who began their maturing process in that decade lost confidence in the authority of nearly every institution in American society.

It was nothing less than Western civilization that was on trial, and it was Western civilization that was judged to be worthy only of being tossed out with the rubbish.

That marked the beginning of a politics of suspicion, in which only the foulest motivations seem credible. Theories of conspiracy can be entertained without any supporting evidence simply because they are plausible.

So conventional history has given way to histories that focus on the hypocrites and injustices of those who created our institutions. Contempt has been legitimized, whether directed at teachers or "dead white European males" or the courts, or people who run for office, or persons who represent the dominant culture.

It would be foolish indeed to call for a program of "remystification!" It's true that the emperor often has no clothes — or, perhaps, is a tacky dresser — and the wise person will call it the way she sees it. Nevertheless, while pendulums often seem to have to swing first

from one extreme and then to the other, society finds a better balance somewhere other than the extremes. One who holds high office may not come out 100 percent on the scale either of intelligence or virtue.

Nevertheless, the continuity of our institutions requires that we manage some respect for the office. Our national history has often been recited as though the players in the drama were saints — white, Christian saints — and we know that distorts the truth. Still, it's an over-correction to convert all of those who built our society into villains.

There would seem to be a direct line running from the disillusionment of the '60s to today's vilification of public officials to the militia parading in the woods to the blowing up of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

It might be wiser if we could guard our tongues and pens, tame our rhetoric, and look for ways to offer to public officials, national institutions, and our own history a modicum of respect without awe or naivete.

Ronald P. Byars, Ph.D., is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. To leave a voicemail message, dial (313) 953-2047, ext. 1851, from a Touch-Tone phone.

Lunch & Learn series open to all

The Rev. Ronald P. Byars, senior pastor and Observer & Eccentric columnist, will keynote the kickoff event of the fall Lunch & Learn series in Calvin Hall at First Presbyterian Church, 1669 W. Maple, Birmingham.

He'll speak on "The Sights and Sounds of France" on Monday, Oct. 21. Bring a brown-bag lunch at 11:30 or just attend the talk from 12:15 to 1 p.m.

Beverages and desserts will be available for purchase. Attire is casual. No reservations are required.

Byars will show slides of medieval villages, 12th century cathedrals and vineyards in Burgundy, all of which he visited on route to Taize, France.

A short audiotape will highlight the liturgical music for which the Ecumenical Center in Taize is known.

Whole congregation gathers

Orchard Lake Community Church Presbyterian, 5171 Commerce in Orchard Lake, will move its 9 and 11:15 a.m. worship services to Walled Lake Central High School, Oakley Park at South Commerce in Commerce Township, on Sunday, Oct. 20, in order to bring the whole congregation together at one time.

Plans include a 10 a.m. worship service followed by a dinner (nursery care will be provided at the high school, with Sunday School classes held from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.) The service will be a celebra-

tion of Thanksgiving for a new time in the life of the congregation, which began as a summer chapel on the shore of Orchard Lake in 1974. The public invited. Call (810) 682-0730. The celebration will be led by Dr. David Robertson, senior pastor since September 1995. It will include contemporary music, youth presentations and dinner. New staff members will be formally welcomed, including: Bruce Snyder, music director; the Rev. Maryln Meagher from Princeton Seminary, associate pastor; and Buzz Matthews of Royal Oak, youth director.

Convocation
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Attendees, said Michlin, "will be mostly lay people, interested in ecumenical and interfaith work, who recognize the importance of this event and come to see for themselves that what we said is really true."

The Rev. Gustav Kopka, Jr. is pastor of St. Peter's German and Saxon Evangelical Lutheran Church in Warren.

The German native, who now resides in Warren, represents the bishop for the Southeast Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The ELCA is the largest Lutheran body in America with 2.3 million members. It is affiliated with the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation.

"The purpose of this celebration is to give more public awareness with the Lutheran and Jewish community that our church body has declared this a regrettable statement of Luther," said Kopka.

Lutheran Church of the Master, 3333 Coolidge Road, was founded in 1964, and has been led by the Rev. Thomas Barbret for 17 years.

Church members opened their doors to Troy's first Jewish congregation when the fledgling, lay-led community known as Cong. Shir Tikvah was seeking a roof under which to worship 14 years ago.

The Jewish congregation worshipped at the Lutheran Church of the Master for the first five years of its history.

Today, Rabbi Arnold Sleutelberg leads the thriving Reform congregation, which meets at Northminster Presbyterian Church.

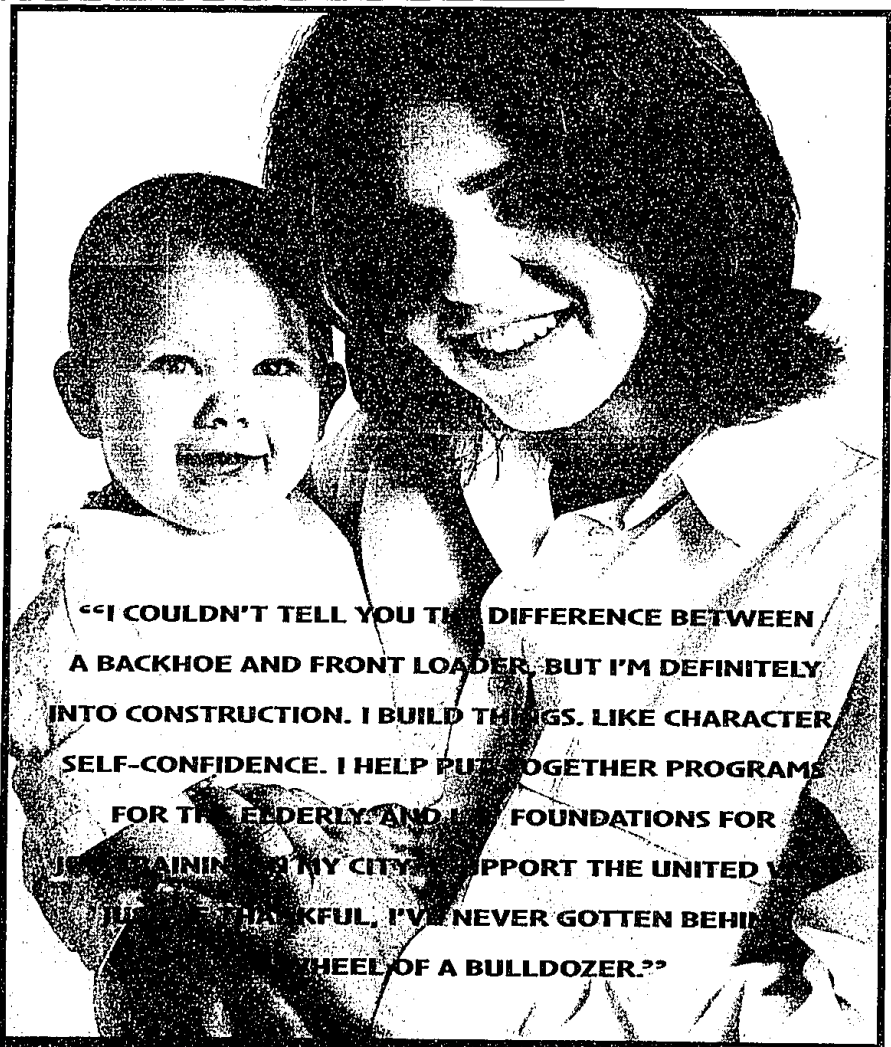
Their proposed synagogue at the corner of Wattles Road and Northfield Parkway is scheduled for completion sometime next year.

It is with a continued spirit of hospitality to the Jewish community that Lutheran Church of the Master will host the convocation, which is jointly sponsored by the Ecumenical Committee of the Southeast Michigan Synod of the ELCA and the Michigan Area American Jewish Committee.

"The essence of this is awareness, forgiveness and loving one another," added the Rev. Paul William Schmidt of Birmingham, associate pastor of Lutheran Church of the Master. "They're the primary fruits of the spirit for all people."

"The Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community" begins at 4 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 20, at Lutheran Church of the Master, 3333 Coolidge Highway, just north of Big Beaver Road in Troy.

The convocation is open to the public at no charge. A fellowship reception follows. For more information, contact Sharon Shipiro at (810) 646-7688.



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