

AN AMERICAN JEREMIAD:
CLASSICAL LIBERALISM AND ECCLESIAL WITNESS
A Summary and Response to Os Guinness at the Faith, Living, and Learning Conference

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At the Faith, Living, and Learning Conference in Mount Vernon, Ohio, USA, Os Guinness, a prominent Anglo-American evangelical intellectual, deeply embedded in “conservative” American political discussions, presented “remarks on where faith is viewed globally in 2001.” Guinness did not directly explicate a thesis; rather, he presented observations that “are fast, and therefore brief, and therefore superficial, but at last some of the contours of the discussion today and at least talking points for thinking and for our discussions together after this session.” I would like to summarize Guinness’ comments, place them within a certain tradition of public discourse, and articulate at least what I see is a fundamental tension of Guinness’s agenda. In this way we might continue the conversation that he began with his address.

Guinness presented his “remarks on where faith is viewed globally” in series of three propositions. He delved into the “situation and challenge of the world . . . for us as followers of Christ, as people of faith in 2001” in three large categories: (1) geopolitics; (2) the world religions; and (3) American public life. In each, Guinness brought large, sweeping heuristic observations as a backdrop for a Christian academic mission in the contemporary world.

In geopolitics, Guinness defended an American-centricity, culminating in the triumph of classical liberalism as the central historical movement of the twentieth-century. Here Guinness narrated a story of “the rise and fall” of classical political and economic liberalism. In World War I, World

War II, and the Cold War, liberalism, with its purest embodiment in the United States, emerged as the victorious ideology over national socialism and communism. Yet all is not well: “In the very years of its triumph and prosperity you can see profound shifts within liberalism so that in many ways it is unrecognizable.” Guinness narrates a shift from “classical liberalism” – what is commonly seen as a “conservative” political position in the United States represented by the Republican party – to a “constitutional liberalism” – commonly called a “liberal” position in the United States, represented by the Democratic party – as the story of moral decline. Stephen Carter describes these positions very well. In classical, “conservative” liberalism, autonomous individuals have liberty to pursue their own self-interests, except as they consent to limit them in the state apparatus. Here “governmental authority itself posed a problem for the freedom of the individual, and . . . the sovereign therefore had to be constrained, its powers divided.”^[1] In constitutional liberalism, however, the state seeks to advocate actively for the “rights” of all individuals, including minorities, by “enabling all citizens to enjoy a set of rights both defined and enforced by the apparatus of the national government.”^[2] Baldly speaking, in classical liberalism, individuals are seen to need protect from the state to pursue their own interests; in constitutional liberalism, individuals are seen to need the protect of the state in order to pursue their own self-interests. For Guinness, however, this shift from classical to constitutional liberalism bodes ill for “faith.” Triumphant liberalism has corroded from within, a corruption seen in “the shift from a robust individualism to a so-called expressive individualism.” Guinness stated that “while liberalism was the victor over totalitarian societies, corrupt liberalism, created in the West, [created] the totalitarian self, which is behind what the Pope has called, the culture of death.” Therefore, he concluded ominously, “We are entering, under the guise of liberalism, the victor over national socialism, the victor over communism, a new dark age.”

Guinness next moved to the perspective of world religion’s as a backdrop to “faith” in the 21st century. Guinness heuristically mapped the “world religions” into three general “families of

faith”: the eastern, the secular, and the biblical. He seemingly implied the superiority of the “biblical”, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because of its [their] uniqueness. Both the eastern and the secularist belief in “an impersonal ground of Being;” in contrast, the biblical asserts “there is One who is Person, and yet transcendent.” God’s Being therefore becomes the basis for inalienable human rights of each human “person” – a conviction consistent with classical liberalism: “we only have unique inalienable dignity, because we’re made in His image.” God’s very Being in the “biblical family” becomes the basis for the Western liberal “free, autonomous individual” – the endangered victor in the geopolitical battles of the twentieth century.

Despite his fundamental understanding of God as an individual Personal Monad, rather than the Trinitarian, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Guinness goes on to bemoan the privatization of religion and individualism found in American evangelicalism. Guinness rightfully connects these trends to the influence of early and late modernity. Accordingly, privatization of “faith” leads to a rejection of any authority outside the self and, therefore, makes a “religious” syncretism possible, or even likely. Guinness stated, “To the extent that we’re shaped by these modern features of religion, to that extent, we’re not people of faith in the strong biblical sense.”

The third and last perspective from which Guinness examined “the state of faith” was from the perspective of “American public life” or “the public square.” Here Guinness spoke of the obstacles and prospects for “faith” impacting the general “cultural” and “political” life in America. Guinness believes that blockages and opportunities for “faith” exist in “American public life.” Blockages include the resistance of the elites, the failure of “faith” to impact every dimension of individual lives, and a lack of a “public philosophy” in the church. As throughout the address, however, Guinness remains positive. Opportunities exist, the first in “history” – not the history of the saints and the martyrs, but the history of America and the Western Europe: “No other faith [than the Christian faith] comes close to being a source of the very greatest that the

West at large and America in particular is so proud of. And it gives us a tremendous trump card as followers of Jesus for we are the natural heirs of these things.” Social and political crises as well as “personal yearnings” provide existential opportunities for “faith” to impact the culture through the elite as well. “I think for these three reasons we have extraordinary openings for faith still. . . . we dare not flee from engagement.”

The final proposition called his audience into this “engagement” with hostile culture elite on the “conservative” side of the culture wars. He spoke of the “unequal forces we are facing . . . one side has the elite institutions.” Though not explicitly stated, Guinness seemed to place “we” on the other “side” with “the majority in the business world and the majority in the military world . . . and in the lower and middle in the working class.” The battle is significant because of “the increasing evidence of naked evil,” an evil unable to be adequately engaged because of the “chaos and corruption of the church,” including, maybe even especially, its evangelical wing. Therefore, Guinness calls for a “sober realism” about the state of faith at the beginning of the 21st century, a situation fraught with danger and opportunity.

Guinness, in conclusion, gives twenty to twenty-five years of opportunity before “the door is closed” for faith. It is “a moment for people of faith and of courage and vision to stand and make a difference, not for America’s sake, but for the kingdoms sake.” This kingdom is a kingdom of “freedom, for “as faith goes, so will freedom go, and as faith and freedom go, so will America go, and this next period is very crucial for America too, but it is far more important for the people of faith in this country and that’s why what you are doing in all your colleges is of magnificent importance .” The way out of the new dark age comes through the dual embracing of faith and freedom.

“As faith goes, so will freedom go.” While we cannot press Guinness to a precision that his address did not seek, his rhetoric seemed to suggest an underlying thesis. If I may summarize this, it seems that the rhetorical subtext of Guinness’ address argued that the fortunes of “faith” in the 21st century require a return to the classical political liberalism that raised the United States to center of world history. Threatened by a moral/political shift of “constitutional liberalism,” “people of faith,” including Christians, should seek to influence the cultural and political elite toward “faith” and classical liberalism for the benefit both of “faith” and the “freedom.” Classical liberalism will provide the opportunity for “faith,” while “faith” can sustain the freedoms necessary for liberalism. The only other option is “a new dark age.”

Guinness therefore sought to motivate the faculty of the colleges and universities of the Church of the Nazarene to engagement with America’s political and cultural elite for the preservation of “faith” and “freedom” in America – perhaps ironically given that the Church of the Nazarene is an international group of believers amidst the church catholic in discipline with each other, not a group defined by borders of any particular nation-state. Indeed, scholars and administrators from throughout the world attended the Faith, Living, and Learning Conference; the South American Mario Zani ironically began Guinness’s session with his “testimony.” Yet Guinness, consciously or unconsciously, drew upon an old and honored genre of speech for the conference, a genre that has been named, “the American Jeremiad.” Sacvan Berkovitch, a Canadian scholar, has documented how this genre rose out of its Reformation European context into the American context through the seventeenth century Puritans and then eventually applied, not to the life of the church, but directly to the United States. [\[3\]](#)

Jeremiads were “occasional” or “political” sermons, preached during special services of fasting or thanksgiving, or other times such as “election day”. The genre of the Puritan jeremiad began with articulating the achievements of the “fathers” who had settled in North America on a holy

“errand in the wilderness.” The jeremiad would then state how current circumstances imperiled this mission, but ended with the hope of quickening the individual for the moral renewal of the nation. Morally renewed, the nation could then complete its holy mission as God’s elect amongst the nations. God’s intent for creation hung in the balance, then, of the individual’s task to reform morally the United States. As Berkovitch writes,

The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand. . . . Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture. . . . It made anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate. The very concept of errand, after all, implied a state of unfulfillment. The future, though divinely assured, was never quite there, and New England’s Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome.[\[4\]](#)

The “Christian” and the “federal” remained distinct, but closely related: “It is precisely this effort to fuse sacred and profane that shapes the American jeremiads.”[\[5\]](#) The jeremiad arises out of a concern to keep alive a model of a Protestant Constantinian Christendom whereby the church provides the moral guidance of the state, as a formal or informal part of the state, to ensure God’s blessing upon the state which itself is the focus of God’s election.

Guinness’ address clearly shares these Constantinian commitments. The church exists in a separate sphere from the state, but it exists for the moral reform of the state – which then can assure the continuance of “faith” and the on-going mission of the liberal nation-state. The church has no genuine political witness on its own; it can only influence “politics” as defined by the liberal nation-state – through the active involvement of individual believers in democratic and market processes. Thus Guinness gives a jeremiad: the accomplishment of the “Fathers,” the victory of American liberalism in war that ensured “freedom” supporting – and supported by –

“faith”, now endangered by the encroachments of an constitutional liberalism. Yet this “clear and present danger” is a call to increased activism for the moral renewal of the liberal body-politic, so it, then, can assure the future of “faith.” Anxiety, the threat of the new dark age, is invoked in order to keep the errand moving into the future.

The use of a centuries old genre, however, is not the problem with the subtext of Guinness’ remarks, but serves to mask a fundamental tension that exists within it – as it does throughout most of American Christianity, either evangelical or mainline, Protestant or Catholic, including the membership and leadership of the Church of the Nazarene. This is the presupposition that liberalism, classical or constitutional, and more precisely, the liberal nation-state, provides a favorable or neutral context for the life and witness of the church. Therefore, the church must translate its witness into categories that the liberal society can accept on its own terms for any political impact it may make.

This assumption has forcefully been called into question through the works of theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, John Milbank, William Cavanaugh, D. Stephen Long, and other theologians that identify with a recent movement called “radical orthodoxy.” These scholars have convincingly argued that liberalism is not friendly, nor even neutral to the life of the church – it is hostile at its very core. Yet we need not refer to these works: the tensions are overtly present in Guinness’ address.

Perhaps most obviously, is Guinness’ ambiguity whether he sought to address us as “people of faith” or “Christians.” It would seem that he has constructed a hierarchy of “faith”, a hierarchy arising out of the liberal concern for the abstract “universal.” Guinness seems concerned, in the widest sense, for a generic human “faith” of which “the biblical” is a specific “family” composed of Judaism, Chistianity, and Islam, all who share a believe in a “personal God.” Christianity is

therefore a particular “subspecies” of these larger “faiths.” Christianity is assumedly true, but Guinness clearly asserts that its particularity must nonetheless be abandoned when one moves into the “public square.” Guinness thereby subordinates ecclesiology, the life and language of the church, to the demands of the liberal state. This subordination is required, in liberal theory, in the name of the liberty of the individual. Guinness then wants to provide a theological foundation for “liberty” in the very Being of God, who is revealed, not particularly as Father, Son, and Spirit for our salvation, but rationally, apologetically, universally as a transcendent Person. God’s freedom becomes the basis, analogically and universally, for human freedom. “As faith goes, so will freedom go.”

Yet freedom here becomes a more basic category for Guinness than Christology and ecclesiology, and therefore, becomes defined ultimately terms that the liberal state provides: the ability of an individual to pursue his or her liberty, i.e., her or his own self-interests. This stands fundamentally against a Christian conception of freedom. The “glorious freedom” of the Christian is what members of the Church of the Nazarene call sanctification -- the ability to live justly beyond the powers of sin, death, and Satan. It is not the state that sanctifies, but the Spirit who callus us to the Father through the Son.

Thus Christians are not a generic “people of faith” and are only transformed into such from the perspective of liberal politics. Christians make the very particularistic confession that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised this very particular Jew named Jesus who had been crucified by the Romans from the dead. One cannot generalize from the very particular language of the Christian confession into an anthropological category called “faith” without fundamentally eroding the witness of the church and transvaluing the fundamentally categories of Christian theology and life.

Thus, while Guinness as a Christian rightfully bemoans the individualistic, privatized, and syncretistic character of American evangelicalism, he fails to see that he himself legitimates and advocates such transformations by accepting the public/private split of liberal theory whereby “religion” or “faith” is private while the state is “public.” Once the distinction is offered, it is impossible to put limitations upon it as Guinness desires. The result is a de-ecclesialized “faith,” one individualized, privatized, and open to a syncretism that would see Christians on the same side in a “cultural war” as the military and capitalistic businesses, centered in the first world. Yet Christians do not need to translate our language into liberal categories nor do we need a “public policy.” Christians do have a “public policy;” it is called the church, a visible, concrete international body of believers, made one in baptism and drawn together in the Eucharistic, called to live non-violently in the world as the Body of Christ, sharing economic resources with each other and showing hospitality to the stranger, especially the poor, to whom Jesus proclaimed the gospel.

As members and educators in the Church of the Nazarene, we have resources at hand that should help us resist Guinness’ Constantinian fusion of the faith and the liberal nation-state that is the United States of America. Wesley well knew that Constantine’s conversion signaled the fall of the church; our holiness foremothers and fathers at least had a language of “world” that they believed we were called out from in order to live together as a “glorious church without spot or wrinkle.” Yet the seduction to provide an intellectual apology for the elite in order to influence the society rather than live an embodied witness amidst the poor is great, whether it be for a “conservative” liberalism or a “liberal” liberalism.

It seems to me that Guinness points the way in his critique of the modernist self that has become the basis for a de-ecclesialized Christianity in the United States, and through American missionary activity, throughout the world. Yet to realize this fully, we must recognize that the

greatest apologetic is not an intellectual translation of Christian convictions for its cultural despisers, nor the shaping of the nation-state's policies that are built upon the pursuit of self-interest and violence. The "apologetic" needed is the living, breathing production of saints within local congregations who live together under the discipline of the gospel. To do this will require a much deeper commitment to the church catholic even amidst a liberal society, not as a means to a greater "political" end, but itself as a way to embrace the politics of Jesus as a kingdom of priest, a holy people. Insofar as Guinness has opened this discussion, we can give God praise.

[1] Stephen L. Carter, The Dissent of the Governed (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1998), p. 23.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[3] See Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1978).

[4] Bercovitch, p. 23.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 29.