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BELIEFS

In a Rich Tapestry of Columns, a Search for Common Threads by Peter Steinfelds

It comes to mind now because the Beliefs column is about to close out 20 years of appearing every other week, with occasional absences, in these pages — 486 columns, counting this one, or 482 over the strict quota of four good ones.

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Yet even if it would be wildly hyperbolic to say that the same four columns have been written over and over more than 100 times, there probably are certain threads running through these two decades, underlying convictions that have made some topics natural choices or shaped how they were presented.

Here are a few of them:

First, the great world religions are complex and multilayered; they are rich in inner tensions and ambiguities that allow beliefs and practices to evolve over time as the faith is tested by new circumstances and insights. The great religions cannot be equated with the diminished and frozen fundamentalisms that they periodically spawn.

This conviction was captured by Jaroslav Pelikan, the scholar of Christianity, in his well-known distinction between tradition and traditionalism: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

Second, religions encompass claims about truth and rules of conduct but cannot be reduced to doctrinal propositions or ethics. Religions involve orientations toward reality handed on in stories, rituals and paradigmatic figures as well as in creeds. Religions are embodied in communities and shape distinct ways of life.

Third, intelligence and critical reasoning are essential to adult approaches to faith. In short, theology matters. It is curious that so many otherwise thoughtful people imagine that what they learned about religion by age 13, or perhaps 18, will suffice for the rest of their lives. They would never make the same assumption about science, economics, art, sex or love.

Fourth, at least partly because of that assumption, a contemporary abundance of serious thought and scholarship about religion is marginalized. Thinkers and scholars who should have a presence in the intellectual and cultural landscape — whose books, for example, might well be noted in the annual “holiday” listings — are instead known almost entirely in their own religious circles or academic specialties. That is a loss this column has tried to counter.

There has been a price to pay, of course, namely a corresponding lack of attention to manifold forms of popular inspirational religion. Only one column surveyed angelmania, even in the years when those heavenly messengers and do-gooders were flying high. No columns explored the best-selling spiritual chicken soup in 57 varieties, the marathon conversations with God, wonder-working prayers, dramas dripping with mystical meaning, apocalyptic adventure series and newly discovered recipes for changing one’s life.

Much of this torrent of inspiration and advice may be the religious equivalent of fast food, but it really deserves thoughtful analysis. Who consumes it and why? What are its wholesome and harmful ingredients?

Fifth, if this column has neglected popular religiosity, it has not dodged the great challenge to faith — and to the systematic examination of faith that is theology — posed by the existence of evil. The response of religious thinkers and leaders has been a recurrent topic, whether after events like the Sept. 11 terrorist

attacks, where religion itself was a source of the evil, or the great tsunami of 2004, where nature, that great mother and serial killer, went on a murderous rampage.

Sixth, a major concern threading its way through these columns is protection of conscience. From its Protestant and Enlightenment origins, American society has tended to honor the personal conscience of the dissenting individual — at least in principle, although, as any atheist running for public office can testify, not necessarily in practice.

But what is applauded in individuals can seem intolerable in groups. Faced with religious bodies that resist prevailing opinion and hold to beliefs that either the majority Christian population or influential cultural elites consider retrograde, the nation has often balked.

Should these groups be allowed to maintain distinct identities, to set their own standards for their institutions, to propagate their views and to be active in civic life? Should any modifications of their views be left to evolve or not (see above) from internal debate — or be forced by legal or economic pressure? The presupposition here has been that freedom of conscience for individuals cannot be detached from freedom of conscience for communities of belief.

These six convictions are undoubtedly not the only ones that longtime readers will have recognized as animating these columns. But they are important ones and have given some unity to 20 years of work.

Peter Steinfels

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Peter F. Steinfels (born 1941) is an American journalist and educator best known for his writings on religious topics.

A native of Chicago, Illinois, and a lifelong Roman Catholic, Steinfels earned his Ph.D from Columbia University and joined the staff of the journal *Commonweal* in 1964. He served as a visiting professor at Notre Dame in 1994-95 and then as visiting professor at Georgetown University from 1997 to 2001. He currently writes a biweekly column, called "Beliefs", for the religion section of the *New York Times*.

He is a professor at Fordham University and co-director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. Steinfels has also written several books, including *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (ISBN 0-671-41384-8) and *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (ISBN 0-684-83663-7).

He has argued in favor of the ordination of women as priests and deacons, and has even suggested that this could eventually lead to the creation of female Cardinals.^[1]

Family

He is married to Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, a writer and former editor of *Commonweal*. They have two children, Gabrielle Steinfels and John Melville Steinfels.

References

1. Perspectives: Peter Steinfels