

Our Dystopian Rut

—Robert Joustra—

I grew up on the cowboy colonialism of Captain James T. Kirk, during a Cold War that my students are taught, but no longer remember. Kirk was a lot of things: vain, ambitious, violent, domineering, a womanizer—absolutely no question there—and, certainly then, in many ways the parallel of Cold War America. He symbolized a utopianism driven by some fairly base desires and designs, but it was utopianism. It was a picture of what the world could be, if only.

Gene Rodenberry's Cold War idealism had company in others, like Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, in which *psycho-history* grounded an intellectual approach to the macroscopic manipulation of the rise and fall of empires. If it was possible, argued Asimov's science fiction, to know with certainty the position of every particle and speck in the universe at one moment, one could predict their movement and, thus, the future.

No doubt, for every Rodenberry and Asimov there was a Walter M. Miller Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* to speculate on the cyclical rise and fall of civilization, the atomic havoc humankind perpetually wreaked upon itself on its (re)discovery. The Second World War and atomic weapons generally were not without their dystopian cultural influences. But both streams, the audacious utopian and the dystopian, persisted in those decades, rival visions of the human spirit and imagination.

Today, we have dystopia. Even our superheroes are resurrected from another era, one which had the moral brass to make fantasies that stood for things. Even Superman got into a funk in the late '90s, eventually rescinding his American citizenship and, one assumes, burning out, over-dosing on red kryptonite and bumming around a beach in Mexico wondering what happened to the "American way." Our fantasies reflect what is more than what is hoped for, or so I've argued about George R.R. Martin's *Dancing with Dragons*.

The disruption in our fantasy has in fact become so dire that Neal Stephenson started a foundation to address this burned out pessimism afflicting our imaginations: the Hieroglyph Project. *Smithsonian* describes the project as a plan "to rally writers to infuse science fiction with the kind of optimism that could inspire a new generation to, as he puts it, 'get big stuff done.'"

"You're the ones who have been slacking off," said Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, to a collection of science fiction authors. Slacking off is not how I'd put it.

Science fiction and fantasy are now mainstream in ways they have never been, and their production is nothing short of brilliant. Cult TV shows like *The Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones* and *Battlestar Galactica* (which begins and ends in holocaust) are some of the best produced, best acted, most fantastic spectacles our imaginations have to offer. Our imaginations are working overtime, begging—pleading maybe—for some kernel of idealism to bleed through the scripts, to meet us on our couches.

But a latter generation's bold idealism has been so thoroughly deconstructed, so unmasked for its colonialism, violence, oppression, and hegemony, that the act of proposing, of building, of dreaming, seems itself a liability, an indulgent silliness, maybe even an evil one. Dystopia loves company.

At the root of that genre, of all fantasy, of story and of imagination, is hope. The problem here is not only or decisively in our science fiction. In the absence of hope, in its atrophy, even the expectation that Stephenson and the Hieroglyph Project will perform a resurrection of the American Dream seems ill-fated. For the prior thing is not moon bases or starships, economic justice or political reformation, but the resurrection of the human heart.

Conscience rights are Charter rights

—Peter Stockland—

Have Wildrose Party leader Danielle Smith's in-born libertarian instincts cost her a majority government in the Alberta election?

According to a *Calgary Herald-Edmonton Journal* poll reported in today's *National Post*, Smith and Wildrose have lost the impressive lead they held in the first week of campaigning. They are said to be tied in popular support with the governing Progressive Conservative party.

Reporter Darcy Henton speculates in the *Post* story that the rise in Tory fortunes, or the slide for Wildrose, has come after "so-called conscience rights" became an issue on the campaign trail.

Premier Alison Redford last week attacked the Wildrose platform for promising to protect conscience rights by letting health care professionals and marriage commissioners go to court for legal exemptions from, say, performing abortions, dispensing contraceptives, or officiating at same-sex weddings.

Redford called the platform promise "frightening" and unfit for the Alberta she wants to live in. Smith brushed off the matter by accusing the premier of typical liberal scaremongering.

The casual dismissal was a serious mistake. Having worked with Smith many years ago, and having watched her stellar career path ever since, I would be willing to wear a Toronto Maple Leaf jersey for a week if I am wrong on this point: Smith's iron-clad libertarian convictions caused the tactical misjudgment.

Few politicians have put their own beliefs aside in the service of a greater good to the degree that Smith has in balancing her libertarianism with openness toward what the thinker Phillip Blond calls social conservationists.

She is the first to acknowledge, however, that she doesn't really "get" social conservation. Tenacious protection of the moral foundations of society is not something that makes her want to put on the boxing gloves. Her reflexes respond to the transactional, the contractual, the invisibly handed.

She gave the back of the hand to Redford's assault of conscience rights, in all probability, because she does not fully grasp why those rights are so important to social conservationists.

Someone who did understand their importance would have immediately



Alison Redford, left, and Danielle Smith. Photo: *Edmonton Journal*

gone on the offensive by reminding the premier over and over at every whistle stop that conscience rights are Charter rights.

Every speech would end with a rhetorical question as to whether the premier of Alberta is "frightened" by the Charter's section 2(a) protection of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. It would demand to know how Redford, the great and good Red Tory protégé of Joe Clark, thinks abiding by the clear wording of the Charter would make Alberta an unfit place to live.

Social conservationists know intuitively there is nothing "so-called" about conscience rights. They are the first of the fundamental rights enumerated in the Charter, bound together with religious freedom, because they are the sine qua non of protection from State coercion and of the fulfillment of personal self-identification.

No transaction, no contract, no invisible market hand can usurp the primacy of conscience, properly formed, in protecting our ability to live our lives in conformity with what is right. Conscience rights are, in fact, the freedom and the limitation on government that libertarians themselves claim to crave.

All is not lost, however, even if it proves true that Smith's libertarian proclivities have produced a public reaction that costs her a majority. I have long believed that a term as Opposition leader would best prepare her to lead Alberta with the largeness of a Peter Lougheed or similar iconic political figure.

A natural born libertarian, Smith is also a genetically gifted apprentice. It was said of Margaret Thatcher, "The lady's not for turning." For Smith, that could be re-phrased as: "The lady's all for learning."

Win or lose, learn she will.

Comment Interviews Charles Glenn

In your work, what are you creating, and what are you cultivating? (In Andy Crouch's vernacular, what new culture are you making, and what good culture are you conserving and nurturing?)

Charles Glenn: In a sense, all my research and writing for a quarter of a century has been to understand how North American and Western European societies came to see an irreconcilable conflict between social justice and the rights of conscience, a conflict played out especially in popular education. I ask what remedies are possible and how they can be put in place, taking into account the distinctive accommodations in fifty different countries I have studied and written about.

Obviously, this is not a mechanical matter but one of persuasion and indeed of encouraging a different way of understanding what true human flourishing requires and why that has come to be misunderstood. Working for policies that support faith-based and charter schools that serve the poor and promote such flourishing in thoughtful ways keeps me going.

Each book that I finish writing raises new questions for me and sends me into a period of intense thought and research (both historical and comparative) for the next book. Like the aging W.B. Yeats, I can truly say that

Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible . . .

Who is the "public" for your work—who is it for, and how does it affect the lives of those who engage with it?

Unlike most professors, my audience is not primarily other professors but policy-makers, leaders in civil society, and thoughtful citizens, especially in the evangelical and Catholic communities. And of course my undergraduate and graduate students, who challenge me constantly to make my thought more clear and persuasive.

Why do you do what you do?

I would like to think that it is for the glory of God, though I know that all sorts of other motivations are at work as well, some unworthy. There is also a desire to do something toward healing Western culture and society through education worthy of the name.

What skills, proficiencies, and virtues does this work develop in you?

I suppose the ability to sniff out the significance of historical documents and of educational policies and practices in many countries. I wish I were a profound thinker, like several of my friends; I suspect that my calling is to gather and publish the materials for their reflections.

What do you do for fun?

Spend time with my wife, seven children, and five grandchildren; drink wine and talk with friends in Europe; kayak on our lake in New Hampshire; read history; listen to Baroque music; bicycle to work; play with our dogs.

The NY Times on Chapter and Verse

—Ray Pennings—

The March 26th edition of the *New York Times* included a column by Stanley Fish which cogently captured a core issue which makes public discourse so difficult in our day.

But the desire of classical liberals to think of themselves as above the fray, as facilitating inquiry rather than steering it in a favored direction, makes them unable to be content with just saying, *You guys are wrong, we're right, and we're not going to listen to you or give you an even break.* Instead they labor mightily to ground their judgments in impersonal standards and impartial procedures (there are none) so that they can pronounce their excommunications with clean hands and pure—non-partisan, and non-tribal—hearts. It's quite a performance and it is on display every day in our most enlightened newspapers and on our most progressive political talk shows, including the ones I'm addicted to.

The column was prompted by a network television discussion on global warming in which the host challenged accepted mainstream opinion on the subject. Chris Hayes, at least according to Fish,

"observed that when we accept the conclusions of scientific investigation we necessarily do so on trust (how many of us have done or could replicate the experiments?) and are thus not so different from religious believers, Dawkins and Pinker asserted that the trust we place in scientific researchers, as opposed to religious pronouncements, has been earned by their record of achievement and by the public rigor of their procedures. In short, our trust is justified, theirs is blind."

It was left to Fish to point out the irony.

It was at this point that Dawkins said something amazing, although neither he nor anyone else picked up on it. He said: in the arena of science you can invoke Professor So-and-So's study published in 2008, "you can actually cite chapter and verse."

Chapter and verse? If anyone literally appealed to a scriptural chapter and verse in public discourse, the mere appeal would almost ensure their argument would be dismissed. It's not every day that a column in mainstream media points out its self-inflicted hypocrisy as directly as this. But there is no point in gloating. In fact, a lament may be more in order. One column a trend does not make, neither is an admission of liberal blindness published in the *New York Times* likely to change what has become an addiction. That is why one need not quote the *New York Times* in order to ascertain something is true, in spite of the preferences of certain elites. However, when the occasion presents itself, one would be a fool not to take advantage of it.

Presuppositions matter. We interpret the world according to our belief systems. Belief based on reason is as much a belief as belief based on revelation. There are authorities beyond the academic study *du jour*. Neutrality is a myth. And now we can even claim the *New York Times* as an authority for saying so.

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