

Standing on the Promises

Absolutes and imagination in Southern religion.

By SUSAN FORD WILTSHIRE

POET AND CRITIC ALLEN TATE, the only one of the Vanderbilt Agrarians I was in time to have met, wrote in his essay on religion, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930): "Abstraction is the death of religion as well as of everything else."

Tate identified the peril of absolutist religious beliefs. Absolutes are abstract. They have to be. Life actually lived is far too messy to be subject to human absolutes of any kind, particularly in matters of religion. Absolute premises exclude those who fail to "measure up" to predefined requirements.

This leaves two possibilities about the nature of God: a God who is exclusive or a God who is inclusive. For absolutists, God excludes from grace those who are defined as outside the kingdom. In the more ambiguous and hospitable notion of a loving, inclusive God, there is room in the kingdom for everybody: We are all sinners, and God loves us anyway.

Thomas Merton puts it this way: "A holy zeal for the cause of humanity in the abstract may sometimes be mere lovelessness and indifference for concrete and living human beings. When we appeal to the highest and most noble ideas, we are more easily tempted to hate and condemn those who, so we believe, are standing in the way of their realization."

These two strands have long co-existed in Southern religion. Both were shaped during the same years in the same part of my world: West Texas in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

At a Lubbock, Texas, high school reunion, I found myself visiting with two friends from those long-ago days. After a while one man

explained to the other: "Susan became a liberal because she went to New York."

I smiled meekly and nodded. (Old habits are hard to break.)

No, I thought to myself. I became a liberal because I went to church.

The influence was indirect. In those years I never heard a prophetic word uttered from the pulpit about race or McCarthyism or the death penalty or nuclear war or anything else of the sort. For me its disciplines included reading the Bible through; memorizing Bible verses; attending Sunday School and church youth groups; and earnest projects of personal piety. On weekdays I attended Morning Watch, a Protestant worship service with hymns and prayers held in the public school auditorium each day before classes.

Church in all these forms instilled in me a sense of fairness, a passion for justice, and the faith and words to fuel them both. What I would not know until much later was that in the same time and place, representatives of my own denomination were propagating a very different kind of religion.

LONG BEFORE MY GENERATION KNEW what a "movement" was or even that there was a need for one, we learned our first movement song in Vacation Bible School:

"Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world."

The subversive truth was already there. It all seemed so simple.



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That these words took root in my consciousness was a result also of the home in which I was raised. When I was in the sixth grade, my mother invited the principal of my nearby elementary school together with Mae Simmons, the principal of the segregated African-American elementary school across town, to come to our house for tea. My mother had met Ms. Simmons in one of her volunteer activities and thought the two principals would have much in common and would enjoy meeting each other. The year was 1952. This may have been the first integrated social occasion in my town. As we drank our tea around the fireplace, three of us were having a very good time. The white principal sat mute and agitated.

In that moment I realized something was very wrong in our society.

By the time I went to the state university in Austin, many people knew something was wrong. In 1959 the few African-American students at the University of Texas could not participate in intercollegiate sports. They could not belong to the band or work in the library. They could not see a movie or buy a sandwich or get a haircut anywhere near the campus.

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at a remote, empty road, I faced south, beyond the horizon, where the desert winds had surely swept away our first timorous steps. Reflecting on all we had accomplished—1,700 miles of trail and more than \$10,000 in donations—I knew the real task still lay ahead. On Oct. 9, Josh and I will lead the 2005 Nashville AIDS Walk downtown at the Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park. We showed how far we would go for HIV. Can we now get others to step forward, too?

To see photos and to learn more about Hike for HIV, please visit www.hikeforhiv.com.

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That still leaves us pondering the contagion of motorists with their cry-wolf turn signals. What to do? Pass around them? But they might indeed be preparing to switch lanes, for once. Send them a message? I've considered painting a sign to flash out the window. But what would it say? "Please turn off your turn signal" strikes a polite tone, but it's too wordy at interstate speeds. "Check blinker!" is too abrupt and presumptuous. "Wake up! Now!" carries cryptic, unintended metaphysical undertones. Maybe we should just go back to the hand signals of yesteryear (circa 1971) to indicate left or right turns, back when people kept the windows down because air conditioning was too exotic, expensive and didn't work anyway.

Well, enough already. Instead of highway high anxiety, it's better to recall one of the last big songs from the 1970s and counsel peace, love and understanding. I will from now on be gentler with my boneheaded brother-and-sister random-blinker cohort. Maybe they too are sending distress signals into the jittery new world, wondering how we got on this road we're on.

This article has been adapted from a column originally written for the Tennessean newspaper. Ray Waddle, MA'81, is an author and columnist who teaches a writing seminar at Vanderbilt Divinity School. His latest book is called A Turbulent Peace: The Psalms for Our Time (Upper Room Books).

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I joined the Student YMCA/YWCA and found myself challenged by a faithful community to participate in the stand-ins and picket lines that in time changed these iron-clad customs. In those years I learned two important lessons: (1) faith without action is feckless, and (2) you can be right, or pretty sure you're right, and people can still hate you. Until then I thought that if you tried very hard to be good, people would like you.

MADELEINE L'ENGLE TELLS OF HOW HER children's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* routinely makes it onto the list of the 10 most frequently censored books in school and public libraries. She decided one year to read all 10 books. She found in common among them one thing: imagination.

Imagination is the human gift that enables us to perceive something not yet existing, to work toward ends we may never see. I am fortunate to live in the state that became the 36th needed to ratify the Women's Suffrage Amendment into the U.S. Constitution in 1920. In hard times I think of the 100 women and men at the Seneca Falls conference in 1848 who began the long campaign for women's vote. They knew that every single vote at every stage of this struggle would have to be cast by a man. Only one woman at Seneca Falls lived long enough to cast a vote in a presidential election.

Imagination is also the gift that enables us to see more than one side of a question. The very faith of Christians rests on an ambiguity: Was Jesus human or divine? The stained-glass windows of Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville recently were taken out to be restored. One of the oldest, "The Ascension Window," had become so begrimed over the decades that the bottom portion was unrecognizable: All one could see was Jesus ascending to heaven from an opaque blur. When the window came back gleamingly restored, parishioners were astonished to see two footprints left behind on the green grass by the human Jesus as the divine Jesus ascended into heaven.

"Standing" has many connotations: "Here I stand." "Stand by your man." "Stand up and

be counted." "Stand up, stand up for Jesus." "Stand and deliver." "What is your standing in this case?" "To stand somewhere, for something." "Standing on promises."

To know where we stand in the present requires clarity about our past and imagination about our future. Walter Lippman writes that we must be at peace with the sources of our lives: "If we are ashamed of them, if we are at war with them, they will haunt us forever. They will rob us of our basis of assurance, they will leave us interlopers in the world." Because all institutions are human, they, like all human beings, are flawed. Will Campbell and James Holloway in *Up to Our Steeples in Politics* (1970) are prophetic in reminding us how sinful even the churchly institutions are. Once we recognize our own sins, we become less absolute in judging others as damned or saved.

The ambiguities of faith also require caution about politics and patriotism. The ancient Greeks believed that gods take sides in war. In Homer's *Iliad*, for example, the goddess Athena takes the side of the Greeks, the goddess Aphrodite of the Trojans. The God of Christians does not take sides. God's promise instead is to stand close by all who suffer. A careful look at Irving Berlin's beloved "God Bless America" can help us here: "Stand beside her and guide her, through the night with a light from above." God is implored to stand by, advise, and guide our actions, not to lead the charge in the service of American interests.

Our human stands, whether we take them in church or in politics or in solemn acts of civil disobedience, are always penultimate. They rest on next-to-last authority. If we consider them ultimate, then we are playing God and Allen Tate is right: We are converting human ideas into abstract absolutes that are the death of religion and of everything else. ▼

"Standing on the Promises" was adapted with permission from Susan Ford Wiltshire's essay in Where We Stand: Voices of Southern Dissent, published by NewSouth Books (Montgomery, Ala.). Wiltshire is professor of classics and chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Vanderbilt.