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## Civilization on the Brink: Cultural Observations

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Evidence of this comes from many sources, and the common thread running throughout various controversies and issues is the refusal to see the truth, to acknowledge moral authority, and summon the courage to deal responsibly with threats to social order, moral integrity, and the institutions necessary to civilization itself.

Item One: Take, for example, the confused response of many of the world's leading journalists to the terrorist attack on innocent children and hundreds of others in Beslan, Russia. As the death toll reaches almost four hundred persons, many of them children, journalists have been offering their own editorial commentary on the moral nature of this attack, often cleverly disguised in the selective use of terminology. In other words, they are refusing to call the attackers "terrorists."

Daniel Pipes, one of the world's leading experts on terrorism, compiled a list of euphemisms and evasions used in the aftermath of the September 3 attack in Beslan. National Public Radio referred to the terrorists as "assailants." United Press International called them "extremists," while The Washington Post referred to them as "fighters." The Los Angeles Times identified the terrorists as "hostage-takers," and The New York Times offered a headline identifying the terrorists as "insurgents." Other leading newspapers and media outlets referred to the terrorists as "kidnappers," "militants," "perpetrators," "radicals," "rebels," and "separatists." Adding insult to injury, The Pakistan Times referred to the terrorists as "activists."

Activists? These terrorists were not carrying placards while walking in a protest march; they were murdering innocent people by the hundreds, and killing children after refusing them so much as water after they were taken as hostages. Why do these journalists refuse to use the word "terrorists?" Pipes suggests that the reason can be traced to the response of liberal journalists to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Added to this is the refusal of many in the media to deal with the Islamic identity of the terrorists, and their ties to international terrorist organizations. As Pipes laments, "The multiple euphemisms for terrorist obstruct a clear understanding of the violent threats confronting the civilized world. It is bad enough that only one of five articles discussing the Beslan atrocity mentions its Islamist origins; worse is the miasma of words that insulates the public from the evil of terrorism."

Language is our most important tool for communication. When language is debased and euphemisms rule, we are robbed of any opportunity for a serious moral conversation. When we refuse to call terrorists what they really are, and hide in a thicket of linguistic cowardice, we grant the terrorists an extended victory. We should call terrorists what they really are—mass murderers.

Item Two: Even as the 2004 presidential election is underway, memories of the 2000 race continue to interrupt. In a fascinating article, journalist David Remnick of The New Yorker offers an insight into the current state of mind of former vice president Al Gore, the 2000 Democratic presidential nominee. The article, published in the September 13 issue of

The New Yorker, is not flattering to Gore. Remnick presents him as a largely self-absorbed and glaringly eccentric public figure, living with the knowledge that he came so very close to the Oval Office just four years ago. Remnick followed the former vice president around Nashville as he visited a jazz club and traveled around Nashville with his new friend, Robert Ellis Orrall, an eccentric musician and visual artist.

Liberated from public responsibilities and the weight of elected office, Gore freely spoke his mind about a range of political issues and President George W. Bush. "He certainly is a master at some things, and he has a following," Gore observed. "He seeks strength in simplicity, but, in today's world, that's often a problem." Nevertheless, he called President Bush "a bully," and suggested that the war on terror is being fought more out of fear than as a rational response to the threat.

When asked about President George W. Bush's Christian faith, Gore responded with vigor. As Remnick relates: "Gore's mouth tightened. A Southern Baptist, he, too, had declared himself born again, but he clearly had disdain for Bush's public kind of faith. 'It's a particular kind of religiosity,' he said. 'It's the American version of the same fundamentalist impulse that we see in Saudi Arabia, in Kashmir, in religions around the world: Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim. They all have certain features in common. In a world of disconcerting change, when large and complex forces threaten familiar and comfortable guideposts, the natural impulse is to grab hold of the tree trunk that seems to have the deepest roots and hold on for dear life and never question the possibility that it's not going to be the source of your salvation. And the deepest roots are in philosophical and religious traditions that go way back.'" Al Gore may call himself a Southern Baptist, but when Remnick asked Gore and his wife Tipper where they currently attend church, Gore responded, "We're ecumenical now." Gore went on to explain, "The influx of fundamentalist preachers have pretty much chased us out with their right-wing politics."

During his years as vice president, Al Gore took positions that diametrically opposed the convictions held by Southern Baptists on issues ranging from homosexuality and abortion to a larger range of moral and political issues. Some news reports indicated that the Gores, while in Washington, had joined a Baptist church in the area that featured a woman as pastor. As with former President Bill Clinton, Gore's identification as a Southern Baptist is far more ethnic than theological in form.

Nevertheless, his comments about President Bush's Christian faith should be genuinely alarming. A former vice president of the United States refers to evangelical Christianity as "the American version of the same fundamentalist impulse that we see in Saudi Arabia." Furthermore, he goes on to suggest that conservative Christian convictions are grounded in intellectual and personal insecurity.

When evangelical Christianity is compared to militant Islam by a man who, as recently as four years ago, stood a heartbeat from the presidency and won a plurality of votes in a presidential election, we are in big trouble.

Item Three: Finally, we face signs that Americans are growing weary of making moral distinctions and may be caving in to demands for special rights for Muslims.

New Jersey's Six Flags Great Adventure theme park announced that Friday, September 17 would be "Great Muslim Adventure Day" at the facility, and only Muslims would be welcome to attend.

The Muslim Youth Division of the Islamic Circle of North America and the Muslim American Society were reported to have arranged exclusive use of the theme park for the entire day. According to WorldNetDaily, the ICNA website boasted, "First Time Ever-All Day-Entire Park Exclusively for Muslims!"

Debbie Nausser, spokeswoman and vice president of the Six Flags theme park, confirmed claims that the park would be restricted on Friday for "Muslims and their friends."

In the past, the ICNA has featured events that included speakers who have empathized with suicide bombers and blamed Jews for the war on terror, claiming that a conspiratorial plot was designed to put the blame on Muslims. The organization Judicial Watch traces ICNA links to Hamas and world terrorism.

What is going on here? Can you imagine the outcry if a major theme park, serving as a public accommodation, advertised a "Christians Only Day?"

We are living in confused and confusing times, and our contemporary challenges require clear thinking, moral focus, and intellectual discipline. With civilization standing at the brink, Christians must be both observant and analytical, ready to bring biblical truth and Christian conviction to the firing line of contemporary debate. If not, we will soon face the chaos Durant promised.

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