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The Strange Postmodern Parable of Ron Reagan

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In recent months, Ron Reagan has appeared on the national stage as a proponent of embryonic stem cell research and an opponent of President George W. Bush and his administration. He now works as a commentator for MSNBC, and he grabbed headlines at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he called for the adoring crowd to “cast a vote for embryonic stem cell research.” The address was a big hit at the convention—but Reagan's only qualification for speaking to the Democrats was that he was Ronald Reagan's son. His real value for the Democrats was an opportunity to tweak the Republicans. His appearance was no tribute to family loyalty.

Ronald Prescott Reagan was born May 20, 1958 to Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Born to famous parents, Ron Reagan would see their fame and celebrity transformed as Ronald Reagan shifted from acting to politics, and was elected governor of California. As a young adult, he would see his father elected President of the United States.

Already, there were clear signs that Ron Reagan would not follow in his father's footsteps. The younger Reagan dropped out of Yale University in 1976, deciding instead to study at New York City's Joffrey School of Dance. Ron showed both talent and potential as a dancer, and he was added to the Joffrey Ballet's traveling troupe as a regular member. Both parents appeared to be supportive of their son's chosen career.

Ron Reagan may have demonstrated genuine talent for ballet, but in other areas, he was clearly trading on his father's famous name, asking an audience: “How many people here think I was asked to host Saturday Night Live because I'm a contributing editor of Playboy magazine? How many people here think I was asked to host this show because my father is President of the United States?” At the second question, the crowd erupted with applause and laughter. “That's what I thought,” he replied.

In recent years, Ron Reagan and his wife Doria Reagan, a clinical psychologist, have lived in Seattle, Washington, where Ron has been involved in talk radio and television. One time, he hosted a dog show for cable television's “Animal Planet.”

Throughout his adult life, Ron Reagan's leftward political leanings have been clearly evident. His appearance at the 2004 Democratic National Convention is but the capstone of his efforts to associate the Reagan name with ideas and principles at odds with his father's. Though Ron claims to be a registered Independent, he acknowledges that he did not vote for George W. Bush in 2000, and now says he will support “any viable candidate who can defeat Bush” in 2004. He has indicated plans to vote for Senator John Kerry.

Several aspects of this story deserve careful attention. On the one hand, the entire spectacle of Ron Reagan is evidence

of the culture of celebrity and the value of a famous name. More importantly, the issues now swirling about Ron Reagan present a cautionary tale about fathers and sons, as well as a warning about ideas and their consequences. Put simply, Ron Reagan is famous only because he is the son of one of the nation's most beloved presidents. He has no particular credentials, either in politics or in matters of science and ethics. His only credibility in speaking to the issue of Alzheimer's disease is the fact that his father was its victim.

When Ron Reagan spoke to the Democrats, most commentators joined in the adulation. "A few of you may be surprised to see someone with my last name showing up to speak at a Democratic Convention," Reagan quipped. Promising that his address would not have "anything to do with partisanship," Reagan launched into a presentation that was partisan from beginning to end.

More importantly, while promising to do "justice to the science," Reagan presented an absolutely untenable description of embryonic stem cell research. Furthermore, he promised that cures for diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, lymphoma, and others would be readily available, almost immediately. Professor Robert F. George of Princeton University, a member of the President's Council on Bioethics, responded to Reagan's address, noting that he "described the process of obtaining embryonic stem cells in a way that left out the fact that the cloning process he described creates a human embryo which is killed in order to harvest its stem cells." Professor George also set the record straight: "Those of us who oppose embryonic stem cell harvesting object to the practice because it necessarily involves killing of human embryos. And human embryos are nothing other than human beings in the embryonic stage of their natural development. Ron Reagan refuses to face up to this fact. He suggests that it is a matter of 'theological belief,' when the truth is that it is a plain matter of scientific fact that can be verified by consulting any textbook in human embryology." Reagan had argued that the nation's policy on federal support for embryonic stem cell research should not be based in "the theology of a few," implying that only right-wing ideologues are opposed to the destruction of human embryos for stem cell experimentation. Leslie Smith, Senior Fellow at Seattle's Discovery Institute, countered that Reagan "is the ideologue who has jettisoned reason and fact in order to embrace a faith in cloning miracles."

Just a few months earlier, Ron Reagan was handed another public platform when he spoke at the final ceremonies for his father's funeral, held at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. Speaking to a national audience, Ron Reagan was understood to deliver a slap at President George W. Bush when he described his father's faith. "Dad was also a deeply, unabashedly religious man. But he never made the fatal mistake of so many politicians: wearing his faith on his sleeve to gain political advantage. True, after he was shot and nearly killed early in his presidency, he came to believe that God had spared him in order that he might do good. But he accepted that as a responsibility, not a mandate. And there is a profound difference."

In interviews after his eulogy, Reagan acted shocked that anyone would have assumed he was speaking of President George W. Bush. His coy and disingenuous public demeanor has become a trademark of his public appearances.

Ron Reagan's enthusiasm for the destruction of human embryos in the name of science is largely explained by his larger worldview. Ron Reagan is an avowed atheist, a fact he confirmed in a June 23, 2004 interview with CNN's Larry King. When asked if he would run for elected office in the future, Reagan responded: "No, I'm not really cut out to be a politician. You know that I sometimes don't know when to shut up. That could be a drawback. I'm an atheist. So there you go right there. I can't be elected to anything because polls all say that people won't elect an atheist."

The younger Reagan's atheism caught the attention of several in the media. Veteran religion reporter Gustav Niebuhr, writing for beliefnet.com, suggested that Reagan's address to the Democrats was history in the making. "Does his prime-time appearance at a national political event represent a political breakthrough for non-believers?" Niebuhr asked.

While Gustav Niebuhr was asking his question, Paul Kurtz, chairman of the Council for Secular Humanism, was ready with an answer. He declared Reagan's appearance before the Democrats as "a breath of fresh air," acknowledging that it was still a "very minor opening" for atheists. While the political impact of Ron Reagan's atheism may be debated, the impact of his worldview on his own understanding of human life and human dignity is readily apparent. As an atheist, he must believe that human life is a cosmic accident of one sort or another. Human life has no inherent dignity, for he believes in no Creator in whose image human beings are made.

Consistent with his secular worldview, Ron Reagan also serves as an advocate for homosexuality. During his years in

ballet, rumors of Reagan's own sexuality swirled around the press corps. In an interview published in the August 31, 2004 edition of *The Advocate*, Reagan claims that speculation about his sexuality has "never bothered me." Nevertheless, he denied rumors of homosexuality, pointing to the fact that he's been married to his wife for twenty-three years. "Pretty good for a gay guy," Reagan laughed as he responded to the reporter.

Though he denies political ambitions, Ron Reagan clearly intends to exert a political influence. His opposition to President George W. Bush is both transparent and vitriolic. In the September 2004 edition of *Esquire* magazine, he offers "the case against George W. Bush." Though Reagan offers a host of complaints against the President, his most bitter comments are reserved for the President's voting base. "That base also encompasses a healthy share of anti-choice zealots, homophobic bigots, and assorted purveyors of junk science." Reagan went on to make his case against the President. "Bush has tossed bones to all of them—'partial birth' abortion legislation, the promise of a constitutional amendment banning marriage between homosexuals, federal roadblocks to embryonic-stem-cell research, even comments suggesting presidential doubts about Darwinian evolution."

How could a son stand at such odds with his father's deepest convictions and political principles? This is a question that should haunt not only political analysts, but all fathers.

Ron Reagan once told reporter Lou Cannon, "You know, there is something that [Dad] holds back. You get just so far, and then the curtain drops, and you don't go any farther."

Tragically, Ron Reagan rejected the legacy of his own father and failed to embrace his father's core convictions. The full reasons for this would be known only by this particular father and son, if at all. Nevertheless, while Ron Reagan enjoys his fifteen minutes of fame, those of us who are fathers should pay special attention to this tragedy. Hearing Ron Reagan speak, we become witnesses to a strange postmodern parable for our times.

