

Sightings 6/26/06

Blogs for Better or Worse

-- Martin E. Marty

The text for our morning meditation is by Rick Morrissey: "One of the best and worst things that has happened to our society is the blog -- best because everyone can have his say, not just us so-called experts; worst because everyone can say anything with almost no accountability" (*Chicago Tribune*, June 23). The same was true of pre-weblog use of the web, and before that, though in different ways, of TV, radio, and the telephone. A religious hoper could say that blogging is another manifestation of the human pick-up on God's Creation. A realist could say with Paul Tillich that it illustrates how "the demonic pervades the structures of existence." Time for a segue to the world of "public religion," our business.

Talk to anyone in the know, including bloggers, about Presbyterians deciding, for now, not to discuss possible divestment, etc. (you know all about that); or about Episcopalians deciding to let policies regarding gays go unresolved for now (you know all about that, too); or Southern Baptists electing an unheralded candidate to the presidency (you might know about that), and you will hear about how blogs influenced convention voters, the ethos of constituencies, and press coverage.

Safely one generation (which means about two and a half years) behind on each unfolding of new technology, I had to do some research via print media, my natural home, and the web itself. The latter took me to any number of formal comments about blogs, and to blogs about blogs. Several things come to mind at once. First, blogs are democratic, since geniuses and self-advertised idiots have equal access. Second, they can in rare instances be creative, since the human imagination, unrestrained especially when it belongs to an anonymous person, can come up with ingenious notions. Third, they can represent the worst kind of populism, allowing for every prejudice and idiocy to go unmonitored and criticized only by other bloggers. Cruise the web and you will find evidences abundant.

Last Thursday I spoke to the American Theological Library Association at its annual meeting. Several people who approached me after the talk mused about how the blog will change denominations and other religious structures. No one yet knows how or how much. They agree that it'll be somewhat harder for backroom dealers to deal, power-brokers to go for broke, and establishments to keep reestablishing their power, limited as that is in denominations these days. I was most impressed by the coverage by Sam Hodges in the *Dallas Morning News* (on June 10, for example), where headlines have included "Blogs Sway Baptist Debates" and "Southern Baptist Convention Presidency Is Up for Grabs," as it had not been for many years. The two headlines are connected. Blogs built up a power base for Frank Page, until recently the darkest of horses, and he won the race by several lengths.

Hodges, who covered the results of the election in the *Morning News*, cited the blog influence, quoting Quentin Schultze, respected Calvin College observer, analyst, reporter, and theoretician of how media affect religion. Let me close with a word from him: "The SBC has become the first denomination to shift institutional politics significantly from letter-writing, phone calls and

conventions to the public Internet. Those who hold denominational power have got to be concerned." For better and/or for worse.

Resources:

For Sam Hodges's June 10 article on blogs and the Southern Baptist convention, as well as his contact information, please visit:

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/DN-baptistmain_10rel.ART0.State.Edition1.3d9d395.html.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.