

Sightings 10/2/06

Naming Evil
-- Martin E. Marty

Thirty-eight times in a four-page editorial for James Dobson's and Focus on the Family's *Citizen* magazine, radio talk show host Dennis Prager capitalizes and condemns the "Left," pushing everyone he does not like into a homogenized lump. His complaint: The capitalized-Left is unable and unwilling to oppose or confront evil in the form of bullies. Illustration one: The capitalized-Left lump was made up of people who could not bring themselves to call Stalin and the Soviet Union evil. Illustration two: Ditto for not calling terrorists and the Islamic radical fringe evil.

Mr. Prager gives four choices: "Join the bully fighter; don't join but at least admire the bully fighter; deem oneself inadequate for not joining the bully fighter; or denounce the bully fighter as the aggressor. The latter is the dominant leftist attitude." One wishes Focus on the Family would focus on the family instead of giving a platform to someone who voices such cosmic, sweeping, and inclusive generalizations about the Left that he has created. Mr. Prager does recognize that the capitalized-Left often finds certain things evil -- such as avoidable poverty, perpetrated inequality, etc. -- but they are not the evils of his choice. Why, according to Mr. Prager in the *Citizen*, is his capitalized-homogeneous-Left lump unable and unwilling to "label and confront evil"? Because they are chicken; they stand back for psychological reasons: "fear of confrontation, fear of fighting, fear of dying, loathing of authority figures whether parental or divine." Even if they weren't chicken, they would not label bullies evil and take them on, for ideological reasons. Prager shoves them into a Marxist camp with words like "bourgeoisie and proletariat," which dictionaries of usage today would label "obs. rare."

When confronted by charges like Mr. Prager's, I ask the macho self-named bully fighters exactly what suffering or inconvenience they have experienced during the current Iraq war (which is on Prager's mind) -- other than showing "willingness to die" at the hands of airport screeners. No other dying is evident in the form of a draft, rationing, restraint, or economic setbacks. Bully fighting comes cheap; that's why it is hard to "join" or "at least admire the bully fighter."

The lowest blow comes when Mr. Prager says the capitalized-Left will not speak of good and evil "because it smacks of traditional Judeo-Christian values," which the Left loathes or redefines. His Left is all secular. Many people who hold the positions he loathes and redefines, however, are in "Judeo-Christian" camps. Suppose the bully fighter would ask why Christians might have trouble naming evil and hating the bully. Perhaps they have read Matthew 5:38-48 in the Sermon on the Mount, or Romans 12:9 ("hate what is evil") and 14 -- the command "bless, do not curse" the persecuting bullies. Try Romans 12:9-21 as a lump.

Of course, those who have been to seminary -- I'm among them -- know that Jesus and Paul did not really mean any of this, or that their ethos and commands relate only to intimate, person-to-person relations and not to large social forces or nations. We have learned to wriggle. Prager has it wrong. We as "bully fighters" can "hate what is evil" in Afghanistan, al Qaeda, etc., and defend our nation and values -- and still not demonize or position ourselves as simply "good"

over against others' manifest evil doings. End of sermon.

References:

Dennis Prager's article "Left Behind" appears in the September 2006 issue of *Citizen* and may be found at: <http://www.family.org/cforum/citizenmag/coverstory/a0041657.cfm>.

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