

by Joseph Sobran

Media Bias Revisited

Complaints about “media bias” usually boil down to uninteresting charges that the news media tilt their reportage in favor of one party—usually, but not always, the Democrats. So say the Republicans, with some justice, but put this way the indictment is somewhat superficial. Conservatives more keenly accuse those media of being “liberal”—that is, principled enough to prefer a liberal Republican candidate to a notably corrupt Democrat.

I have studied the news media for many years, from afar and from within, and I know that most journalists do try to be impartial. When they fail, the failure is usually unconscious. The code of political neutrality survives its frequent minor violations.

“The style of your own time is always invisible,” the critic Hugh Kenner used to say, citing the true story of a statue, a supposed Etruscan horse that turned out to be a forgery. How was it detected? The 19th-century forger had endowed it with every ancient Etruscan mannerism he could see, Kenner explained, but also with every 19th-century mannerism he (and his contemporaries) couldn’t see. Finally, in the mid-20th century, its 19th-century style gradually “rose to visibility,” and a keen critical eye urged carbon dating, which confirmed suspicions of its true age.

So what unconscious prejudices of our time are passing largely unnoticed in the media? We can spot at least a few. One of the most striking was displayed in the media frenzy earlier this year over the messianic and “inspirational” candidacy of Barack Obama.

Not all such prejudices are political; the deepest one is perhaps materialism, a view that denies any supernatural authority and supports sexual license. The materialistic version of the theory of evolution enjoys a virtually dogmatic status in the news media, which are quick to trumpet any discovery that seems to confirm it.

I was impressed by one detail in the American coverage of the Olympics in China, which was by no means uncritical. The trouble was that the criticism was limited to the Chinese government’s “crackdown on dissent”—deplorable, to be sure, but trivial when compared with its denial of a far more basic freedom: the freedom of the family. Beijing’s monstrous conduct in this area is blandly referred to as its “one-child policy.”

Policy! You might expect those who call abortion “freedom of choice” to be horrified by forced late-term abortions, but this is not the case. Most abortion advocates say nothing about it; others actually defend the “policy,” explaining that, after all, China has a “population problem.” I would prefer to suggest that the Chinese population has a “government problem,” namely tyranny, but our media don’t seem to see it that way.

This old world has always abounded in tyrannies of various sorts, but very few of them have ever thought to restrict the natural right to have children and large families. That area of privacy, at least, has usually gone undisturbed even by otherwise aggressive despotisms.

The most significant thing about this fact is that our news media don’t find it shocking. The phrase “reproductive freedom” has become a dishonest euphemism for legalizing feticide, but this most flagrant outrage gets very little mention. Would Western secularist liberals, who evince indignation far more about restrictions on political dissent than about grisly forced late-term abortions, object very strongly if our putatively democratic regimes adopted similar “policies”?

Our rulers—both actual and would-be—recognize no principled limits on the power of the state. As C.S. Lewis put it, it’s no use telling them to mind their own business, for our whole lives



are their business. Consider what is now called “sex education,” for example: Professedly neutral, it actually encourages children to sin—or in the preferred locution, to be “sexually active”—and to speak the devil’s language, which is “value-free” and “non-judgmental.”

Notice how readily the supposedly neutral news media pick up the lingo of the “progressive” side in these moral controversies: *gay*, *choice*, *women’s* (meaning “feminists”), and all the rest. To be “progressive” means to reject Christian standards of sexual morality. (If termites could talk, they would no doubt call what they are doing to the house progress.)

The sexual revolution has taken place not so much in the homosexual bathhouses of San Francisco and Manhattan as in the marriage bed. That is where contraception, abhorred as immoral and revolting by nearly all professed Christians before 1931, is now accepted as normal for married couples. Few Protestants see anything wrong with it; and even most Catholic priests are now too timid to condemn it in the pulpit. (One of the few who did dare to preach against it in my own staid Northern Virginia parish told me he later found his car vandalized. This happened more than two decades ago!)

Contraception, a taboo topic on television within living memory, has achieved such full respectability that today contraceptive products are freely advertised on prime time. Hardly anyone notices anymore. The style of your own time is always invisible.



Sola Scriptura: The Case for the Crusades

by Hugh Barbour, O.Praem.

*“Woe to the Assyrian, he is the rod and the staff of my anger,
and my indignation is in their hands. I will send him to a deceitful nation . . .”*

—Isaiah 10:5-6, Douay-Rheims

Confronted by the rise of insurgent Islam and the political reality of *jihad*, many Christians, eager to formulate a response, have turned to the Crusades. Can the rationale for the Crusades be transferred to, or imposed on, the “War on Terror”?

In order to understand the theological case for the Crusades, we must carefully attend to the notion of theological argumentation that obtained in the Middle Ages, setting aside current styles. The perspective of the historian is necessarily ruled out, even if he may discover or collate or provide the texts from which the theological *rationes* are to be culled by the theologian. An approach that makes use of *a posteriori* evidence of what is often abusively called “popular piety” or “ideology” or “propaganda”—or, if we are of a more traditional bent, of a certain positivistic romanticism about Europe and the Christian Faith—will not yield an understanding of what for its preachers was an enterprise logically deducible from the *scientia Dei et beatorum*, “the knowledge of God and the blessed,” the authentic expression of which is to be found on the sacred page of Holy Writ.

Theology is both a speculative and a practical science. It is predominantly speculative, since it regards truths that are immutable, metaphysical, and supernatural, but it is also practical, since theology treats as well the means of arriving at the permanent possession of the immutable things contemplated. In his lessons on the First Book of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that if theology were merely speculative it would concern only the present, but since it also considers the practical way to attain happiness, it concerns the future as well—the resolutions to be made and the actions to be undertaken in order for wayfarers to become possessors of everlasting bliss.

A certain kind of contemporary “theology” now in decline has, under the aegis of Heidegger, seen theology as a work of historical interpretation, set on God as the “ultimate future” of man. There is no place for the sort of initiative that seeks to place human society under the sway of an objective revelation, which is always present and immutable, atemporal and transcendent. Instead, it speaks

only to the men of this time of the things of this time. It has no place for crusades, but it also has no place for universal creeds or catechisms, as Karl Rahner makes clear in his vespéral résumé of his own thought, *Foundations of Christian Faith*.

The “ultimate future” of medieval theology, on the other hand, is always an absolute and realized present; it is the historical future that is concretely relative, determined simply by whether or not men take up the means given them by God to arrive at the perfection and bliss of the heavenly society already established with the creation of the angels.

How do men determine what these means are? By examining the authoritative text of the Bible. We who are heirs of the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation can scarcely appreciate, albeit perhaps for different reasons depending on our allegiance to the one or the other, the serene conviction of the medieval Catholic theologian, and in the first place of Saint Thomas, that all theological reasoning, to the extent that its conclusions are certain and undoubted, must be resolved to the first principles of this queen of the sciences—namely, to the words of Sacred Scripture. In the same *lectura romana* on the *Sentences* cited above, Saint Thomas answers the question whether the writings of the saints (of the Fathers most especially) may be used in theological reasoning. His answer is a very qualified *sic*, “yes,” coming close to a formal *non*, “no”:

In the case of theology, in the place of the principles which are self-evident there are the rules and articles of faith which are handed down (*traduntur*) in the canonical scriptures, and therefore the arguments which proceed from them take the place of demonstration. The arguments of the saints on the other hand are like probable reasonings, whence it is permitted to use them, not as establishing a necessary argument, but as providing a certain probability. Only those things which pertain to the rule of faith handed down in the canonical scripture impose the necessity in matters of faith.

We may know of the example of the saints, we may know the historical progress of the Crusades, but do we know

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