

GLENN TINDER

Questions: What do you make of Tinder's question and answer? What are the implications of such an argument for a Catholic university? Can we educate well without God? Do you think Tinder is correct that we are now living on the moral savings of Judeo/Christian culture accumulated over the centuries and that this moral capital is no longer being replenished? If not, what moral resources does our culture depend upon?

INTRODUCTION TO GLENN TINDER

Glenn Tinder is professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. He is the author of several books, including *Community: Reflections on a Tragic Ideal* (1980), and *Against Fate: An Essay on Personal Dignity* (1981). This essay appears in *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (1989).

Glenn Tinder's central thesis—addressing both Christians and non-Christians, liberals and conservatives—is that Christianity requires not a specific political program, but a particular political posture. This posture, or prophetic stance, as Tinder calls it, enables individuals to enter into society and undertake programs of political and social action, judging ideals with both critical detachment and responsible attentiveness.

For him Christianity prescribes relationships that are at odds with a secular world order, which inevitably involves elements of domination and coercion. He asserts that Christianity requires political responsibility and a reformist attitude toward the social order.

CAN WE BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD? ON THE POLITICAL MEANING OF CHRISTIANITY GLENN TINDER¹

We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality, construing it as a relationship to God without

¹ Glenn Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?" *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1989): 68-72, 76+. Used with permission.

implications for one's relationship to the surrounding world. The God of Christian faith (I shall focus on Christianity although the God of the New Testament is also the God of the Old Testament) created the world and is deeply engaged in the affairs of the world. The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world—that we can practice a spirituality that is not political—is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God.

And if spirituality is properly political, the converse also is true, however distant it may be from prevailing assumptions: politics is properly spiritual. The spirituality of politics was affirmed by

Plato at the very beginnings of Western political philosophy and was a commonplace of medieval political thought. Only in modern times has it come to be taken for granted that politics is entirely secular. The inevitable result is the demoralization of politics. Politics loses its moral structure and purpose, and turns into an affair of group interest and personal ambition. Government comes to the aid of only the well organized and influential, and it is limited only where it is checked by countervailing forces. Politics ceases to be understood as a pre-eminently human activity and is left to those who find it profitable, pleasurable, or in some other way useful to themselves. Political action thus comes to be carried out purely for the sake of power and privilege.

It will be my purpose in this essay to try to connect the severed realms of the spiritual and the political. In view of the fervent secularism of many Americans today, some will assume this to be the opening salvo of a fundamentalist attack on "pluralism." Ironically, as I will argue, many of the undoubted virtues of pluralism—respect for the individual and a belief in the essential equality of all human beings, to cite just two—have strong roots in the union of the spiritual and the political achieved in the vision of Christianity. The question that secularists have to answer is whether these values can survive without these particular roots. In short, can we be good without God? Can we affirm the dignity and equality of individual persons—values we ordinarily regard as secular—without giving them transcendental backing? Today these values are honored more in the breach than in the observance; Manhattan Island alone, with its extremes of sybaritic wealth on the one hand and Calcuttan poverty on the other, is testimony to how little equality really counts for in contemporary America. To renew these indispensable values, I shall argue, we must rediscover their primal spiritual grounds.

Many will disagree with my argument, and I cannot pretend there are no respectable reasons for doing so. Some may disagree, however, because of misunderstandings. A few words at the outset may help to prevent this. First, although I dwell on Christianity I do not mean thus to slight Judaism or its contribution to Western values. It is arguable that every major value affirmed in Christianity originated with the ancient Hebrews. Jewish sensitivities on this matter are understandable. Christians sometimes speak as though unaware of the elemental facts that Jesus was a Jew, that he died before even the earliest parts of the New Testament were written, and that his scriptural matrix was not Paul's Letter to the Romans or the Gospel of John but the Old Testament. Christianity diverged from Judaism in answering one question: Who was Jesus? For Christians, he was the anticipated Messiah, whereas for traditional Jews (Paul and the first Christians were of