

June 20, 2010

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When I was a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary forty years ago, a very gracious professor of mine, C. Penrose St. Amant, rendered me a special kindness that has lingered in my soul ever since: He introduced me to the thought of Frederick Jackson Turner, especially in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," a lecture delivered in Chicago in 1893.

Turner's "frontier thesis" claimed that certain distinguishing features of the American spirit---including self-reliance, the capacity for creative adaptation, aggressive independence of mind, and innovative expressions of democracy---are best explained as the results of the ongoing environmental challenge of America's progressive frontier line. One of my favorite books of American History, Ray Allen Billington's *Westward Expansion*, uses Turner's thesis to examine the political history of our nation from its founding to the end of the 19th century.

My own engagement with this subject, though certainly political, may be more properly described as "moral," perhaps even "theological": I am interested in the Western frontier as the active setting where Bible-reading citizens came to grips with the moral dilemma of slavery.

It was recognized at the time---on both sides of the dilemma---that slavery's very survival depended on its expansion into the new territories opened up by the Louisiana Purchase at the beginning of the century. *De facto*, then, the "frontier" of this moral problem was the Mississippi Valley, especially the State of Missouri. This has long been the focus of my own preoccupation with Turner's thesis.

This past week my mind has been very full of the moral dilemma of the Mississippi Valley frontier, as I took by eldest grandson on a little trip to study Lincoln down in Springfield and Twain over in Hannibal, Missouri. It was my hope to fix these two figures---Lincoln and Twain---very deeply in the soul and mind of this ten-year-old lad I love and care about. He made this trip after fulfilling a substantial reading assignment to prepare him for the experience.

Treading in the steps of these two giants (and cruising on The Father of Waters), we spent long hours talking about the subject I mentioned above, though we did branch off, from time to time, to reflect together on other appropriate themes---like the Punic Wars.

I have no idea how deeply---from this initial trip---the likes of Lincoln and Twain may infiltrate and refine the soul of my grandson, but naturally my hopes are high. In any case, these two men best represent, I believe, the correct side of the frontier crisis concentrated in the Mississippi Valley during the first half of the 19th century. Both of them born during those decades, they became the frontier spokesmen for what I think of as "the American spirit."

Let me confess that I borrow this last expression from the thematic title of the spring issue of *The Claremont Review of Books*, where it is contrasted to the term "elite culture." Much of this issue of the CRB (and I read every last word of it) is taken up with the growing conflict between traditional American common sense and the Progressive Movement that has, in recent decades, seized control of much of our culture, including education, publishing, social services, entertainment, and religion.

Everywhere are signs that the Progressive Movement may suffer a serious political setback at the polls this fall, at the hand of citizens outraged by the recent reorganization of health care and terrified at the menacing prospect of national bankruptcy.

Even---and, perhaps, especially---if this happens, the crisis will not disappear, because the real problem is cultural, and a deep cultural problem is rarely fixed by merely political solutions. What is truly required, I believe, is a fresh renewal of "the American Mind." This expression comes from Jefferson, the man mainly responsible for providing this country with a very large frontier on which to shape its destiny.

In what are perhaps the best pages in the aforementioned issue of the CBR, Wilfred M. McClay argues that the history and literature of the American frontier still provide our most promising source of cultural renewal. I completely agree with him, let me say, but neither of us discounts the price: The frontier was a tough place, and lots of people perished there.

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