

Naïveté: The Tragic Beheading of Nicholas Berg

by Art Katz

Art Katz's sermon explores the tragic consequences of naïveté and idealism through the story of Nicholas Berg and critiques the oversimplified views of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq.

Scripture: Psalm 146:3-4, Proverbs 14:12, Isaiah 5:20, Jeremiah 17:9, Matthew 10:16, John 16:33, Romans 3:23, 1 Corinthians 1:25, Ephesians 6:12, 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Topics: "Human Nature", "Naïveté"

Description

Art Katz reflects on the tragic fate of Nicholas Berg, emphasizing how his naïveté and idealism led him into a perilous situation in Iraq. Katz critiques Berg's belief in the inherent goodness of people and the dangers of underestimating the complexities of human nature and geopolitical realities. He draws parallels between Berg's fate and broader societal misconceptions, including the misguided optimism of political leaders like President Bush regarding democracy in the Middle East. Katz warns that such idealism, detached from the truth of human sinfulness and the realities of the world, can lead to devastating consequences. He calls for a return to the understanding of God's truth to navigate the complexities of life and conflict.

Transcript

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There is something especially sad in this latest of melancholy episodes coming out of the war in Iraq in a self-appointed man, "traveling alone, without a translator or a bodyguard, in a lawless land whose language he barely understood." [This and all quotes are from the N.Y. Times article, May 26, 2004].

The American authorities that had detained him concluded that he was a "freelancing businessman with a high tolerance for risk, whose naïveté and idealism blinded him to Iraq's treacherous corners" (my emphasis here and in italicized portions throughout). The FBI is quoted as saying "He was in the wrong place at the wrong time." A close friend commented "I'm sure that through the entire ordeal he felt no fear. I doubt that he thought they would hurt him. He really believed in the goodness of people. That if they took

the time, they'd like him." Berg had formed a company in 2002 which he called Prometheus Methods Tower Service using as a motto "Man is more than a fire tamed."

In all this is the sketch of the essential humanist who I suspect saw himself as a Promethean figure [Prometheus - Greek mythology demigod, one of the Titans who stole fire by trickery from heaven (Zeus) and returned it to the earth] who could go 'where angels fear to tread' confident in his human charm to bridge all ancient enmities and hostilities, and to do good where institutions, governments and armies failed. Persuaded of his own essential goodness, he trusted in a comparable quality in all men. A foreman in his company commented, "He didn't do too well at recognizing human danger because he never thought anybody was going to hurt him." In Iraq he met an Iraqi businessman who had lived for twenty years in Philadelphia, and that "the two planned to create a company called Babylon Towers."

We are told that "his feelings were heavily influenced by his Judaism and his moral beliefs...[He] became increasingly religious after college, studying the Torah and learning to keep kosher...being particularly attracted to the Hebrew concept of tikkun olam-healing the world through social action." Here again, however well meaning such intention, it both minimizes the evil that is in the world and elevates the hope in the capacity of man to rectify what his own nature has produced. It is another expression of idealism predicated upon man, and indeed issues out of his own humanity. As the scriptures warn us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is death" (Proverbs 14:12). Our own dear Jewish brother's demise is such a fulfillment.

President Bush might be considered an expression of the same. The hope of establishing democracy in Iraq as a model for the Middle East, however much it be desired, fails to consider the Islam whose very nature is intrinsically opposed to it. The concept that our enemy are the 'terrorists' who can be rooted out and defeated fails to consider the whole Islamic matrix antithetical to the West and all western values, and prefers religious subjugation and autocratic rule. There seems an enjoyment in the brandishing of arms and their employment, the decapitation of their captives and the dismemberment of their victims! A more temperate columnist, David Brooks, in a NY Times article following Bush's address to the nation over the situation in Iraq, writes:

"It's a huge gamble to think that the answer to chaos is liberty. But it is fitting that during the gravest crisis of his presidency, President Bush reverted to his most fundamental political belief...the sentiment[s] embodied in the Declaration of Independence, that our Creator has endowed all human beings with the right to liberty, and the ability to function as democratic citizens. He said last night with absolute confidence that the Iraqis are democrats at heart. Bush is betting his presidency, and the near-term future of this nation, on that central American creed. It's an epic gamble. Because let's face it, we don't know whether all people really do want to live in freedom. We don't know if Iraqis have any notion of what democratic citizenship really means. We don't know whether they hear words like freedom, liberty and pluralism as deadly insults to the way of life they hold dear. We don't know who our enemies are. Are they the small minority of Baathists and Jihadists, or is there a little bit of Moktada al-Sadr in every Iraqi's breast?"

In the same issue (May 26, 2004), in a letter to the editors, a correspondent writes: "This naïve misunderstanding of the president-his incessant tendency for oversimplification, his division of the world into good and evil-is what impelled him to invade Iraq in the first place. This is not patriotism; this is disaster." Another notes, "his suggestion that we replace it [Abu Ghraib prison where the scandalous mistreatment took place] with a new state-of-the-art, American-financed prison reflects his administration's

deep and persistent misconstruing of the mind-set of the Iraqi people...As long as Mr. Bush continues in this fatal misunderstanding of the psychological barriers we need to overcome in Iraq, this "plan"...will come to naught." Another writer tersely concludes, "What is 'epic' about this administration except its remove from reality."

In essence, what cost an individual his head and life, a naïve idealism totally unrelated to the historic realities of the Arab-Islamic world, may corporately cost the USA the same. If we continue to reject the truth of God and of man as revealed in Scripture, and in God crucified, our every consideration is warped and awry. Reality is everything as God sees it and as He has been pleased to express and reveal it. May we take pause to reflect on what our rejection has cost us, and seek Him who waits to be sought and who alone is the Prince of Peace.

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