

Bless You: Reflections on Benevolence and Benedictions

by Theodore Plantinga

Brian Mulroney is an enigma in Canadian political history. In 1984, leading the Progressive Conservative Party, he won a majority of such proportions as had been matched by no Conservative predecessor. In 1988, despite considerable unpopularity during his first term in office, he won another election and returned to Parliament with a clear majority and another full mandate as Prime Minister. During his second term his government became even more unpopular, and he himself led the unpopularity parade. It was clear to all that the Conservatives would not be re-elected when the next election came -- not even if Mulroney himself stepped down as Prime Minister and party leader. He did step down and was succeeded by Kim Campbell. And then the Conservatives were massacred at the polls. In 1984 they had won 211 seats. In 1993 they went down to two seats.

Was it Campbell's fault? Most observers do not think so. The finger gets pointed at Mulroney, whom virtually everyone had come to detest. But why? What was wrong with him? Didn't he mean well? Wasn't he trying to do his best for Canada, as he understood it? Perhaps his governing style was a bit dictatorial and unparliamentary, but wasn't his high-handedness a *benevolent* despotism?

One of Mulroney's lieutenants wrote a very entertaining book about him which was published back in 1987, during Mulroney's first term. This book, by Michel Gratton, who functioned for a while as the Prime Minister's press secretary, is entitled *So, What Are the Boys Saying? A Candid Look at Brian Mulroney in Power*. Mulroney and his political associates were not happy with the idea of such a book; they were distressed at the revelations it would probably contain. Because of their response to the book-in-genesis, Gratton was able to gather material for a follow-up book in which the reception of the

original book could be discussed: *Still the Boss: A Candid Look at Brian Mulroney* (1990).

Mulroney may have found Gratton's writings mean-spirited; perhaps he interpreted them as a manifestation of disloyalty. A more objective reader, however, will sense the genuine affection for "the Boss" coming through in the book. Yet at one point Gratton effectively puts his finger on an interesting dimension of the Mulroney puzzle. He tells us that *Mulroney meant well*, and in that respect was one of us. Perhaps this was the reason we clasped him to our bosom and elected him with a majority twice in a row.

Gratton writes: "Did Mulroney have any overall plan in mind? I never knew, and I don't know of anyone else who knew, either. At base, he appeared to be in power to be in power. He meant well, no one could deny that, but what did he mean? No one could explain that." [NOTE 1]

Could we accuse Mulroney (assuming that Gratton's testimony is to be accepted at face value) of an "ignorant benevolence"? The idea would then be that one need have little or no knowledge of a situation when assuming a posture of benevolence toward it. Isn't this what liberals are sometimes accused of, when their critics complain that they love "humanity" but can't stand people? Isn't the idea that the liberal mentality is easier to maintain when you stay away from specifics and actual flesh-and-blood people?

Anatole Broyard would sure be suspicious of liberals and their brand of benevolence. Broyard once wrote: "I don't trust anyone who tells me that he loves me when he doesn't even know me." [NOTE 2] In Broyard's statement the key term is "love" rather than "benevolence," but the same basic question arises, namely, whether such sentiments as benevolence and love presuppose specific knowledge.

I suggest that Broyard's complaint should be taken seriously as an implicit criticism of the Christian ethos. When Christians are enjoined to love their neighbors (all of them, presumably), are they then obliged to gather knowledge of those same neighbors so that their love will avoid any taint of "ignorant benevolence"?

I have often pondered this question in relation to my own faltering efforts to live a Christian life. For fear of being accused of "ignorant benevolence," I have not freely assured people whom I don't know that I love them. But where I find myself relating regularly to certain people, such as the students receiving instruction from me during a given term, I do make a concerted effort to both

gather and retain information about them. In doing so, I hope to make my interest in their welfare and the love I try to show in my conduct toward them seem genuine.

But Christians are not only in the business of loving others; we also "bless" people. Sometimes we give our own blessing, as when parents wholeheartedly consent to a marriage involving one of their children. But in many cases it is God's blessing that we wish to invoke.

There is a liturgical term for such expressions of good will: "benediction." Etymology reveals that the term means "good speaking." In effect, to pronounce a benediction over people (as a pastor does at the end of a Reformed worship service) is to wish them well and perhaps also to express the conviction that God has good in store for them.

When we speak words of benediction or express the hope that God will bless them, we are not claiming that we somehow control the Lord of heaven and earth or give him orders. The idea is usually either one of two things. First, we may say, when talking to a certain person, that we approve of what he is doing, and then add that God will surely bless it. Generally, we use a subjunctive, so as not to appear presumptuous. When taking leave of a former student of mine who is now engaged full-time in Christian ministry, I may say (or write in a Christmas card), "May God continue to bless your ministry."

Secondly, we may say that we will pray for the person in question by asking God to bless his work. But when we speak freely of God's blessing, a question might arise in our mind: is all work "blessable"? Probably not. By couching our benevolence in the mode of prayer, we are hedging our bets, as it were. We are expressing personal approval of the work while still recognizing that our judgment may somehow be in error. It may be that Almighty God, knowing that there is something rotten and unacceptable at the core of the enterprise for which we promised to invoke divine approval and blessing, will withhold his blessing and instead bring that work into judgment. In such a case, we have exercised an "ignorant benevolence" and left it to God to overrule us if that proved necessary.

It seems to me that much Christian benevolence and many Christian benedictions have such openness built into them. In other words, we leave it to God to determine just what specific form blessing ought to take. In fact, we could pursue the point further and claim that in any situation of genuine complexity, we simply cannot be expected to know whether divine favor ought to be extended. We can then be persons of good will, like Brian Mulroney, who

always meant well, and freely express our benevolence, without really knowing much about the situation over which we feel impelled to pronounce a benediction.

If we are advocates of ignorant benevolence, we could even argue that the will of God for a particular situation is too complicated for us to be able to think things through to the point of figuring out and stating what it is that God ought to do by way of blessing such-and-such an enterprise. In that case, our ignorant benevolence would become an "agnostic benevolence." Is there room for such a thing in the Christian life?

A small terminological note is in order here. In ordinary parlance, an agnostic is not just someone who says he doesn't know whether there is a God but someone who says he *cannot* know whether God exists. Presumably, the rest of us *cannot* know either. Strictly speaking, the term "agnostic" is an adjective; one can be agnostic in relation to all sorts of matters -- not just God's existence.

In the phrase "agnostic benevolence," I am presupposing God's existence but claiming that we cannot know in any specific way what it would mean for God to bless this or that enterprise. God's hidden will is so complex and so far beyond human understanding that we can have no specific knowledge of it. Here, of course, I am presupposing the familiar distinction between God's revealed will for our lives (taught to us in the Bible) and his hidden will, which includes such matters as the time of Christ's return and the end of the world (see Mark 13:32).

If "agnostic benevolence" is in order, at least some of the time, there are interesting implications for prayer. Larry Dossey helps us understand the issue at hand in his book *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*. In this book he discusses research on the effectiveness of prayer that was undertaken by an Oregon organization called Spindrift. This organization makes an interesting distinction between *directed* and *nondirected* prayer. Dossey explains: "Practitioners of directed prayer have a specific goal, image, or outcome in mind. ... They may be praying for the cancer to be cured, the heart attack to resolve itself, or the pain to go away. Nondirected prayer, in contrast, is an open-ended approach in which no specific outcome is held in the mind. In nondirected prayer the practitioner does not attempt to `tell the universe what to do.'" [NOTE 3]

Although Dossey does not use the term "agnostic" in this context, the issue of agnostic benevolence does come up in his discussion. He raises the question of "knowing what to pray for." Some people think the answer to this question is

quite simple; we should pray for God's will to be done. Others urge greater specificity. In requesting us to "pray for" such-and-such a cause or organization or project, they spell it out: "Please ask God to bring about the following" Then come the specifics, sometimes in remarkable detail.

When I consider such prayer requests, it sometimes occurs to me that what is being advocated might well be the wrong course of action or the wrong result. Or it might be something that seems helpful in the short run but would be harmful in the long run. In such a case we might conclude that the person making the prayer request means well, just as Brian Mulroney means well, but is nevertheless trying to push things in what seems to be the wrong direction.

Could one not request prayer without being so specific about what ought to happen, without advising God as to the best remedy? Of course: to do so would be to request what the Spindrift research calls "nondirected prayer," which it generally finds to be more effective than "directed prayer."

Dossey observes: "The Spindrift experiments have important implications for those situations in which we simply do not know what to pray for. Suppose we want to control our physiology in a way that promotes healing of a particular problem. Should we image or pray for an increase or decrease of blood flow to a specific organ? For an increase or decrease in a particular type of blood cell? For a rise or fall in the blood concentration of a particular chemical? These questions can be bewildering to specialists, let alone laypeople. The Spindrift experiments are consoling on this point. They suggest that it isn't always necessary to know how the body ought to behave for healing to occur. One need only pray for 'what's best' -- the 'Thy will be done' approach." [NOTE 4]

Dossey relates the two types of prayer to the difference between introversion and extroversion as personality types. He relates the issue to his own life and explains: "As an incurable introvert, I have recoiled all my life at being told by extroverts how to pray." [NOTE 5] He explains that introverts are more comfortable with "nondirected" prayer. Yet he affirms that both personality types are valid, and so are both types of prayer. [NOTE 6]

Like Dossey, I am an introvert by nature and am drawn to "nondirective" prayer. My Calvinist training also comes into the picture: Calvinists are strong believers in the sovereignty of God and believe that part of the purpose of prayer is to help us align ourselves with God's will.

On the other hand, I, too, would like to be thought of as "meaning well," although I am not eager to be linked with the much-maligned Brian Mulroney. I

want to be able to express my benevolence and pronounce a heartfelt benediction over someone. Yet I would like it to be understood that in doing so, I am not insisting that my projected understanding of what a good outcome must be is the only acceptable outcome. Rather, I believe that in such situations God may surprise all of us in the way he responds to our prayers and statements of benevolence as he brings good into situations that are laced with sorrow and disappointment. The familiar words of Romans 8:28 are worth pondering here: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

It is not my intention to glorify ignorance or to recommend an approach to the Christian life that would leave some of us appearing to be insensitive to the hurts and needs of others. Quite the contrary. Still, the main point I wish to make in this essay is that although I seek knowledge and try to keep informed regarding many causes and persons dear to me, I accept the validity of agnostic benevolence. It must be possible to remember a person or cause in prayer without spelling out a lot of details in terms of what ought to happen next in relation to that person or cause. In other words, it must be possible to wish a person well without knowing exactly what it would mean for that person to flourish within his or her unique situation.

Christian unity is also at stake here. If Christians of differing opinion seek to be united on some level in mind and heart through the practice of prayer, they will find it easier to reach such unity through nondirective prayer. I have attended many meetings and worship services where someone who was leading in prayer went into substantial detail as to what ought to happen next in relation to some matter that concerned all of us. (I have probably been guilty of the same thing myself.) In some cases, at least, I felt I could not honestly wish for what was being spelled out in prayer as the request of all of us which we were placing before the Lord God.

In Redeemer College chapel services we sometimes leave place for individual silent prayer as a way to allow people with different opinions on the matter of concern to address God in their own way. In making this provision, we are leaving room for people of differing convictions on a specific matter to address God in accordance with those convictions.

I believe many Americans are praying for President Bill Clinton. Christians in the United States are not all of one mind on the question what President Clinton should do in the face of the charges against him. Some think he should resign from office. Others think he ought to fight the charges every step of the way. Should it not be possible for Christians of different political persuasions and

affiliations to join together on some level in praying for the President and to ask that God's will might soon be done in relation to his crisis? Or must Christian Americans pray either as partisan Republicans or as partisan Democrats?

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

The Boys, Paperjack edition, p. 234.

[NOTE 2]

Intoxicated by My Illness and Other Writings on Life and Death, ed. Alexandra Broyard (New York: Charles Potter, 1992). p. 17.

[NOTE 3]

Healing Words (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 97. The Spindrift prayer research is not restricted to people who prayer to a personal deity whom they address as God.

[NOTE 4]

Healing Words, pp. 99-100.

[NOTE 5]

Healing Words, p. 95.

[NOTE 6]

See *Healing Words*, pp. 92ff.