

# Kneel down and raise up, America

About a half century ago, on a soul-chilling southern Connecticut November weekend, I had my first encounter with humbling, knee-bending prayer.

With my presence unknown, my father, in impossibly slow motion, had dropped to his knees as more than one tear escaped his steamy red bespectacled eyes, baptizing the carpet of our den. Tommy Ryan, a senior General Electric executive and long since wayward altar boy, crossed himself and softly wept.

My father was transfixed by the sadly sincere gesture of newly turned 3-year-old, "John John." The little boy steadily saluted as "Black Jack," the rider-less steed with stirrups reversed, was steadied and reconnected to the caisson carrying our 35th president's coffin.

Inside, his daddy and so much more lay dead and God seemed suddenly distant. Having survived the evil of New York City's Hell's Kitchen Depression-Era streets and escaped the Burmese jungles of World War II, my father, saddened beyond measure, sought the solace of "Our Father."

This past weekend, on the 47th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s divine speech of a dream delivered at the threshold of a memorial to a giant, Glenn Beck paced and proselytized.

For more than an hour, the controversial conservative news evangelist exhorted us to publicly kneel in reverence and supplication to God, uphold Dr. King's message and celebrate a return to



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traditional American values and support restoration of America's honor.

The issue of religion and the affairs of state were clearly delineated in our Constitution's First Amendment by our Founding Fathers. They understood the profound inherent dangers of religiosity

run amok, state supported evangelical zeal, or religious suppression loaded and littered with acrimonious judgments, especially if done under the power and protection of political position.

They knew history's pages would always be stained with the blood of religious martyrs, innocents or dissidents dispatched at the hands of men playing or denying a God whom they fashioned in their own terrifying mortal image, declaring once and for all that theirs is the only righteous path.

They also knew we must be protected from "progressives," secular humanists and socialists with their inhuman *raison d'être* to forcefully, if need be, legislate "right thinking" and godless social reengineering.

Constitutional drafters knew the wisdom of embracing their love for God and country understanding that we are hard wired by holiness to seek and find the solace of divine justice and to humbly do so in communion with others.

Our history unmistakably proclaims our relationship to God as seminal to our survival and success as a nation. It is one of the key codes to a lock on American ex-

ceptionalism and it must be protected.

Perhaps folks are longing to share the faith of our fathers and to once again know that those we elect are similarly wired. Perhaps we collectively ache for that intimate relationship with the ethical monotheism of the Judeo-Christian God whose precepts have been the light for so many generations' paths.

Perhaps we must reinvigorate the healthy tension between privacy of worship suggested by the First Amendment and primacy our faith commands of us to order our faith with our footsteps as it did for those who first strode onto our shores.

The cultural catechism of America is simple and clear. The wonderful and mysterious notion known as man, with all its dark and light and delectable shades between, privately and communally needs the sacred moral compass God provides lovingly through grace.

We need the holy that is wholly non-human reflected in how we govern ourselves and lead the world.

I was speechless that November day long ago as the only profile in courage I knew was humbled and hurting in ways it takes a lifetime to understand. He knew what I later learned; kneeling is just about the right height from which to catch the loving glimpse of God.

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