

The Politicization of Decency

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Pastor Jonathan Lange, Wyoming Pastors Network Co-Leader, May 2017

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After a two-year investigation, the Department of Justice announced charges against 15 people who have been trafficking in eagle body parts. "U.S. Attorney Randy Seiler ...described one operation as basically a "chop-shop for eagles" in which eagle feathers were stuffed into garbage bags. He said it was clear that it was a moneymaking operation and that the feathers and eagle parts such as talons and beaks were treated as merchandise. 'There was no cultural sensitivity. There was no spirituality,' Seiler said. 'There was no tradition in the manner in which these defendants handled these birds.'" ([April 24, 2017, 15 Indicted in Eagle Trafficking Case, James Nord, AP](#)).

As yet, none of these charges allege the actual killing of an eagle. They are purely centered on the merchandizing of carcasses already dead. As I was told after a very unfortunate encounter on the highway, even if the killing of an eagle is purely accidental, it would be a federal offense if you left the scene with even a single eagle feather on your person or in your vehicle.

The Bald Eagle Protection Act was originally passed in 1940. In 1962 it was amended to include Golden Eagles. Under this law, there are criminal penalties for anyone to "take, possess, sell, purchase, barter, offer to sell, purchase or barter, transport, export or import, at any time or any manner, any bald eagle ... [or any golden eagle], alive or dead, or any part, nest, or egg thereof."

As an indication of how seriously this law is enforced, our own Lyman High School provide a curious case

study. At some point in the distant past, a well-meaning citizen found a dead golden eagle. Knowing that Lyman's mascot is an eagle, he had it mounted to decorate the High School's trophy room.



No one is quite sure when this trophy was acquired, but retired teacher, Allen Jaggi, clearly remembers that when he first arrived in Lyman in 1968 it was already there.

After decades of dust and decay had their way with the beleaguered bird, the school decided to have it refurbished. Since the bird was apparently donated before the 1962 addition of golden eagles to the Protection Act, there was no reason to have the mount documented for legality. But now, no taxidermist will take it in without documentation.

For quite some time, Lyman's principle, Todd Limoges, has been handed off from one federal agency to the next in his good-faith effort to document the mount. Reportedly, a special agent from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is coming near to a solution. We hope this comes to pass. I would hate to see the Lyman school district swept up in the next round of indictments.

All local color aside, what piques my interest in eagles is the thoroughly religious tone of Mr. Seiler's remarks at last Monday's press conference. The U.S. Attorney, rather than presenting their crimes in the terms of the law, "sell, purchase, barter..." said, "There was no cultural sensitivity. There was no spirituality. There was no tradition in the manner in which these defendants handled these birds."

All of this is in stark contrast to another headline from last week's news cycle. "Lamborghini" Mary Gatter was back in the news. She was the medical director of Planned Parenthood in Pasadena, CA who, last year, was caught on tape joking about her desire for a Lamborghini while haggling over the prices she charges for various baby parts.



The [April 26th video](#), released from the Center for Medical Progress, again features her working the angles to increase the asking price from \$50 to \$75 dollars per specimen. In the process, she first says that she will not offer any baby parts past the 16th week of gestation. Then quickly changes her mind when the potential customer wants older babies.

Whether or not she violated any of the statutory language of the state of California, I am interested in something else. As an observer of culture, my interest lies in the way these two events were covered. For starters, the Associated Press attended the news conference about eagle feathers, and published a national story about it. Yet I can find nothing from Reuters, AP, or any of the major media outlets that even mentions the latest haggling over baby parts.

Honestly, this does not surprise me. For the better part of two years we have seen an orchestrated news blackout on the work of the Center for Medical Progress. Clearly Planned Parenthood has a good deal of clout in America's news rooms.

Abortion has become so politicized that many ordinary, decent people are culturally conditioned to ignore anything and everything that might call its ethics into question. Simple questions that are treated as "no-brainers" when applied to eagles, must not even be raised if it could touch on abortion in any way.

Is it culturally, spiritually, or traditionally insensitive to treat eagle parts as merchandise? The U.S. Attorney from South Dakota is so certain of it, that he said so in a press conference without need to prove his point.

Is it culturally, spiritually, or traditionally insensitive to treat human parts as merchandise? Any sane person or society would instinctively answer that whatever is true of an animal is infinitely more true of a human being. We, however, have come to a place and time where this question is unasked, and unaskable.

It's time for us all to step back from the political fray and seriously ask: what has happened to us? This is an especial poignant question on the 102nd anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and its coinciding with Holocaust Remembrance Day on April 24. These occasions offer a substantial time to set down our frantic activities and think more deeply than the shallow condemnations of Hitler, or the Ottoman Empire.

Yes, Hitler did murder 11 or 12 million Jews, Russians, Poles, and “undesirables.” The Ottoman Empire was merciless in slaughtering 1.5 million Armenian Christians. But have you ever wondered what happened to the millions of ordinary Germans and ordinary Turks. How did they ever come to a place where they would quietly turn a blind eye to such evil?



If you had been living in those days, would you have spoken out at the risk of your livelihood and life. Would you have boldly called out the evil? Of course, we all would like to think of ourselves doing just that. But now ask yourself seriously if there are any things that you, personally consider evil that you don't publicly condemn, or don't really want to know about, for fear that it might undermine your public standing, or your job prospects, or your party's strength.

More to the point, many of us are sick and tired of politics altogether. We would like to find a place that is purely non-political. We want to be left alone to live our lives without being drawn in to every internet screaming match and every conspiratorial conversation.

But you must recognize that this, too, can become the very mechanism which stifles your opposition to evil. If my highest goal becomes “to avoid politics,” all that's needed to silence me is for someone to say, “that's political.” As a pastor of an historically non-political church body, I have seen this work on me.

At some point, even the well-meaning non-political people need to question the label. When, exactly, did this, or that issue become “political”? Would I have been called “political” if I spoke up about it a decade ago, or a century ago? If not, what changed: the truth, or my environment?

Back to question of eagle feathers and people parts. When did the decent treatment of a dead human being become “political”? I am not the first to ask this question. In pre-Christian Greece (441BC), Sophocles wrote the play, *Antigone*, which explores this very question.

At the beginning of the play, two of Antigone's brothers died fighting on opposite sides of a civil war.

King Creon, of the victorious side, decided that he would honor the one who died fighting for his cause, while publicly shaming the brother who fought against him.



Lytros Nikiforos - Antigone before the body of Polyneices

He gave the order that Polyneices' body should remain unburied on the battlefield to be eaten by eagles and dogs. By this decree, he makes the proper burial of Polyneices' body a capital offense. Anybody caught burying it, or treating it with reverence would be sentenced to death by the king.

Antigone is the leading character in the play who recognizes that such a decree – even if backed by the highest political order in the land – is simply wrong. It is against all culture, spirituality, and tradition. In several brilliant dialogues, Sophocles explores why she was willing to give her own life and speak out for decency that politics should never touch.

Read the play, and be Antigone