

# **What Word from the Infinite Silence Speaks Through the Recent Presidential Election in the United States?**

Gene Marshall, December 2000

The essence of biblical revelation might be summarized in this paradoxical sentence: **the Infinite Silence speaks in historical events.** Furthermore, in all historical events, the Infinite Silence is speaking. What is the Infinite Silence saying? This requires human interpretation. Those who venture to do such interpretation are called prophets or sometimes Seers, namely those who see.

This aspect of Christian faith is confusing to many people. It is especially confusing when the historical events in question are something complex and perhaps tragic like the election of George W. Bush to the presidency of the United States.

Seeing the activity of the Infinite Silence does not mean whitewashing the tragic elements of an event and thus looking for silver linings that make the event more palatable. And seeing the activity of the Infinite Silence does not mean postulating divine punishments for supposedly immoral people or divine rewards for supposedly moral people.

Seeing the activity of the Infinite Silence means seeing the glory of what is actually happening (and thus fresh potential for the realistic living of our lives). This speech of the Infinite Silence is nothing more nor less than the experience of awareness breaking through the shells of our unconsciousness, the shells we humans use to protect ourselves from deeper visions of our own ignorance and of our own wisdom about what is actually happening in our own lives. This speaking of the Infinite Silence applies to our social lives as well as to our personal lives.

Our actual social lives are always more tragic than we are prone to see. And our actual social lives are always more filled with positive potential than we are prone to see. I want to illustrate what I mean by hearing the Infinite Silence speak with the following commentary on the recent attention-getting presidential election in the United States.

Seeing the action of the Infinite Silence requires interpretation by the see-er. That is what a Seer is--a see-er of the action of the Infinite Silence. But the audience to whom the Seer speaks may not agree that the Seer sees. And perhaps the Seer does not see. Certainly the Seer never sees everything. The action of the Infinite Silence is always infinitely more than any Seer sees.

So I am risking being wrong and incomplete when I say what I see in these events of which I am going to speak. But I am attempting to do more than simply voice my opinions and biases. I am attempting to say what I see. If you do not see it, it may be that you are a greater Seer than I. On the other hand, it may be that you are not willing to see what is actually there to be seen. About this you must decide.

## **Unjust Voting Devices**

One thing I now see that I did not see before the dramatic events of this election is how extensively the voting technologies of my nation are in disarray. The poorer sections of my country are using the most antiquated voting devices. The pretensions of my nation to be an exemplary democracy are undercut by the plain truth that every vote is not being equally honored. Thoughtless sloth has been part of this shabby practice. And this sloth has been further aggravated by intentional intimidations and underhanded discouragements directed

toward especially African American voters and other minority voters. This complex disenfranchisement is a tragedy that screams out to be corrected. It may be that this realization has been so visibly dramatized that Republicans, Democrats, and others will come together and rectify it. But we should expect some resistance to effective change in this arena, and we should expect that action on this might best be done soon before we all forget. These are the words I hear from the Infinite Silence.

### **Blatantly Partial Court Judges**

A second thing I now see that I did not see so clearly before the dramatic events of this election is how extensively so many of our Court Judges are committed to preserving the order of the status quo and how panicked they are about innovative responses to the complex issues of social justice. I have commented on this in detail in other papers, but I want to emphasize here that this willingness of our supposedly impartial judiciary to deploy involuted legal rationalizations rather than risk remedies that are creatively fresh is a flight from reality. It is a very dangerous and destructive practice that cries out to be corrected. Strong disagreements will surely continue in this arena. But every opportunity to open up the rigidities in the minds of our legal elite needs to be taken. These are the words I hear from the Infinite Silence.

### **A Very Deep Cultural Divide**

A third thing I now see that I did not see as clearly before the dramatic events of this election is how deeply our population is divided. As we now piously talk about coming together as one nation, we would do well not to lose sight of this deep divide that was over and over dramatized during the election contest. This divide is not a temporary election phenomena that will melt away now that the election is over.

Our nation is suffering from an almost 50-50 cultural polarization that is evident in the words, body language, facial expressions, and actions of almost every person. The extreme passions that arose in this election witness to a deep polarization in our fundamental life style. Most Republicans and some Democrats are committed to what I will call "moral absolutes." People committed to moral absolutes genuinely believe that certain things are right and certain other things are wrong and furthermore that they know what those things are. This view of life is defensive and often quite angry toward those who contradict them.

Another view is manifest in the words, body language, facial expressions, and actions of most Democrats and some Republicans. This view or attitude is a style of thinking and living I will call "contextual thoughtfulness." This view is willing to embrace the vision that right and wrong are relative to the practical situations in which we show up. Such a style of operation is willing to risk innovative solutions in the understanding that no answers are the right answers, that no steps are the right steps, that justice is a creative open-ended thing, a venture into the unknown that welcomes the experience of chaos and novelty if there is some chance that such chaos and such novelty might lead eventually to something slightly better than we have now.

The moral absolutist hates contextual thoughtfulness. The moral absolutist is often fixated on one or more very specific things: the horror of abortion, the properness of prayer at football games, the right to own and use a gun, the wrongness of marijuana, the bigness of government, the restraints of big government on businesses, the resistance to what others might call creative chaos, the rights of the wealthy to have and to do whatever they please with their hard-earned money, the divine calling to impose on others their religion or their morality, the rightness of science and technology and industry to lead us in whatever "progress" they see fit. Not all

moral absolutists hold the same list of rigid rules, but they are willing to join with other firm rule-holders to defend their own rules from the likes of the contextually thoughtful.

This basic attitude can be very subtle and intelligently rationalized, or it can be blatantly emotional and obviously contradictory. In the main this attitude is sternly defensive against all opposition. In its more sophisticated versions it is an activist conservatism that strategizes to turn back the clock on critical directions of social change that have been in process for decades. This sort of conservatism views itself as compassionate.

Those who espouse the style of contextual thoughtfulness consider themselves to be the truly compassionate ones, so they ask moral absolutists to explain, "Compassionate for whom?" Perhaps, they say, this conservative compassion is for the wealthy who are burdened with responsibilities which they wish to flee. Perhaps, they say, this conservative compassion is for those who are distressed by the challenges to bring more equity and fairness into our national life. Perhaps, they say, this conservative compassion is for those who want to deny the existence of the most painful and difficult challenges of our times.

Meanwhile, contextual thoughtfulness experiences itself as basically calm and flexible and concerned about things. So they experience themselves as grossly misunderstood by the emotionally charged attacks of the moral absolutists. Many of them have become tough fighters against these super-vigorous conservatives, and they can be expected to oppose moral absolutism with their dying breaths.

It may seem that this deep and bitter cultural divide is somewhat moderated by those in the middle who are asking for this conflict to simply go away. Such moderates say, "Let's stop the fighting and arguing and incivility and just work together." Both candidates in the recent election turned cartwheels in their attempts to assure these distressed moderates that he was indeed the nicer of the two candidates. Many folk were apparently intrigued by George W. Bush's vows to bring Democrats and Republicans together and get something done. Some of these same folk were made uneasy by Gore's tendencies to impolitely unmask his opponents hypocrisies and confusions. The moderate view is: "Let's be nice. Let's overcome the divide between our people. And most of all let's forget about everything that has upset us and return to some kind of normal calm."

Perhaps some sorts of moderation and civility are appropriate and possible, but the underlying divide is not going to go away. The speech of the Infinite Silence that is sounding through these recent events is this: **our naive hope for bipartisan harmony is a denial of reality--a denial of this reality: our nation is deeply divided.** Furthermore, what we are deeply divided over is irreconcilable. A cultural war is going on. No compromise is possible between moral absolutism and contextual thoughtfulness. Conservative Republicans like DeLay, Bauer, and others are going to be moral absolutists no matter what civilities charming George tries to promote. And the liberal wing of the Democratic party is not going to be content with the spectacle of moderate Republicans and the so-called blue-dog Democrats getting together on what can only be seen by true liberals as a superficial agenda. The commentators are right about this: George is going to have a different experience in Washington than he had in Texas. Many Texas Democrats are Republicans with a thin coat of paint. Some elements of the national Democratic party are considerably more vigorous in their contextual thoughtfulness.

A war has already been announced by a large number of Afro-American Democrats. They are going to insist that the voting place irregularities be solved this very year. They are going to turn out to defeat Republicans in upcoming elections. Many liberal Democrats are going to join

in this vigorous campaign. Most women, most of the elderly, increasing numbers of youth, and a large swath of educated middle class people are becoming increasingly dedicated in their commitment to halt conservative activism, to force far-reaching changes, and even to wipe the Republican party off the face of the Earth. You can hear these drum beats if you listen, and the drums say, "This is last time Republicans are going to win the presidency in the history of this nation."

Yes, George W. is going to have a tough time with his bipartisan program. It may be true that agreements can be reached on a few things: the formation of some effective national support for public education improvements, the easing of medical costs for the elderly, the protection of social security, and a few other low-cost weather strippings on the house of state. But don't expect the moderate middle to come up with a truly adequate campaign finance reform. Don't expect them to advance the issues of Afro-Americans and women. Don't expect big improvements in our care for the natural planet. Safe little programs, even safer than Clinton's long list of accomplishments, will be the legacy of this moderate middle.

The best thing we can hope for from the Bush presidency is a weakening of the radical right, a harnessing of their vitriol and activism for the sake of accomplishing this moderate middle agenda.

Those who are the most fully committed to the style of contextual thoughtfulness will not be seduced by the peace and quiet lusted for by the moderate middle. In the next four years, the opportunity of these hard-working, defeated Democrats will be to increase their clarity on what they want to do, to join forces with Greens, with youth, with other forces not yet mobilized for the electoral process. Look for them to abandon their blue-dog Democrats and their moderate Republican charm artists and push this nation into some ever-deepening tensions over what is truly just and appropriate within the actual contexts of our historical perils.

These are the words I hear from the Infinite Silence.

## **The Rise of the Greens and other Anti-corporation Forces**

In the closing moments of those fascinating court case dramas, not much attention was paid to the role of Ralph Nader's Green Party in the overall drama of this election. Occasionally people remembered that Gore would probably have won easily if Nader had not been in the picture. But the significance of the issues that Greens stood for and the place that those issues might play in the future were not frequently analyzed. This was an oversight.

These are the words I hear from the Infinite Silence. **The issues of the Greens and other anti-corporation forces will increase in importance exponentially over the next four years.** If the Democrats want to win elections four years from now, they had better start embracing issues like ending the money-laden corporate rulership of our popular democracies--issues like supporting global accords on global warming--issues like retooling or even shelving the World Trade Organization--issues like restraining polluters and other irresponsible corporations. While the task of restraining conservative excesses and assisting Bush with his trivial moderate-middle agenda will require some attention, enlightened Democrats will also have opportunities to embarrass Bush and the entire Republican party. Democrats now have sufficient power in Congress to create chance after chance to demonstrate how opposed Republicans are to these wider and far more important social changes.

Yes, these are the sort of words I hear from the Infinite Silence. **The next four years will be a time of opportunity for mobilizing some post-Clinton, post-Gore, post-Bush radicality for a**

**fuller social transformation.** This will be vigorously ignored or opposed by Bush and all those play-it-safe moderates in both parties. This may raise more immoderate contempt from the radical right. This may even help the radical right see Bush as the thoroughgoing conservative he actually is. This may even help Bush achieve his moderate Clinton-like agenda. But in the long-haul it will defeat the entire Republican party. It will move moralistic absolutism onto the shelf of history and it will engage moderate lukewarmness with the hot heat of obvious social reality.

**These are some of the deep challenges I hear the Infinite Silence speaking to those who are willing to have ears.**