Man selling himself on the cheap

By Chaplain Norbert Karava

We already experience it on the first day of school, and find it rendered in our tribal playground games. Later on, as we sort our way through competing schools of psychological and political thought, theories of historical development, economics, literature and art, we find it there as well: In everything man does, in every artifact coming from his hands, he leaves an imprint of his own self-understanding, which constitutes the beginning of anthropology, or the philosophical understanding of man. Most of the time, this anthropological sense of man is latent and unarticulated, and thus, it becomes critically important for us to identify the anthropology that underlies, for example, a given political manifesto, if we are truly to appreciate its implications. There is a decidedly different philosophical picture of man in Hitler's "what good fortune for governments that the people do not think" than in the Jeffersonian "all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

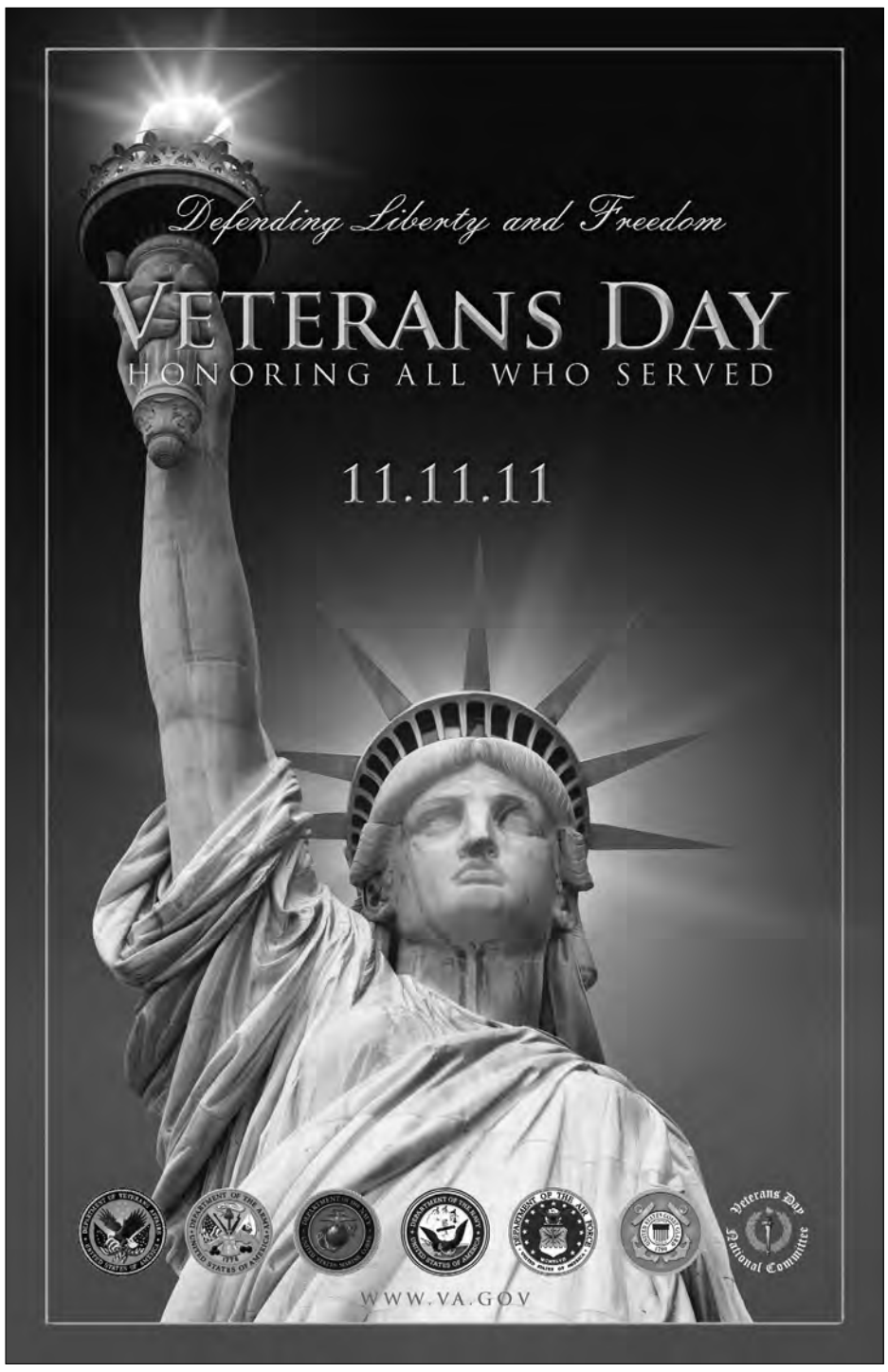
Religion is certainly no exception here and indeed, it can be argued that it is its anthropological import that makes it the most controversial of all man's activities. Atheists and agnostics can argue that religion merely casts God in a prevailing image of man whereas believers claim that the agnostics are merely confusing religion with idolatry, and that it is the experience of God that allows man to discover himself as God sees him, which gives rise not only to a merely philosophical anthropology but a religiously grounded sense of man that associates him with the order of the sacred. And this brings about a moral revolution: If "sacred" then "inviolable." – making man unique among all other creatures. The glory of religion is this: Its sense of man as sacred because of a unique similarity and relationship to God enables him to grasp his worth as an incomparable sacred "thing." The whole physical universe cannot equal the value of a single person, a single inmate in the Kurihama prison here, a single comatose octogenarian struggling for his next breath on his ventilator, there.

And here is one of the ever-recurring controversies in history: Is it possible to vindicate the inviolable moral status of man with a merely philosophical anthropology, without referring to a religiously grounded sense of man? I, and almost all my co-religionists argue that it is not and that it is the acme of the unreasonable to make such an attempt: Without God to vindicate the sense of man as sacred, there can be no sacred sense of man or for that matter, anything else. It would be easier for man to create something from nothingness than it would for him to make himself sacred although this is not for any lack of trying on his part; man seems to never weary of trying to be God. And so, without God, the value of man is not sacred, and therefore up for grabs.

Let us come down to cases: The Judaeo-Christian perspective has its own arguably revolutionary anthropology: As the unique creature, among all other creatures, made in "the image and likeness of God," man cannot simply lose himself in the material process, and cannot be reduced to some cosmic plenum; he is in the physical universe but irrevocably apart from it, and thus, until he enters into communion with the Creator, will always be lonely, unfulfilled, and therefore anxious. And so, it was this sort of anthropology, even if it was only latent and unarticulated, and not some doctrine about God specifically, that made it impossible for Christians to accept the Marxist version of the life of man as completely defined by society, the historic process and the physical universe. For Marxists, the individual could have no real moral significance, either anthropologically or metaphysically and this pervaded not only their theory of history, politics, economy, law and even esthetics, but also, and especially their practical execution of theory – a painful affair, as survivors of a truly Marxist regime such as Albania under Enver Hoxha will generally tell you. It was because of the inherent anthropology of the religion that the political officers and commissars of the Red Army saw Christians as inherently counterrevolutionary.

Let us not unfairly pick on the poor Marxists: As regimes, governments, and social institutions generally become increasingly ideological, dictatorial and tyrannical, they inevitably become hostile to religion because of the accompanying religious sense of man which establishes both the dignity and identity of man as beyond the competency of the state. Once an individual discovers his identity in religious experience, or in the language of the ancients, "latria," he becomes dangerous to any tyrannical social order because he has discovered the inviolable space of his own freedom: Because it is God whom he worships, who defines his very identity enshrined in religious truth, and not the state, he cannot avoid discovering that he is ultimately answerable to no mortal authority – he subjects himself to mortal authority only under the condition of non-contradiction with the perceived will and authority of his God. Again, because man experiences God establishing and confirming his dignity, he no longer looks for recognition and validation from his earthly masters, like a dog waiting to be petted. For him, the earthly power has a bearing on his body as connecting him with the physical cosmos but as a beloved of God, he knows that neither his body nor the physical cosmos define him. Thus, in the language of Jesus of Nazareth: "Fear not them who can but kill the body, and afterwards do no more (…) fear him, who after your body has been killed, has authority to cast you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."

It is when man presumes to script his own identity that he reduces himself to his own mere concept, which in comparison to the mysterious event that we call a person "created in the image and likeness of God" is a sterile suffocating abstraction, incapable of the joy of life. It is when man presumes to script his own dignity and purpose that he inevitably loses the sense of himself as sacred and therefore inviolable and raises a "for sale…cheap" sign over his unhappy head.

Pet of the week

Meet Precious. She lives up to her name. She does not like shelter life. While she gets along with her fellow cats, also waiting for forever homes. She gets shy when the door opens. When she was visiting a foster home during the March earthquake she warmed right up to the family and purred for them. To find out more about Precious, or any animal at Pets Are Worth Saving (P.A.W.S.) contact 243-9996, or e-mail usskittytalk.yokosuka@gmail.com, or visit the P.A.W.S. Web site at www.pawsyokosukajapan.com