

The Dangers of Religion

TEXT:
Leviticus 19:18
Matthew 22:39
Romans 12:9

August 15, 1993

Let it be made clear from the outset that this is a sermon on religion, not politics. What is good about religion is good for the republic, and what is good about a republic is good for religion. However, we believe fervently in the American way, which stands for the separation of religion and state. Naturally, we are to live out our beliefs within the political state as private citizens, but we do not attempt to use the state's political system to enforce our belief system upon our pluralistic neighbors.

Religion can be the greatest thing on earth or the worst. It can be the greatest healing therapy in society, or the greatest hazard to a society's health. It can be a democratic republic's greatest good or its worst threat.

Look at the hot spots of the earth today and you see religious extremists lighting the fuses — whether in Northern Ireland, Israel, Bosnia or California, USA. Religious extremists are breeding all kinds of “culture wars.” Religion can breed all kinds of harassment, bigotry, prejudice, intolerance and deception.

We have only to look back to Jesus' day. His greatest problems were not with the atheists or agnostics, but with religious extremists. When you have religionists who think they have all the answers and that everyone should be compelled to live by their beliefs — because they have an “exclusive” on righteousness — you have the worst dangers knocking at your door.

Religion is peculiar. When it is not in earnest, it doesn't hurt anyone; but it doesn't do any good either. When it is in earnest, it is a most powerful force for good or evil. If religion can persuade someone that an idea is the will of God, that person, not wanting to displease Almighty God, may feel compelled to act on it.

We Christians must face up to the fact that our Christianity has propagated, in the name of Jesus, devilish acts, bloody wars, awful persecutions, hate crimes and political chaos. We have seen this evidenced on television, with leaders of Operation Rescue harassing neighbors and demonstrating at women's clinics in most detestable and criminal ways — in the name of Jesus! The hate which certain extreme

elements of the Christian community have cultivated toward neighbors of a homosexual orientation resembles the environment of hell. It causes the community to wonder if they have ever heard of the first and second greatest commandments of God.

One of the not-so-obvious Christian religious movements in our country is what has become known as the Religious Right, or the New Right. So many wonderfully good and well-meaning people are being drawn in and are supporting their agenda, without realizing what they are doing or considering the ultimate consequences. The movement is led by some very charismatic leaders, like Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Tim La Haye, Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell. Their message sounds good, righteous and very Christian on the surface. What unthinking person can listen to clean-shaven, well-dressed and patriotic-sounding Pat Robertson talk about his Christian Coalition and not think, “That it is exactly what this country needs — This is good old American patriotism”? The thousands of good Christians who will gather in Kansas City or other cities to hear James Dobson

talk of his "Focus on the Family" crusade may think, "Wow, that's the greatest, and every American should hear and heed." "Discipline our kids, don't spare the rod and spoil the child; indoctrinate them with our exclusive doctrines; make divorce impossible; don't teach about sex until kids are more mature and can understand it; don't permit the teaching of sexuality to youth in public school, because it will end up making them prematurely curious, and that leads to promiscuity." Preach "Mom at home in the kitchen and Dad bringing home all the bacon" orthodoxy. "Focus on the Family," on the surface, appears to be a commendable mission. But it is a mission which is out to get the state to legislate what Dobson's religion can't seem to do. **Any religion that needs the government to support and subsidize it doesn't deserve to survive. It is not the state's business to carry out the churches' ministries!**

The Religious Right's mission is twofold. First, it seeks to gain control of the Republican Party apparatus at the state and local levels, with the eventual goal of claiming control of the Republican National Committee itself. Its second objective is to win for its candidates election to hundreds, even thousands, of lower level public offices. Once elected, they can begin to implement Robertson's Christian Coalition extremist views, and from there, they can seek higher offices. They have put out a detailed manual, spelling out how to get in and manipulate the democratic politi-

cal process. They seem to think that any means justify their ends. They campaign quietly, very much within the safety of their own church communities. They are referred to as "stealth" candidates. They have been concentrating upon school boards throughout the country. No one hears of them, except their own church sponsors, and with the low turnout of voters for school board elections, they are suddenly seen for the first time *after* being elected.

To be sure, any person should be free to run for an office, whatever his or her political party or religious affiliation. But stealth candidates, who conceal their ultimate purpose until elected, are mighty dangerous for local communities and the nation.

Once in office, these New Right folks "come out of their closets." They begin pushing their agenda on our schools, ranging from censorship of selected novels and textbooks to the teaching of creationism, gutting sex education programs, and putting an end to school breakfast programs for the needy and day care for children of working parent families — on the grounds that such programs undercut the family. Children should eat at home with their parents, when there may be no parents there — or no food? The Religious Right's general agenda includes, among other things, antipornography. What sane person does not detest child pornography? Yet people buy into the general agenda on the basis that any antipornography program is worthy of support. They are

against any woman having a say about what goes on in her own body and insist that abortions, performed for any reason, should be judged as "murder in the first degree." In turn, single-issue antiabortion folks may jump on their bandwagon. However, it should be noted that many pro-life antiabortionists will not have anything to do with Robertson's Christian Coalition. It should also be noted that a majority of conservative citizens do not want to be equated with the Religious Right. The Religious Right are also opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment and would deprive those who are not their kind of people of certain inalienable rights guaranteed by our Constitution.

The Religious Right are determined to get *their* prayers and *their* Bible reading back into the public schools, by hook or by crook. They are big on censorship of books, including any fantasy yarns involving witches — even those in the long tradition of children's literature, such as "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel." They claim that these lead to devil worship and witchcraft.

The newest code words of the New Right, used to hook those who might not hear them otherwise, are the *environment*, the *deficit* and the *economy*. Since there is hardly one among us who is not interested in these issues, some of the finest of persons are hooked into the New Rights agenda based on a single concern.

The Religious Right extremists always refer to the United States

as a "Christian nation." This always appeals to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant! But look at history honestly. The very idea that the United States should be officially Christian was explicitly rejected by James Madison, one of the primary designers of our Constitution, and the other framers, who insisted on a system of separation of church and state that guarantees religious freedom for all individuals and groups — Christian and non-Christian alike. The "Christian nation" concept has never been endorsed by the Supreme Court as officially binding judicial policy. "Christian nation," like "family values," have been code words for an evangelical socioreligious perspective and have been used to marginalize, if not blackball, all of their nonconformists.

Ours has always been a pluralistic country of all nationalities and religions. We used to pride ourselves in being "the melting pot of the world," and considered our diversity our strength and uniqueness. **The genius of our American system is that in religious matters the government remains neutral.** This allows all citizens to practice their religious faiths freely and not impose them on government.

The Religious Right always employ the expression "Christian nation," referring to their desire to see the national laws reflect the narrow sectarian principles which they themselves hold — not just saying that a majority of Americans identify with Christian denominations. **These misguided**

religionists and patriots are trying to say that only persons with the correct religious views are real Americans and should hold public offices. The historic position of this nation is that the government as a legal organization is independent of all religions. Our Constitution specifically provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the First Amendment was intended to "erect a wall of separation between church and state." The person's right to freedom of belief is to be beyond the reach of government and majoritarian rule.

The Religious Right extremists have been conniving in every political way to get state-mandated prayer and Bible reading back into the public school, ever since the 1963 Supreme Court decision declared it to be unconstitutional. Let's face it, Christian Protestants, that old tradition clearly promoted a generic form of Protestantism, without any concern for our Roman Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, Unitarian or Muslim neighbors. The Pennsylvania law that was challenged by the Supreme Court was explicit: "At least ten verses from the Holy Bible *shall* be read, without comment, at the opening of each school day."

Actually, voluntary prayer in public schools has always been legal. Children are perfectly free to say grace over lunch and read the Bible in their free time. **We need to resist government-prescribed**

prayer programs in our public schools. That 1963 Supreme Court put the responsibility back upon parents, where it belongs, giving fathers and mothers the right to determine what religious exercises are taught. **A religion that must depend upon the state to do what it cannot do is not worthy of existence ... even Christianity.**

The Religious Right are running down the public schools, toward the end of getting government money for the private and parochial schools. It is called the "voucher" system. The head of the National Education Association has said, "Since the New Right can't get the public schools to go along with their religious views, they want to privatize education, to get money from the public treasury for religious schools." Private and parochial schools may be excellent, but they ought not expect public funding, for soon the funding state is sure to impose its regulations. Any subsidizer soon regulates, and religion loses! Every election within the Shawnee Mission and Blue Valley school districts and Johnson County Community College has stealth candidates. The Republican Party in Johnson County has been captured by the New Right and stealth candidates. **This osmosis will continue if the religious and nonreligious sit by and do not insist on knowing exactly where a candidate is coming from and heading toward. Surely, any patriotic American believes that no individual or organization should promote or impose their religious or personal beliefs on**

others through deceptive practices, personal attacks, political connivery or stealthy activities.

Now, folks, the issue of this sermon is not politics, but religion. If we continue to let the historic wall between church and state erode away, religion will suffer more than the state. The new Religious Right extremists want nothing less than to force our American society to enact into law their exclusive religious views, and thereby impose them on everyone. But ours is a constitutional republic made up of many different religions — where every individual's rights are guaranteed and all voices are heard. The Religious Right seeks a theocracy that legislates and enforces their particular vision of God's law.

This New Right confronts us with a threat far greater than the old threat of Communism. **When the state and the church would become entwined, it is religion that will be the loser.**

I tremble for my country when I hear zealous religionists plaguing good neighbors and women's health clinics in the name of Jesus, who said, "A new commandment I give to you; love one another as I have loved you." I tremble for our nation when I hear extremists discredit our public school system, the only truly ecumenical program left in our community. The public schools take the poor and the handicapped, the abused and foster children, the Christian and the Muslim, the Roman Catholic and the Jew. They do more of the Lord's work every day than most

other institutions. I fear for our public school system if we afford government support to private schools, either secular or religious. **It is our freedom of religion that will ultimately lose.**

Americans need to be reminded that no group, religious or secular, can insist upon majority rule. One does not keep the Ten Commandments by any majority rule! The Bill of Rights aims precisely to protect the religious freedom, rights and sensibilities of the minority against the whims of the majority. The protection afforded individuals under the First Amendment is not subject to majority rule. Government agencies, including public school authorities, do not have liberty to promote the religious perspective of any group — majority or minority.

It may sound judgmental for one religionist in a pulpit to stand up and warn people about the threat of differing religionists. I pray that what I do today is discernment in love, not judgment in any hate. We must not let the Pat Robertsons, James Dobsons, Tim La Hayes, or Jimmy Swaggarts be ignored. It is our Christian commission to put in a good word for Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. We are to share our faith in Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth — but not at the expense of another faith. To love our neighbors as ourselves requires tolerance, but it also requires looking out for the best ultimate welfare of both state and church. It means being humble, not self-righteous.

Recently, the "born-again" Watergate burglar, Southern Baptist, evangelical writer and Republican, Charles Colson, predicted that "if evangelicals don't begin to attend to their own houses of worship, they will be eclipsed." **Colson said that the role of the church is not to win political battles or even make people happy; it is to make people holy.**

I have saved my biblical text for this sermon until last: "Love your neighbor as yourself." When we abide by those words, we will do best by our religion and by our country.

Prayer: Lord, we have certainly sought your guidance in preparing this sermon. If, in our own sinful nature, we have missed your wisdom, save us all. If we have perceived your true word, let it be heard and bring it to its fullest fruition. Grant that, in the midst of our differences within the Christian community, we may discipline ourselves, with the aid of your grace, to love all of our neighbors, not just in theory but in practice. Grant that in every family, even our church family, we may agree to disagree and still love one another. We beg of you, teach us the truth that sets us free. Amen

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