The Dangers of Religion

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 political 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 antipornography folks may jump on their bandwagon. However, it should be noted that many pro-life antipornographers 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 prac-
tices, 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 constitu-
tional 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 reli-
gious. 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 Command-
ments 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
doing religionists. I pray
that what I do today is discern-
ment 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 evangeli
cals 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 prepar-
ing 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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