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Religion & Politics Gasoline & Fire!

By Jim Myers

“The story of religion in this year's national elections is not simply a documentation of the occasional use of religious language by politicians or the partisan political words and actions of religious leaders. It is a story of defiling and disregarding the boundaries between religion and politics. It is a story about abuses of religion and intrusion into religious institutions that can compromise the vitality of democracy as well as the integrity of religion.”
(Comments of Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President, Interfaith Alliance.)

The focus by political professionals on religious based issues has been increasing in every election since the Supreme Court ruled in favor of abortion and against “prayer in school.” A major factor has been the development of television evangelism into a powerful media tool by Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Kenneth Copeland and many others. It didn't take long to discover that the polarizing power of these issues expanded the support base of followers and increased the number and amount of funds contributed.

It also didn't take political professionals very long to discover that they could tap into blocks of 10 to 15 million voters for their candidates simply by adding selected religious issues to their agendas – and well, as they say -- the rest is history. Religion is playing a greater role in every new election.

Historically, in the West at least, individuals have been acutely aware of two powerful institutions that could exert tremendous influence in their lives – the state and the Church. One was under the leadership of kings, while the other was initially under the pope. Later, with the advent of Protestantism, a large number of other religious leaders were added to the mixture.

At some points in time kings controlled the Church, while at other times popes controlled kings. The power of Church was its claim to be the exclusive source of eternal salvation. It could use the power of the state to force unbelievers to be “baptized into the Church;” or use its power to withhold saving sacraments or to threaten excommunication with sure damnation.

The challenges for individuals whose lives were affected by the decisions of kings and popes were very real – especially when there was a conflict between the two powers. Following the pope could result in being imprisoned or executed. On the other hand, following the king could lead to the fear of being condemned to the eternal fires of Hell. It was a lose-lose situation for the average person.

Throughout most of the history of Christianity there were no such legal protections like those which protect us today -- “separation of church and state,” “freedom of religion,” “freedom of speech” and “freedom of the press.” It was a very different and dangerous world.

In the 16th century Luther formulated a new belief concerning the jurisdiction of state and Church:

The jurisdiction of state and Church are sharply distinguished from each other. The secular authority, if it be Christian, has its power direct from God, it is even in possession of the general priesthood. The Church does not have to prescribe to the government what it has to do. On the other hand, the secular authority may not meddle in the affairs of the Church. One can compel nobody to believe; therefore the Church must be founded entirely on the voluntary principle. (A History of Christian Thought by J. L. Neve; p. 235)

The Division of Power

There have been many examples in which religious authorities used the power of the state to enforce adherence to religious beliefs and doctrines; both before and since Luther. The results are facts of history.

“Christians were burned, while still others were punished by other nefarious means. Some were branded on the cheeks. Their necks were tied fast to a post with towels, and their hands holden, that they might not stir; and so the hot iron was put to their cheeks.” (Fuller, Church History, p. 164).

“Multitudes were driven into exile, fleeing into Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, and the wilds of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. . . .” (Hassell, History of the Church of God, p. 466).

An important factor in the abuse of religious power is the belief that the “state should not meddle in the affairs of the Church.” Even today we have witnessed this in the plague of sexual abuse cases filed against the Roman Catholic Church. *How could those who proclaim to be leaders of morality act so immorally – and be protected?*

This plague of sexual abuse existed because it was covered up by both religious and political leaders. It came to light when media leaders chose to make the facts known to the public, in spite of tremendous pressure.

Battles over freedom of the press played a primary role in ending the witch hunts and anti-Trinitarian burning at the stakes in England. It has played a major role in the development of our “free” society. It will also play a significant role in determining the course of our future.

The Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance suggested that the media follow certain guidelines to ensure accurate reporting (below are a few of them):

(1) Report on religion in political campaigns with the same kind of scrutiny devoted to economic policies and foreign affairs.

(2) Understand that not everyone who uses religious language is a person of faith.

(3) All stories on religion should consider the multiplicity of religions in this land.

(4) There should be no more an establishment of religion in the press than in the Constitution. The majority status of Christianity in the nation is without question, but . . . the United States is one nation with many faiths!

(5) Report on the positive and healing role of religion in public life as well as on the problems associated with religion in the public square.

SOURCE: http://www.religioncommunicators.org/resources_gaddy.html

The next time issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage come up – **ask yourself why you are on one side or the other.** Is your position based on facts or 30-second emotionally charged ads?

We are standing at a critical juncture in history – will we evolve into a completely secular society or will we revert to the ways of many of our spiritual ancestors and blindly follow the orders of those who hold religious authority or . . . ?

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