

One Nation Under (Whose?) God

by Rev. Robert Edward Greene

The rise of the Christian Right -- a term we use to describe a conglomeration of politically active fundamentalist Christian groups of which the Christian Coalition may be the best known -- has caused a significant degree of consternation among liberals. The Christian Right, liberals complain, is attempting to influence national policy, which of course is what liberals have been trying to do for decades. The Christian Right is seeking to direct the course of the nation, which of course is what liberals have been hoping to do, and with some degree of success, since the nation was founded. The Christian Right is trying to impose its moral values on all of us, which, as the Christian Right justly points out, is exactly what liberals have been aiming to do over a much longer period of time. The Christian Right is encouraging their church members to vote for particular candidates and to support or oppose specific legislative proposals, which of course is not only what liberals have been urging churches and church members to do but which Black churches have been doing outrightly ever since the civil rights movement began if not before.

The real problem for liberals is that the policy, the course of the nation, the moral values, the candidates, the proposals which the Christian Right supports are not those espoused by liberals. And, worse yet, the political representatives supported by the Christian Right have replaced in the majority those who had represented the liberal approach.

The difficulty is one of substance and not of process. It is important for our own values and well-being to keep that distinction clear. The First Amendment restricts the ability of government to interfere in the free exercise of religion. It does not limit the rights of the religious to attempt to influence governmental policy. Indeed, there was a time when social activists were urging the churches -- many of them most reluctant -- to take an active part in urging governmental decisions that should reflect religious values.

So by our values, as well as by Constitutional mandate, the Christian Right is entirely free to exercise freedom of speech, to seek to influence, and urge its followers to seek to influence, the direction governmental leaders will set. And we need ardently to defend their right to do so if we are to continue to enjoy ourselves the same right and opportunity. Free speech survives only when it is assured to those who disagree with us as much as to those who agree with us.

On matters of substance, then, we can debate and should debate. It is important that we continue to proclaim and support the implementation of those religious values which we hold as vital and significant to the well-being of humanity. That we can do as long as both sides possess the freedom to engage in free speech, a free press, free religion.

The greater threat from the Christian Right comes not in the substance they expound, bad as it is, but from those within that movement who reject our First Amendment rights - - who propose not only that their moral values be adopted but that no opposition to those values be allowed; who proclaim not only that national policies ought to follow the Bible, as they interpret the Bible, but that the Bible, as they interpret it, precludes Constitutional rights; who insist not only that the government should adopt laws they support, but that

the United States is a Christian nation and that other religions should be banned or limited or relegated to second class status.

What they propose is not unique. It is indeed the more common, for traditionally state and church have gone together. Protestantism was established in the German states not by freedom of individual choice but by the decision of the local ruler. It was not the individual who chose to be a Catholic or a Lutheran or a Calvinist. How one worshipped was determined by where one lived.

It is important to realize that the United States is perhaps the only nation in the world without an established church. It is important to recognize that religious freedom started here, Even England, whom we honor as the mother of democracy, upon whose traditions so many of our fundamental concepts are based, did not grant full religious tolerance until 1858, a full seventy years after such was incorporated into our Bill of Rights.

Indeed religious liberty is indebted to the existence of established churches in the American colonies, but fortuitously different churches. In New England, Congregationalism was the established religion until 1828 when the division between the orthodox and the Unitarians forced a separation between church and state, although in fact that had begun some fifty years earlier when the Universalists gained the right to the religious tax dollars paid by their members. In the southern states, the Church of England and its American successor, Episcopalianism, had been the established church since the founding of those colonies. Maryland was dominantly Catholic; Rhode Island, following the pattern established by Roger Williams, dominantly Baptist. Only Pennsylvania, with its Quaker origins, from the beginning had refused to adopt a state religion and granted equal tolerance to all, which probably is why the Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, fleeing from England after the burning of his church and home, chose to settle in Pennsylvania rather than the Unitarian-inclined but much more fractious Massachusetts. Eventually, the originally Anglican New York would follow the Pennsylvania model.

In 18th century America, such an acknowledgment of religious tolerance was not all that easy to attain. It was not without cause that Thomas Jefferson asked to be remembered equally as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty which the House of Burgesses adopted in 1781 under his persuasion.

So when the thirteen separate and independent states came together to form "a more perfect union," an obvious question was what was to be the national religion? What was to be done when such a diversity of established religions already existed?

The answer lay in the then clear thesis that the states would remain sovereign, that only limited powers were to be granted to the federal government. Each state then could retain its own church. The First Amendment was a guarantee that the national government would not interfere.

Still that official national tolerance, combined with the freedom of movement among all the states and the revivalist movements particularly by the Methodists and Baptists, gradually would erode the state churches. The North's victory in the Civil War, which established that the union was indivisible, effectively demolished the reality of state sovereignty. Yet it was not until 1940 that the United States Supreme Court ruled that

the states could not establish a religion, that the states could not interfere in the free exercise of religion -- that the due process clause of the post-Civil War 14th Amendment now imposed upon the states the same restrictions which the First Amendment had enjoined upon the federal government.

In truth it would take a long time before Americans were willing to grant full acceptance even to Catholics and Jews. I recall a Unitarian couple in New Hampshire recounting one night the discrimination they had endured as a young Jewish couple in New Hampshire in the 1920's. As late as 1960, the question still could be asked whether it was safe and proper to elect a Catholic to the presidency. Even a dozen years ago, objections could be raised here in Stockton to the establishment of a Buddhist monastery.

In historical perspective, the Christian extremists are right: the United States certainly was established with the expectation that it would be a Christian nation, indeed probably a Protestant Christian nation. Yet the very diversity within Protestantism, within Christianity, made it impossible to define the nation in those terms. Those adopting the First Amendment may have thought they were only preventing the federal government from establishing one Protestant church over another. But Madison's phraseology, devoted as it was to Jefferson's philosophical tolerance, was far broader. It was enough to allow Jefferson later as President to write to New England Baptists that this nation had erected "a wall of separation between church and state," a phrase the Supreme Court would pick up in 1878 and make legally determinative for more than a century.

Meantime the diversity that had forced tolerance in the first place only grew. Immigration would change not only the faces of America but its religious character as well. What was a very small Jewish community in 1789 would expand into a very substantial percentage of the population. More recently we have seen an influx of Muslims, as well as the conversion of some native-born Americans to the religion of Islam. Confucianism and Buddhism came along with the Chinese laborers who were imported to work in the gold camps and on the railroads. Their numbers only increased with the acceptance of refugees from southeast Asia in more recent years.

Surely Stockton is as polyglot as any -- Christians and Jews sharing one community with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and even Unitarians Universalists!

They're all Americans. They're all citizens. So if this be "one nation, under God," under whose God is it?

It bothers me tremendously when I hear it said that this nation could be great again if only we would return to God's ways. The fact is that poverty and crime, and injustice and inhumanity were just as rife in the United States in the past when it was under God's ways, if indeed it ever were under God's ways.

I understand that people are fearful. I understand that people are distressed. I agree that we all would be better off if there was greater morality. I would like people to be more moral. I would like more people to act more morally more of the time. But God unfortunately does not seem to create that. Rather it takes people to create a moral community.

And I would propose that those two words have to go together -- morality and community. Morality is a way of acting towards others within a community. Morality is impossible without a sense of belonging to a community.

If people in a church or a mosque or a synagogue or a temple tend to be more moral, it is because they are part of a community and they understand and accept the responsibilities to others with whom they share that community.

If in fact we could sit down with the Christian Right, if we could talk with them, we probably would find out that we share many of the same moral values. But unfortunately we can't do that. The reason lies not in morality but in theology. The Christian Right is convinced that there is only one source of moral values and that is the Bible. They are convinced that there is only one way to achieve morality and that is to follow the guidance contained in the Bible, as they happen to find it. We cannot talk about the truly important concerns we share because in truth we do not speak the same language: the Christian Right refuses to acknowledge that there is any reality outside their scripture and the rest of us refuse to rely solely on one ancient text, much less their interpretation of that text. The result, unfortunately, is to increase divisiveness at a time we are most in need of unity.

Having said that, their intolerance demands a continuing response to the substance of what they advocate while at the same time not becoming so frightened as to endanger our own freedom and theirs.

The Christian Right claims a great membership and fast growth, but that may be designed more to scare us than to reflect their real participation. Certainly the allegations that the Christian Coalition controls the Republican Party clearly are exaggerated. Yes, politicians will appear at their rallies and they will say what those present want to hear; these people are voters, after all, and well organized ones at that. Much of the conservative political agenda happens to fit neatly with the agenda the Christian Right discovers in the Bible.

More important, people are frustrated with the failure of the liberal agenda that has dominated the nation these last sixty years to deliver on its promises. They are scared, uncertain, distressed. People are looking for something that will provide them comfort, assurance, and security.

The liberal response to this ought to be neither a return to the failures of the past, as conservatives suggest, nor to sustain the failures that do exist in the present. Rather our purpose, our function, ought to be to point to a new way, to new directions, based on the rational concept of people living in a world community. Difficult as it may be, we need to tell people the answer lies not in greed but in sharing. We need to point out the truth that human well-being comes not from any scripture but from people working together and helping one another. We need to emphasize that morality is not derived from fear of God, but from an understanding of the human community. We need to remember always that freedom is interdependent, that only when we accept and acknowledge individual differences and the benefits that derive from the specialized skills each of us have, can each of us become free.

To convey that message, to implement that morality -- which is far more Biblical, far more scriptural, than anything the Christian Right finds -- is the challenge facing the religious liberal today.

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