

What's needed is a little more activity

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From Where I Stand

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"The spirit we have, not the work we do, is what makes us important to the people around us."

Rome, we learned at the time of the last conclave, is worrying a lot these days about the tension between secularism and spirituality. They want to reclaim Europe from secularism. They want a spiritual society. I'm still trying to figure out what those things are and how you tell the difference between them in this society.

One thing I know: we are apparently steeped in both of them. A lot of people have stopped going to church, yes, but, at the same time, the National Book Study Group calculates that one of the two major growth dimensions of the publishing industry this year will be in religion. That, in fact, has been the trend for years now.

Parishes of all denominations, from one end of the country to the other, have been spawning book discussion groups in great number. Every newspaper is full of "religion stories" -- of popes and pedophile priests, of church disciplines and denominational demonstrations everywhere.

In the United States, it is getting harder and harder to find a story about politics that is not really, at base, a story about religion. We are awash in stories about the desecration of the Quran, about the veto of scientific research for the sake of religious values, about political parties in our own country and which of them is "moral" and which is not. What's more the various measures of the "morality" of the two seem to translate into votes, into legislation, into campaigns, into elections.

The country -- the world -- is, in fact, being torn apart by religion.

Strange. I thought it was supposed to be the other way around. I thought religion was supposed to be what brought us together, what made us compassionate, what broadened our hearts, not narrowed them.

So what is the problem -- and what is the answer?

The problem does not seem to be over religion in general. Most everybody, at least most everybody in the United States, seems to think that religion is itself a good thing. No, the tensions come over religion in particular, over what is considered moral or immoral by each of them. "Religion" has become a battleground over exactly what constitutes the morality.

For some, the great moral issues have to do with stem cell research, therapeutic abortion, homosexuality, the use of life support systems, birth control and fertility technology. Anything, in other words, remotely connected to sex and sexuality. The "life issues" we call them.

For others, as important as those issues may be, that list is not complete. "Life issues," they argue, have as much to do with our policies on war, on capital punishment, on torture, on subsidized housing and food stamps and education and universal medical care -- on anything that dignifies or diminishes life after birth -- as they do about science, sex and sexuality.

We call those people "liberals" when what we really mean is "libertines," because they reach different conclusions about what morality may really demand where all the life issues are concerned.

As a result, we make a hybrid out of public and private religion. Some things we claim are private; other things are to be regulated in the public domain. The medical insurance that will keep a person alive is their own responsibility; the way they choose to conceive or not conceive life is ours.

The question is, who or what will bring both sides together?

Every once in a while a light into the resolution of the stand-off shines from out a place where we might least expect it. A bit of that happened, I think.

Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, held its annual Commencement ceremony last week. This faith-based institution was one of only two schools in which George Bush would give commencement speeches this season. The other was the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis.

No problem here.

Calvin, after all, derives its mission from the Dutch Reformed Tradition, a strain of evangelical Calvinism long known for its no-nonsense approach to religion and life, to their integration, to their joint role in human sanctification. They believe in the inerrancy of scripture. Some might even think of them as sure to be what is now called 'far right' in the same way liberals are considered "libertine."

After all, the school's Web site is clear about its purpose: it educates for the sake of renewing the world. At Calvin, clearly, such things are taken seriously.

On graduation day, the school made the connection clear. First, a third the college's 300 faculty members, according to a Reuters' report, protested the choice of George Bush as commencement speaker. An equally large part of the graduating class did the same.

Some refused to applaud his presence. Others wore buttons that read, "God is not a Democrat or a Republican."

The full-page ad they published in the local newspaper defined their concerns: the war in Iraq, the devastation of natural resources, the loss of Social Security.

Here, in other words, was a large group of young people and their faculty who could very well have been expected to see only one side of the life issues but who were making some very clear, very real, very present connections between two of the other most striking mandates of scripture, as well. Alongside "Woman, go and sin no more," they put on an equal footing, "Young man, sell what you have and give to the poor," and "Peter, put away your sword."

These were people who refused to be either simply "Left" or simplistically "Right." These were people for whom the spiritual included all of life.

That sounds like inerrancy to me. It also sounds as if being "spiritual" has a lot more to it than being part of a "Right to Birth" movement and calling it "the Right to Life."

Maybe Rome is right to worry about secularism. In fact, maybe we're masking the worst kind of partisan secularism under the guise of the spiritual.

I have a notion that we have a lot more people of every denomination who put both "Right" and "Left" together but whose voices are being shut out of the national debate in favor of the extremists in both camps. Like these young people and their mentors at Calvin College, a truly evangelical school, they know that the fullness of the Christian message about life requires a great deal more morality than simply a concern about sex and sexuality. Most of all, they seem to know that governments that ignore that message in the name of Christianity may be the most immoral of them all.

From where I stand, it seems that maybe the rest of us should listen to these students who hold one tradition dearly enough to speak with courage for all of it. The president in his commencement address told them to be active in society. And, for all our sakes, they were.