

Our Two Cents Worth

Beliefs and the Separation of Church and State

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Belief

I was listening to a call-in talk-radio show today when, in the ensuing conversation, the host stated that the beliefs of public officials must be divorced from the actions and decisions of their office. It got me to thinking as to whether such a thing is possible.

I think that it can be demonstrated that everybody has beliefs, and that everybody acts and decides in accordance with these beliefs. It is therefore impossible to separate ones beliefs from their decisions and actions. The above statement made by the talk-show host, made in relation to a politician's Christian belief, reveals an underlying hypocrisy and bigotry towards Christianity that runs rampant in our secular society.

We all have beliefs

First, let's examine the word "belief" in any realm, not just religious belief. Webster's dictionary defines belief as "a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing", and further as believing "a tenet or body of tenets held by a group." Let us now try to imagine a person with no beliefs.

The opposite of belief is disbelief or unbelief. Webster's defines these terms respectively as the "mental rejection of something as untrue" and "incredulity or skepticism." For a person to operate in the world as a complete unbeliever or disbeliever requires that person to be utterly indifferent and ambivalent about everything. Such a person would have no thought, opinion or emotion on anything. One could argue that the rejection of something as untrue, being incredulous or skeptical, is itself a belief system since one must have an opposing thought that something else is true, credible, or believable. This could lead to a circular argument where one must conclude that nothing is true, credible or believable. The ultimate goal then of the pure disbeliever would be the attainment of a vegetative state of mind. This is hardly a laudable goal for anyone with an ounce of reasoning. So we must conclude that for anybody to operate in our world, beliefs are a necessity.

We all act on our beliefs

Is it then reasonable to suggest that we can divorce our decisions and actions from our system of beliefs? If we can, then on what basis or premise are our decisions and actions made? If there is no rational link between what we believe and what we say or do, then the decisions and actions that result must be those of an insane person. So the decisions and actions of a sane mind must be influenced by an individuals beliefs. For the great majority of people in society, the results of their belief system have little impact on the society in which they live. For those who live a public life – politicians, great leaders, people of celebrity – the results of their belief system can have a great impact on society.

The suggestion that a person can make decisions and take actions completely divorced from their beliefs is illogical in the extreme. For the course of action that is decided upon must be the result of a thoughtful comparative analysis of the options. And to what must the options be weighed against but a persons system of beliefs. The decision to act contrary to ones set of beliefs creates conflict and angst within the individual. Unabated, contrariness to ones belief system could lead to all manner of psychological problems such as depression and psychosis. To resolve continual conflict requires one to continually adjust their system of beliefs which is perhaps the definition of relativism. In this light, recanting, confessing and performing penance or restitution is indeed good for the soul.

Religion is not welcome in public discourse

Let us now narrow the scope to the matter of religious beliefs. Are the decisions of a public figure influenced by their religious beliefs? They must be. If they are not, then the public profession of ones religious beliefs is meaningless. This has particular currency in Canada where the media microscope has focused on the religious beliefs of Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day.

The media and popular politics assert that there must be a separation of church and state. The application of this assertion to any public figure that professes a set of religious beliefs is simply not possible, unless we desire to witness the public deconstruction of a persons principles. Thus by this line of reasoning, any person that subscribes to the tenets of a religion is automatically disqualified from public office. But non-religious belief systems are not scrutinized to the extent of religious belief systems by the media. And as has been demonstrated, we all have belief systems and act on them accordingly. To single out religious belief systems as a litmus test for the acceptability of one to serve in a public office is hypocritical and bigoted.

Two issues of particular offence to Catholic teaching are those of homosexuality and abortion. Svend Robinson, Member of Parliament for Burnaby-Douglas is a professed homosexual. Does his belief system in the acceptability of the homosexual life style influence his public position and statements? Of course it does and it is a matter of public record. His antagonism towards Catholic teaching on homosexuality has manifested itself in his desire to remove references to God from the Canadian constitution and his campaign to recognize homosexual unions as equivalent to heterosexual marriage. Yet where are the media cries that his personal homosexual-oriented belief system be separate from his public office? Don't his decisions and actions have a profound effect on Canadian society?

On abortion, we have the public words and actions of Jean Chretien and Henry Morgentaler that both profess a woman's right to choose to kill their unborn child. Are these positions not the result of their individual system of beliefs? Yet the media does not decry the belief systems that result in these professions. One of the supposed fears of a politician with Christian values that oppose abortion and homosexuality is that his decisions on these moral issues will influence or be imposed on society. Yet there is no fear of societal influence or imposition when an opposing belief system in favour of abortion or legitimizing homosexual unions is applied.

We must therefore conclude that it is only acceptable to divorce ones belief system from public discourse when that belief system is religious in nature. Thus we have hypocrisy and bigotry in our nation governing our society. If you have a religious belief system founded on

moral truths, then your values and principles are not welcome in the public arena, but any other belief system is welcome. Tolerance of ones belief system is exclusive of religious beliefs.

Catholics must come to realize that in Canadian society today, secular intolerance of our beliefs in the public arena is entirely acceptable by those who supposedly profess tolerance of the views of others. Is the day soon upon us where there is a complete denial of the right to engage in the public discourse of national policies in the perspective of religious beliefs? Let us pray that this will not come to pass.