

Op-Ed Commentary:

[This is in response to the op-ed essay "Government Is Not God's Work" by Robert H. Meneilly, which appeared in the *Sunday Times* on August 29.]

Don't Be So Afraid of God

By Dr. Jerry Cammarata

Rev. Robert H. Meneilly seems a very frightened man, one whose nightmares center around what he perceives to be a plot to take over the United States by something he and others have termed the "religious right."

The aspect of that plot which seems to worry Rev. Meneilly most, in fact makes him "tremble for my country" and "tremble for our nation" as he puts it, is the possibility that a horrific phenomenon called "family values" will be foisted upon an unsuspecting population and bring about the downfall of America. In an assertion that sounds more than a bit paranoid, he contends that "family values" are, in actuality, "code words for an evangelical socio-religious perspective, used to marginalize, if not blackball, non-conformists." Whew!

In fact, the principles generally referred to as "family values" are not a creation of the Christian Coalition nor of the Focus on the Family Crusade, two of the reverend's most worrisome threats, nor are they the invention of any other religious group or denomination. They are, rather, generally agreed upon, long-held tenets of the people of our nation (the majority of whom also happen to profess religiosity), outgrowths of the complex forces of culture, history, tradition, family, religion and community and, yes, individual thought and judgement. To depict those values as the agenda-driven constructs of a cabal of televangelists is to reduce Rev. Meneilly's fellow citizens to the level of simpletons, naively accepting such dictates as they're

led to slaughter. How would he explain, I wonder, the atheist or agnostic, of which I know many, who profess identical "family values"?

The reverend warns glumly that the plotters have as one of their goals injecting their beliefs into the laws of our land, to "get the state to legislate what ... religion can't seem to do." Tacit in such statements is the belief that people's minds, or the collective consciousness of a nation, can somehow be compartmentalized into distinct, often contradictory, processes, one for law, another for principles. No matter how much tub-thumping may be employed to drown it out, the fact is that, in any democratic system, laws always have, do and will reflect the agreed-upon morality, principles and values of the people from whom they emanate and whom they govern. To do otherwise would be ridiculous.

Furthermore, it is not only the right, but an obligation of participating citizens, for parents, business owners, housewives, educators, politicians, secretaries, scientists, construction workers, as well as ministers and writers, to talk about, create and support appropriate community and national standards. Just because the end products of such discussions may parallel religious beliefs doesn't make them invalid nor indicate a desire to turn our nation into a theocracy.

One thing Rev. Meneilly seems to fail to comprehend is that "religion" in the most encompassing sense of the word, meaning faith in a superior force and a fixed set of principles and values that form the logical basis of an individual's actions, is an inescapable component of humanity. While he may revile the "religious right," he does not seem to realize that the secular humanism which pervades so many 20th Century agendas and is reflected in his essay, as well as the current mania for "political correctness" and, particularly, the brand of aggressive atheism which tries so hard to mask its bigotry under a facade of "neutrality," are all as much "religions" as Islam or Seventh Day Adventism. Deifying mankind or some portion of it, true believers pursue such faiths in the same way one would follow any other religion, preaching, proseletyzing, indoctrinating and converting, often with the

same zealotry, intolerance and fanaticism of which Rev. Meneilly darkly warns. So, by his standard, no one should be able to vote or hold office in America, since each of us follows some form of "religion."

Rev. Meneilly cites the Founding Fathers for their insistence that there be a separation of church and state in the new nation, as well as guarantees of religious freedom for all, and there aren't many Americans who wouldn't cheer that with a resounding "Amen!" But there's quite a distinction between separating church and state and outlawing any recognition of the existence of God. The Declaration of Independence, for example, is rife with references to God, including the phrase "... that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights ..." and concluding the document "... with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence ...". There isn't a courtroom or official commission in America where witnesses do not swear to tell the truth "so help me God," and the Pledge of Allegiance, of course, includes the phrase "under God," added to it as recently as 1954. The Congress of the United States begins each session with a prayer, and so far that has not been found to be unconstitutional.

What this whole argument boils down to, it seems to me, is what representative government is all about. At every level, from the presidency to the local school board on which I serve, two forces come into play when an elected official performs his or her functions. First, there is the set of beliefs, positions, interests and values of the people whom the official represents. Second, there is the set of beliefs, positions, interests and values of the individual himself. That public official cannot have the hubris to believe that he is elected simply to vote his personal opinion; his mandate is to *represent* the views of his constituents. On the other hand, no one can expect any human being to be an automaton whose own conscience will play no role in his decisions.

Such thorny issues as abortion, homosexuality and assisted suicide have

recently brought this conflict to the fore. The response of Rev. Meneilly and others is to try to exclude from the governmental process those who don't believe as he does. His railing against the "religious right" is, to use his terminology, employing code words to try to silence those whose values happen to coincide with those of some religions, but the fact is that his adversaries are not religious fanatics nor extremists. For the most part, they are simply average parents who seek for themselves and their children a restoration of what they understand to be community values.

Finally and obviously, as Rev. Meneilly and others would be the first to point out, there is a document called the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. What seems to worry the minister is that those horrid people he categorizes as the "religious right" dare to speak out publicly and try to influence others with their views. Would he and other members of the "nonreligious left" deny the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells (not to mention the Pope, orthodox rabbis and strict Muslims who say very many of the same things) the right to express themselves?

Rev. Meneilly concludes that "This religious right confronts us with a threat far greater than the old threat of Communism." Shall we resurrect the format of 1950s'-style hearings and parade these suspects before a panel who'd ask "Are you now or have you ever been a member of an organized religion?", then jail, deport or cut the tongues out of those who respond affirmatively, or at least brand them with a scarlet "R" and forever ban them from holding public office?

I don't think that Rev. Meneilly need stay up nights in fear of a *coup d'etat* by the "religious right," any more than those of us who support the concept of "family values" really believe that our nation would be so foolish as to swallow whole the agenda of the left. What our Founding Fathers brilliantly provided was a form of government in which all voices are heard and matter. Attempts to exclude one group or another from that wonderful forum are as old as the republic itself, and, thank God, such efforts are doomed to failure.

Government Is Not God's Work

By Robert H. Menelly

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PRAIRIE VILLAGE, Kan. 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 and you see religious extremists lighting the fuses — whether in Northern Ireland, Israel, Bosnia or California. Religious extremists are breeding all kinds of "culture wars." Religion can breed all kinds of harassment, bigotry, prejudice, intolerance and deception.

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 please 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 the most detestable and criminal ways — in the name of Jesus! The hate that certain extreme elements of the Christian community have cultivated

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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 movements in our country is what has become known as the religious right. So many wonderfully good and well-meaning people are being drawn in and are supporting its 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 Swaggert and Jerry Falwell. Their message sounds good, righteous and very Christian on the surface. Who can listen to clean-shaven, well-dressed and patriotic-sounding Pat Robertson talk about his Christian Coalition and not think, "That is exactly what this country needs — good old American patriotism?"

The thousands of good Christians who gather to hear James Dobson talk of his Focus on the Family Crusade may think: "Wow, that's the greatest, and every American kid 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 because that leads to promiscuity. Preach Mom at home in the kitchen and Dad bringing home all the bacon."

Focus on the Family appears to have a commendable mission. But it is a mission that is out to get the state to legislate what Mr. 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 church's 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 control of the Republican National Committee itself. Its second objective is to elect its candidates to hundreds, even thousands, of lower level public offices.

Once elected, they can begin to implement Mr. Robertson's Christian Coalition extremist views, and from there they can seek higher offices.

A pastor dissects the religious right's new goals.

They have put out a detailed manual, spelling out how to get in and manipulate the political process.

To be sure, any person should be free to run for any office, whatever his or her political party or religious affiliation. But these so-called stealth candidates, who conceal their ultimate purpose until elected, are mightily dangerous for local communities and the nation.

In office, these folks come out of their closets. They begin pushing their agenda on our schools, ranging from the teaching of creationism, guiding sex education programs and putting an end to school breakfast programs for the needy and day care for children of working parents — on the grounds that such programs undercut the family. In their view, children should eat at home with their

parents, even when there may be no parents; there or no food.

The religious right is also 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.

These extremists always refer to the United States as a "Christian nation." But look at history honestly. The very idea that the United States should be officially Christian was explicitly rejected by James Madison and the other Framers of our Constitution who insisted on a system of separation of church and state that guarantees religious freedom for all. "Christian nation," like "family values," are code words for an evangelical socio-religious perspective, used to marginalize, if not blackball, non-conformists.

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 Supreme Court declared it to be unconstitutional in 1963. Let's face it, fellow 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 struck down 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."

Voluntary prayer in the 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.

The Supreme Court put the responsibility back upon parents, where it belongs. A religion that must depend upon the state to do what it cannot do is not worthy of existence. Even Christianity.

This religious right confronts us with a threat far greater than the old threat of Communism. When the state and the church become entwined, it is religion that is the loser. I tremble for my country when I hear zealous religionists plaguing their good neighbors and women's health groups in the name of Jesus, who said: "A new commandment give to you; love one another as have loved you."

I tremble for our nation when I hear extremists discrediting our public school system, the only truly educational program left in our community. The public school takes 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 all our schools if we afford government support to private schools, for soon the funding state is sure to impose regulations. It is our freedom of religion that will ultimately be lost.

It may sound judgmental for one religionist in a pulpit to stand up and warn people about the threat of differing religionists. I pray that what I do today is discernment, not love, not judgment in any hate. I 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.