

The Values 'Plot'

Beyond the labels, average people wishing to restore American principles

By JERRY CAMMARATA

There suddenly seem to be a great many frightened people raising their voices in the media—in newspaper Op Ed pieces, magazine essays, television commentaries and radio talk shows—whose nightmare centers around what they perceive to be a plot to take over the United States by something that has come to be called the "religious right."

The aspect of that "plot" which seems to worry them most is the possibility that a horrific phenomenon called "family values" will be foisted upon an unsuspecting public and bring about the downfall of America. In a recent assertion in a widely distributed article one spokesman, a minister, contended that "family values" are, in actuality, "code words for an evangelical socioreligious 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, the Vatican, the Focus on the Family Crusade, a conference of Orthodox rabbis, the Archdiocese of New York or an Islamic coalition, 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, contrary to what these fearful people would have you believe, of individual thought and judgment.

To depict such values as the agenda-driven constructs of a cabal of Protestant televangelists and Catholic prelates is to reduce one's fellow citizens to the level of simpletons, naively accepting dictates as they're led to slaughter. How would such critics explain, I wonder, the atheists or agnostics, of whom I know many, who profess identical "family values"?

At the recent promulgation of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* by Pope John Paul II, which deals in its discussions of the Roman Catholic perspective on the nature of good and evil with such subjects as euthanasia, contraception, artificial insemination, premarital sex and abortion, instead of being greeted with respect and study as past papal encyclicals have been, even by their opponents, many of the values-fearing crowd couldn't wait to ridicule the document, shouting hysterically that the encyclical was an attack on freedom, Machiavellian, anti-this and anti-that. Even worse, some used it as an excuse to parade out a garbage heap of anti-Catholic rhetoric, the likes of which haven't been heard since the days of the Know-Nothing Party.

The alarmists glumly warn that family values "plotters" have as one of their goals injecting their beliefs into the laws of our land, getting "the state to legislate what religion can't seem to do," as one put it.

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 society,

laws always do and will reflect the agreed-upon morality, principles and values of the people from whom they emanate and whom they govern. For such legislation to do otherwise would be ridiculous.

Furthermore, it is not only the right, but an obligation, of any participating citizens—parents, business owners, doctors, housewives, educators, politicians, secretaries, scientists, construction workers, as well as commentators—to talk about, create and support appropriate community and national standards. The fact that the end products of such discussions may parallel religious beliefs

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. 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 forefront of our discussions and, often, heated debates at community meetings. The response of critics of family values is to try to

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doesn't make them invalid nor indicate a desire to turn our nation into a theocracy.

One thing the worriers seem 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 which form the logical basis of an individual's actions, is an inescapable component of humanity. While they may revile the "religious right," they do not seem to realize that the secular humanism and moral relativism which pervade so many 20th-century agendas and are reflected in their rhetoric, as well as the current mania for "political correctness" and, particularly, the brand of aggressive atheism which tries so hard to mask bigotry under a facade of "neutrality," are "religions" too. True believers pursue such "faiths" in the same way one would follow any other religion, preaching, proselytizing, indoctrinating and converting, often with the same zeal, intolerance and fanaticism of which they solemnly warn. So, by their own standard, no one should be able to vote or hold office in America, since each of us follows some form of "religion."

These fearful people always cite the Founding Fathers as they insist that there be a separation of church and state in our 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 full of references to God, including the oft-quoted phrase, "...they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights..." and the conclusion, "...with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence..." There isn't a courtroom or official commission in the United States 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 president is sworn in on a Bible and Congress begins each session with a prayer, and so far neither of these has been found 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 of the smallest town, two forces come into play when an elected official

exclude from the governmental process those who don't believe as they do. Their railing against the "religious right" is, to use their own terminology, employing "code words" to try to silence those whose values happen to coincide with those of some religions, but the fact is that the majority of their adversaries are not religious fanatics nor extremists at all. For the most part, they are simply average young men and women, senior citizens and parents who seek for themselves and their children a restoration of what they understand to be the common principles of the American people.

Finally and obviously, as those who oppose family values and celebrate civil liberties 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 worriers is that those horrid people they categorize as the "religious right" dare to speak out publicly and try to influence others with their views. Would these members of the "nonreligious left" deny the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells, Cardinal O'Connor, Orthodox rabbis and strict Muslims—all American citizens who happen to say many of the same things—the right to express themselves?

One commentator goes so far as to contend, "This religious right confronts us with a threat far greater than the old threat of communism." Shall we resurrect the format of the 1950s hearings and parade these suspects before a panel which would ask, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of an organized religion?" then jail or deport those who respond affirmatively, or brand them with a scarlet "R" and forever ban them from holding public office?

I don't think that the anti-family-values crusaders need stay up nights in fear of a *coup d'état* 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.

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