

COLUMNISTS

Freedom calls for some sensibility

There is a fine line between poetry and gibberish; so, too, between religious zeal and fanaticism. People of religious faith need to be sensitive to this reality because it explains, at least in part, the animosity many secularists bear toward religion and its adherents.

Religious people can become defensive and resentful when civil libertarians use the might of the law to circumscribe religious activities in the public realm. They accuse the civil libertarians of trying to expel religion from "the public square."

But such complaints misunderstand the nature and the genius of the American constitutional experiment, fashioned by people whose memories were seared with images of prejudice and persecution against citizens of a religious tradition different from the majority's or of no religious tradition at all.

The founders were determined not to let that happen in their new land. The right of religious people to practice their faith would be legally guaranteed, but no single religion would be allowed to dominate the rest. Adherence to a minority religion would never be grounds for civil penalty or social discrimination, nor would anyone be punished for professing no religion at all.

Unfortunately, there are religious people who are not content with their own legally guaranteed freedom to believe whatever they wish and to worship in any



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

way they deem appropriate. They regard it as their moral obligation to impose their own beliefs, rituals and social codes on everyone else.

When the leaders of organizations like the Christian Coalition complain that "people of faith" are discriminated against because the government and the courts deny them the use of public facilities for religious events and displays, or prohibit the diversion of tax dollars to the support of private, religiously-sponsored schools, or place restraints on the partisan political activity of tax-exempt religious groups, they forget or ignore the reasons for the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The First Amendment was formulated to protect the rights of religious individuals and communities to profess and practice their faith freely, without governmental interference, so long as the public good is not harmed. But the First Amendment was also designed to insure

that no single religion would become the established religion of the nation, and that included the Christian religion and its Judeo-Christian hybrid.

An extreme version of this plaintive mentality surfaced recently in Alabama where a local judge, in violation of a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, posted a copy of the Ten Commandments in his courtroom and refused to take it down.

The argument that the Ten Commandments are authoritative only for Jews and Christians made no impression on the judge and his supporters. For them, the opposition was yet another manifestation of prejudice against "people of faith."

But millions of Americans who are neither religious nor belong to any of the dominant Christian churches know full well what can happen when one religious group secures enough political power to impose its will on an entire society. The history of the Spanish Inquisition is only one case in point. Recent news stories out of Afghanistan and Iran provide others.

In Afghanistan, the militant Islamic movement known as the Taliban are now in control of most of the country. They amputate the hands of thieves, stone adulterers to death, publicly lash women who wear makeup or are in conversation with men who are not their husbands, and prohibit girls and women from studying and working outside the home and from appearing in public without the

traditional burqa, a full-body garment that covers all but the eyes.

In Iran, where another form of Islamic fundamentalism (Shiite rather than Sunni) holds sway, young men and women are still arrested for being together in public, Western music and films are outlawed, private homes are raided for evidence of alcohol and proscribed forms of entertainment, women are required to wear the chador, and romances between unmarried men and women are punishable by fines, prison, or, when sexual contact is alleged, lashing.

Many religious people would surely insist that these aren't expressions of authentic faith, but of fanaticism. To confuse the two, they would argue, is to do an injustice to religion.

But the problem is that one person's or group's fanaticism is another's religious zeal, commanded by God and the sacred book.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many non-religious people and members of religious minorities cringe when members of dominant religious groups complain about discrimination against "people of faith" just because they can't get the government and the courts to enforce their own brand of religiosity?

A thought for the Fourth of July.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Church stands on solid rock

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 16:13-19. (R1) Acts 12: 1-11. (R2) 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18.

In the first reading Luke mentions the martyrdom of James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee. However, it is not his martyrdom that Luke concentrates on, but on the deliverance of Peter, due to the wonderful intervention of the Lord.

In Acts, Luke shows that Peter is the vicar of Christ, his successor. No doubt Herod realized Peter's leadership and so arrested him after having executed James. Knowing how important Peter was to the Christian community, security precautions were doubled: two guards, two chains, four squads of sentries (16 soldiers) and an impassable iron outer gate.

The early church also realized the importance of Peter and so she had recourse to her only weapon: prayer. "The church prayed fervently to God for him." And God responded in an extraordinary way.

On the night before his trial, Peter slept. He wanted a good night's sleep so he took off his belt, his sandals and his cloak. What a good conscience Peter had! What confidence in the Lord! He was sleeping soundly when an angel of the Lord appeared. The angel supervised and directed his dressing. He told Peter to follow him. They passed the sentries and the iron gate swung open of its



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

own accord. In a street away from the jail, the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and realized this was no dream but that the Lord himself had rescued him.

The Gospel too is devoted to Peter, only the second reading is given to Paul, as if to emphasize the primacy of Peter.

The Gospel deals with the promise of Jesus to make Peter the head of the church. He promises him, and him alone, the keys to the kingdom. These keys appear on the papal flag. A year later, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee the risen Jesus fulfills his promise. Jesus is the good shepherd, so just before leaving the sheep, he gives them another shepherd to take his place: Peter. "Feed my lambs and feed my sheep."

In the second reading Paul speaks of his impending death. The tone is one of confident faith. He faces death with absolute trust that God will rescue him from all his trials and bring him to eter-

nal life. He speaks of his whole life as a sacrifice to God — poured out for God like a libation. A libation was a sacrificial rite in which a liquid, such as wine or oil, was poured out as an offering to God. Such was Paul's life: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith — because the Lord stood by me and gave me strength." All that remains is the crown.

Perhaps there is nothing so sublime in all the writings of Paul as those words of the aged athlete, whose faith is stronger than ever, who knows no weariness, who leaves the stadium because the race has been won. St. Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded on the Ostian Way. The magnificent basilica of "St. Paul Outside the Walls," near Tre Fontaine, marks the place of his martyrdom.

St. Peter was martyred in the Circus of Nero. He died by crucifixion, like Jesus. Over his grave the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, erected the first church of St. Peter.

I remember my first visit to Rome in 1950. In St. Peter's I took the "ascensorell" (elevator) to the rim of the vast dome of Michaelangelo. The walkway around the rim was 400 feet above the main altar. I looked down on the baldachino of Bernini over the main altar. In front of the altar is a stairway leading to the tomb of St. Peter.

Around the rim of the dome are the words written in mosaic, 8 feet high: *Tu*

es Petrus et supra hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam mean ...

"Thou art Peter and under this rock I will build my church ..."

A chill went down my spine as I saw that this greatest church in Christendom was built on Peter — literally fulfilling the words Jesus spoke in the Gospel. O happy Rome washed by the blood of Peter and Paul.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, June 30

Genesis 18:16-33;

Matthew 8:18-22

Tuesday, July 1

Genesis 19:15-29;

Matthew 8:23-27

Wednesday, July 2

Genesis 21:5, 8-20;

Matthew 8:28-34

Thursday, July 3

Ephesians 2:19-22;

John 20:24-29

Friday, July 4

Genesis 23:14, 19; 24:1-8, 62-67;

Matthew 9:9-13

Saturday, July 5

Genesis 27:1-5, 15-29;

Matthew 9:14-17

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