

Whose Religious Views Should the State Choose?

There is a war on religion in this country. If you doubt it, just ask Newt Gingrich. Or listen to Rick Santorum. They are convinced that President Obama (you know, the guy who is either a devout Muslim or a godless secularist) is out to destroy the Christian faith because he thinks health insurance should cover contraception.

Oh the horror of the President's radical views. First he insists that pre-existing conditions should not be used against people seeking insurance, and now he believes women have the right to control their reproductive destinies. The walls of churches everywhere are shaking with the force of such cruel legislation.

I'm weary of this phony war. I understand that people have strong disagreements on issues related to their faith. This has always been the case and always will be. In a country that celebrates the freedom of speech and the right to dissent against authorities, such arguments are part of the landscape.

What strikes me as ridiculous is the assumption that these debates are between the people of faith vs. the vile unbelievers. Obama, Santorum, and Gingrich are all Christians. Obama's biggest crisis in his 2008 campaign was connected to his church membership. Mitt Romney, still the presumed leader for the Republican nomination, also is a person whose faith is a central question mark to his potential candidacy.

So, let's set aside this false dichotomy and start telling the truth. The Christian faith comes in many different flavors. Just among the four politicians mentioned above you have two conservative Catholics, a progressive Protestant, and a Mormon.

But to give you an idea of how broad the religious spectrum is in this country, did you realize there are more than fifty different Baptist sects in the United States? Just in that one tradition (which is my own, so I feel free to air the dirty laundry), the Baptists have disagreed with one another so vehemently that they felt the need to divide dozens of times.

So when we argue about issues like women's reproductive choice, or the rights of LGBTQ citizens, can we at least stop framing it as an argument of the believers vs. the non-believers? The reality is that some of us are deeply motivated by our faith to stand up for the rights of women and LGBTQ people. After all, I follow the teachings of a man named Jesus of Nazareth who stood by the outcasts of society before the authorities killed him for it.

What really gets me peeved is not only when politicians suggest their view of faith is the only correct one, but they want the courts and legislators to favor that view against all others. Which is exactly what is happening in North Carolina in our struggle against the proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

The two primary arguments made against same-sex marriage by politicians in this state are that it changes an institution that has never been changed and it is unbiblical. The first point is patently false as the definition of who is allowed to marry whom has changed numerous times throughout history. The second point is even more disturbing.

Those politicians have apparently forgotten these key words from the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Legislators may be motivated by their faith in shaping their views, but they are not allowed to deny an entire

group of citizens basic rights because they think the Bible demands it. Doing so favors one religious view over the religious convictions of people like me who believe marriage equality is what God wants for this world.

The problem for the conservatives who oppose marriage equality on religious grounds is that when you deny them the biblical basis of their argument, which is what happens in a court of law, there is nothing left to their position. We have seen that now twice in the federal courts in California.

When Federal Judge Vaughn Walker ruled that Proposition 8 was unconstitutional, he noted that the lawyers representing the state's referendum outlawing same-sex marriage had not made a case. Months later when a three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals heard arguments from both sides, the proponents for Prop 8 still made no constitutional case to support it. Could it be the problem is there is no good constitutional case to deny millions of Americans the right to marry?

If the only point the opponents of marriage equality in North Carolina are going to make is that the Christian tradition demands marriage be reserved for heterosexuals, then we have a problem. I am a Christian who believes just the opposite. Whose religious view is correct? We can fight about that all day, but religious squabbles should never be settled by the state's constitution.