

Intolerance Swaddled in Faith

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On Sept. 12, 1960, John F. Kennedy, in a tight presidential race with Richard Nixon, addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. In an attempt to reassure those Americans who thought a Catholic president would take orders from the Vatican or somehow impose Catholic doctrine on a majority Protestant nation, Kennedy not only said he believed that "the separation of church and state is absolute" but added something else as well: "I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair." For this, Sen. Rick Santorum has rhetorically excommunicated him.

Kennedy's position did "much harm in America," Santorum told the National Catholic Reporter last year. "All of us have heard people say, 'I privately am against abortion, homosexual marriage, stem cell research, cloning. But who am I to decide that it's not right for someone else?' It sounds good. But it is the corruption of freedom of conscience."

In contrast, Santorum named George W. Bush—a Methodist—as a president with the right approach. He dubbed him "the first Catholic president of the United States." Goodbye, JFK.

As it happens, Santorum was interviewed in Rome, where he was attending a celebration marking the 100th anniversary of Opus Dei, the archconservative Catholic movement. Among other things, the movement believes in the "coherence" between faith and politics. While the National Catholic Reporter said that Santorum is not an Opus Dei member, his words suggest he is in agreement with its tenets.

None of this would matter particularly if Santorum had not recently unloaded his views on homosexuality to the Associated Press. They are by now famous, but just to review, he predicted that if consensual sex between persons of the same sex were legalized—it is illegal in Texas and some other states—it would lead to the legalization of bigamy, polygamy, adultery and even incest. He then went on to make a distinction between homosexuality, which can be tolerated, and homosexual acts, which cannot. For these views, I essentially called Santorum a "moron."

Predictably, a frenzied Internet lynch mob responded in smokin' e-mails that it was I, not Santorum, who was a moron. Less predictably, and more interestingly, others said that Santorum was merely echoing the position of the Vatican on such matters and therefore his views ought to be re-

spected.

Here we get back to Kennedy. He gave that speech in Houston because most Americans did not share his faith—some of them to the point of ludicrous bigotry. Others, though, merely had some qualms. Therefore, he was assuring them all that he would not try to translate his faith into public policy. His Roman Catholicism would remain "his own private affair."

Santorum rejects that approach—and, importantly, so do others of his bent, whatever their religion. In doing so, they sometimes advance beliefs about which there is no consensus. It is one thing to refer to the Judeo-Christian heritage to justify a ban on polygamy, which is often just another term for the exploitation of women, or on incest, where children are often victimized. But it is quite another thing to give the police the power to invade your home and arrest you for a consensual sex act with another adult—which is what happened in Texas—or read you your Miranda rights for committing adultery. Many Americans would be appalled by that.

Worse, in advancing religious arguments for public policy, Santorum and others foreclose both debate and compromise—the basic ingredients of democracy. If you think, simply as a matter of faith, that homosexual sex ought to be a crime, then I cannot reason with you. We might as well argue over the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth or whether Muhammad really ascended to heaven on a winged horse. As history has shown, when these issues get into the public square, absolutes are declared and swords are drawn.

You hear a lot of talk nowadays about how godless this nation has become—downright immoral, if you ask some. The prescription supposedly is to give religion some muscle, bring it back into the schools and into public life in general. George Bush, from everything he says, favors that approach—and the White House, beholden to religious conservatives, waxed Orwellian about Santorum, pronouncing him "an inclusive man."

Rick Santorum serves as a warning. His zealotry, his intolerance swaddled in the tenderness of faith, is polarizing and downright frightening. He does not—he cannot—speak for those of us who do not share his faith, although we all must respect his right to practice it. John Kennedy had the right approach in these matters. He didn't run as a Catholic but as a Democrat. On account of that, he won as both.

SHOW, THEN TELL, YOUR FAITH: The typical modern way to learn about another religion is to read and study its sacred texts. This is especially true for the so-called “people of the book” religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But Brent Plate, who teaches religion and the visual arts at Texas Christian University, argues that religions, before they were committed to words, involved phenomena performed, seen, heard and experienced at an aesthetic level. So rather than simply study the words of religions, we ought also to look at their visual images, their art. This should not be hard for Christians to comprehend, who they believe that the Word was not first of all written but embodied. Plate points out that the Book of Revelation begins with the “Seer” on the island of Patmos having had some visions, after which he hears a voice say to him, “Now, write what you have seen” (interview in the *Door Magazine*, January/February).

■ One quote, not on time, but on place. Columnist John Podhoretz retells a Groucho Marx story: “Told he could not enter a restricted swimming club with his daughter in tow, he protested that, since the little girl was only half Jewish, maybe she could be allowed to enter the pool up to her knees.”

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Context
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A strong wall

An old rabbinic teaching says that the one who prays within the home surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron.

—William Barclay

“We encounter God’s presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life.” —from A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism