

## Good Religionists and the Tony Dungy Factor

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many people assume that “true” religion is mostly or completely benign. They believe that, though religionists are fallible, certain “sacred” texts are not. Many Christians believe that all of the teachings of Jesus were necessarily good and true, and many Muslims believe likewise about Muhammad.

Religionists certainly have their role models, i.e. those individuals that represent the best that a particular religion has to offer. One such role model is Tony Dungy, the former Super Bowl-winning NFL coach and mentor to many former fallen NFL athletes, such as quarterback Michael Vick.

Dungy has demonstrated that a coach can lead his team to a Super Bowl victory without being mean and abusive to his players. Dungy has the reputation for never or rarely raising his voice and always respecting his players as adults. He was one of the most popular coaches of all time, and when he was coaching, he was one of those coaches that most NFL athletes wanted to play for. To many, Dungy represents all that is right with sports. He attributes his character and success to his deep Christian faith.

The problem is that *homophobia* can also be attributed to the Christian faith, among other faiths and philosophies. During the last NFL draft, head coach Jeff Fisher of the St. Louis Rams drafted Michael Sam, the first openly gay player ever drafted in the NFL. Many applauded Fisher for the move and saw it as a great day for the NFL in particular and for the world of sports in general.

However, in an interview in the July 23, 2014 issue of *The Tampa Tribune*, Dungy said, among other things, that he would not have wanted to deal with the problems that could come with drafting the league’s first openly gay player. “I wouldn’t have taken him. I wouldn’t want to deal with all of it,” he said. (<http://tbo.com/sports/bucs/nfl-holding-players-to-higher-standard-20140720/>)

As some pundits have pointed out, just think if Branch Rickey would have had that attitude rather than select Jackie Robinson as the first Black player to integrate professional baseball. If such a move would have never been made, it is pretty certain that Dungy and other Blacks would have never even played in the NFL, let alone had the opportunity to coach.

It is cowardly and hypocritical to accredit Dungy’s coaching success to “true” Christianity, yet to attribute his opposition to homosexuality to “false” Christianity. As difficult as it is for progressive Christians to accept, homophobia is as much a part of Christianity as is good sportsmanship. (Leviticus 18:22 calls homosexuality an ‘abomination.’)

Dungy beautifully demonstrates the paradox that is religion. What the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll said about the Catholic Church could have been said about Christianity in general: “In one hand she carries the alms dish, in the other, the dagger.” Christianity can certainly make a good person better and a bad person worse.

The late Christopher Hitchens beautifully demonstrated the paradox of religion in his book on Mother Teresa, *The Missionary Position*. Though everyone wants to focus obsessively on the late nun’s charity, she also cavorted with dictators, glorified suffering and poverty, did not give serious attention to the need for sanitary conditions for the poor, etc. Yet when these glaring faults are mentioned, many critics complain about alleged “religion bashing.”

The best religious leaders of the civil rights movement were also sexist. They believed that only men were fit to lead and that women should be in the background. Many Black feminist scholars have had to resort to revisionist history to correct the record by demonstrating that Black women were an integral part of the movement.

However, why should this sexism be surprising? If we are to accept the idea that the Christian faith inspired religious leaders to fight for civil rights, why should we not also acknowledge the fact that the Bible was written by biased patriarchs? The Bible blames woman for the “Fall of Man” (Genesis 3:15-16) and condones sexism throughout its pages (e.g. Ephesians 5:22.)

Some religious apologists provide many reasons as to why one should never seriously critique deeply cherished religious beliefs. For example, many people maintain that there are many lonely, elderly fearful women that are merely trying to live out their later years. They desperately need something—anything – to hold onto. Yet many of these nice old ladies also believe in and promote patriarchy, denounce homosexuality, believe that all non-Christians will burn in hell, vote for powerful, reactionary politicians, etc.

The ugly truth is that good religion and good religionists are not necessarily benign. Indeed, the same religion that gave us Mother Teresa is the same religion that gave us Adolf Hitler.