

On Religiously Sanctioned Bigotry

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

In recent weeks there have been disturbing stories in the news about people using religion to make life miserable for others. There is the story of certain Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men on numerous flights from New York to Israel refusing to sit next to women because it is allegedly against their religion. These religious fanatics, not surprisingly, insist that everyone must respect their deeply cherished religious values.

Perhaps the best known case is the Orwellian titled Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of Indiana. It was clear that the intent of the bill was to permit conservative Christian businesses to discriminate against LGBT customers. It was warmly embraced by Roman Catholic nuns and priests, those long-time guardians of LGBT rights. However, Governor Mike Pence, who hopes to become President, changed the bill so that it specifically forbids discrimination against LGBT people.

In this latter case, reactionary religionists insist that their opposition to homosexuality is religiously based, and that, yes, their values should be respected. Yet in the past, reactionary religionists objected to interracial sexual relations. Indeed, it was not until 1967 that interracial marriage was legalized all throughout the U.S.

Religious nuts could rationalize their bigotry in a great number of cases – and historically, they have done so. They could discriminate against fornicators, people who use contraception, or women who have received abortions, adulterers, disobedient children, people who drink alcoholic beverages, people that worship “false” gods” or no God at all, and so forth. Just pick your most hated sin and let the discrimination begin.

The aforementioned Ultra-Orthodox Jews think nothing of using their religion to harm women. They obviously would respect the rights of reactionary Christians that believe all Jews are going to burn in hell. After all, we have to respect

everyone's faith and values. According to I Thessalonians, 2:15, Christians are to look warily upon the Jews "Who both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men." Do we respect these religious teachings, or do we muster the moral courage to stand up for that which is right?

For years, conservative Christians believed that Black people were the children of Ham and cursed to live in servitude forever. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a.k.a. the Mormons, used to believe that Blacks could not make it into Heaven. How many Black people are willing to respect such a belief? Should it not be obvious that some ideas are simply odious and must be rejected by all decent, right-thinking people, no matter where these ideas originate?

The Taliban, ISIS, and other religious fanatics have destroyed historical artifacts and buried history itself because, according to their religious beliefs, certain works of art are an offense to Islam. We blindly respect religion at our own peril.

In Saudi Arabia and other theocratic states, men will not even shake hands with women, as women will inevitably tempt them into sexual immorality. In many nations, women are victimized by Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also known as genital cutting. There is no shortage of people willing to defend this brutal practice in the name of culture and tradition.

I could go on and on giving numerous examples of how deeply cherished religious ideas have ruined the lives of millions. Yet why should religious insanity, intolerance and bigotry ever be permitted to trump legitimate human rights? We put ourselves in a position where we ultimately respect harmful religious ideas more than we respect human beings. And that is sick!

One of the problems is that people want to *be* bigots, but they do not want to be *called* bigots. And the best way to shield oneself from that charge is by promoting bigotry under the cloak of God, religion, culture, tradition, values or patriotism. This subterfuge almost always works like a charm.

This is why humanism is so crucial. In humanism, what is of primary importance is the welfare of human beings – not the supposed will of God or anything else. In humanism, ethical behavior is determined by its consequences to individuals and

society. If the consequences are good or fair, the actions are so. Mindless obedience to the supposed will of God, on the other hand, continues to lead to suffering throughout the globe.

The world needs more courageous people to come forward and stand up for humanity. We must free people from the tyranny of their religions and other deeply cherished institutions and ideas. As long as people continue to place higher value upon the supposed word of God than on what is best for human beings, misery will continue to plague the human race.