

“CHURCH AND STATE” ISSUES

RAGE

From public property to public schools, a major issue is the separation of church and state. The issue has made headlines in a number of cases recently. We’ve taken the opportunity to highlight the most notable.

- One of the most high-profile cases involves the Mt. Soledad Cross, located on city property in San Diego. A veteran who happens to also be an atheist sued in 1989 to have the cross removed, saying it violates California’s constitutional ban on government exercise of religion. A U.S. district judge had originally ordered the cross to be removed back in 1991. Since then, a number of appeals have taken place. Most recently, President Bush signed a bill that transfers ownership of the cross and the memorial site to the federal government. Supporters of the memorial believe they have a better chance of winning under federal law than state law. Opponents of the cross say the case is still the same, regardless of whether it’s handled under federal or state law.

- In another prominent case in California, church and state issues arose when a state senator proposed a bill that would have resulted in Mission San Miguel, a Catholic mission, receiving money to recover from earthquake damage. Some legislators raised concerns because religious services are held at the parish. The legislators were allowing the sponsor of the bill to modify the legislation so it would not raise church-state issues.

- Another cross came under scrutiny, this one in St. Bernard’s Parish, Louisiana. Parish residents wanted to erect a memorial to Hurricane Katrina victims that features a cross bearing a likeness of the face of Jesus. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Louisiana sent a letter to parish

officials in August, saying what the parish was planning would be a violation of the separation of church and state. The ACLU argued that the memorial would be on public ground and that government officials were working on the memorial. Parish officials countered that the memorial would stand on private ground and that the government officials who were working on it were doing so on their own time. The planned memorial, including the cross with the face of Jesus, was erected on August 29.

- In Fort Collins, Colorado, the city council was already thinking ahead to the Christmas season. In July, the council decided that only a Christmas tree would be allowed on city property during the holiday season. Previously, the council had ruled that a menorah would be allowed on each night of Hanukkah. For one city councilman, favoring one religion over another was not the motivation in this decision. Ben Manvel said, "The Christmas trees aren't a problem because they were originally pagan. If we allowed the menorah and a crèche, then we'd end up with a parade of other religious symbols."

- In Nevada, a high school valedictorian began referencing Jesus in her graduation speech, and school officials subsequently cut off the power to her microphone. The officials had screened Brittany McComb's speech earlier and removed any references to Jesus. McComb memorized the parts that were removed and began reciting them during her speech. The former student is suing school officials.

- One place in which prayer was an issue was the locker room. In July, a U.S. district judge ruled that the East Brunswick High School (New Jersey) football coach's constitutional rights were violated when the East Brunswick Board of Education told the coach he was not allowed to bow his head and "take a knee" during prayers, led by his players, in the locker room before games. The Board of Education has filed an appeal to the judge's ruling.

- In a case in West Virginia, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and the West Virginia ACLU sued the Harrison County Board of Education because a high school in the district had a portrait of Jesus hanging outside the principal's office. Supporters were able to raise at least \$150,000 to allow the Board to defend the portrait's placement. The board has since decided to ask for a dismissal of the case, as the portrait was stolen. Meanwhile, students presented the school's incoming principal with a mirror to replace the portrait. The mirror's inscription reads, "To know the will of God is the highest of all wisdom. The love of Jesus Christ lives within each of us." It's not clear whether the principal will hang the mirror outside his office, but the executive director of the West Virginia ACLU says this would also be inappropriate for a public school.

- College campuses continue to be a place where religion and government clash. At the University of Wisconsin, two groups might be denied funds. The University, at its Madison campus, is not recognizing the Knights of Columbus. The University said the group's policy on admitting only Catholic men is against the state's law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or creed. Also in question is the status of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. The issue in that case is that the organization limits its leaders to only Christians.

Some of these cases are still pending, but the results do indicate that the freedom of religious expression is never safe from those who wish to place state sanctions on it. The Catholic League continues to monitor such cases and will take action when necessary.

T-SHIRT RIP-OFF

Dirt Rag is a magazine devoted to mountain biking. Its online version is www.dirtragemag.com. The content, generally geared toward young males, focuses on athletics and is unobjectionable. However, we were alerted to a couple of products sold by the magazine that give us pause.

T-shirts bearing the Sacred Heart and the words “Dirt Rag” are available. So too are pint glasses with the same image. While most of us would be hard pressed to explain the link between bike riding and a devotion to Jesus, the merchandising team at *Dirt Rag* are content to offer the flimsiest of explanations: the sales pitch for the shirt urges readers to “display your divine love of mountain biking with our new Sacred Heart shirt.” The pint glass is described as “sacred and strong, enduring and ever-lasting, our new sacred heart pint glass fuses the imagery of the Sacred Heart with the pastime of adventurous mortals.”

As there is nothing inherently troublesome about mountain biking, pints of beer or casual clothing, these items aren’t extremely offensive. However, they do underscore the willingness of many artistic and pop-culture outlets to misappropriate Catholic imagery to make a buck. It’s much easier to cheapen someone else’s beliefs than to come up with something truly creative.

DENIS LEARY’S CONTEMPT

CONTINUES

The FX cable television show “Rescue Me” has again decided to use the Catholic Church as a target of ridicule.

“Rescue Me” is a drama about the personal and professional lives of New York City firefighters. The show was co-created by Denis Leary, the comedian/actor who also plays Tommy, the main character in the show. Leary has referred to himself as a lapsed Catholic, and has aimed insults at the Church in the past. Last winter, Comedy Central aired his special “Merry F***ing Christmas,” in which Leary said, among other things, “Do I believe there was a baby Jesus? You bet your ass I do. But I believe that nine months before he was born someone sure as s— banged the hell out of his mom.” Previous episodes of “Rescue Me” featured Tommy dreaming about having sex with Mary Magdalene and Jesus subsequently shooting him. In another episode a priest admits to molesting a young boy. The priest also says he was molested as a youngster and that he enjoyed it.

The latest offense involved an episode of “Rescue Me” (titled “Twilight”) that aired this past summer. In this episode, Tommy comes home to discover his roommate Lou (played by John Scurti) has had sex with a nun. Lou tells Tommy “She’s a semi-nun,” to which Tommy responds, “She’s a semi-nun? Lou, what does that mean? She’s in the nun National Guard? Huh? She’s the bride of Christ one weekend a month? What the hell does that mean?” Lou also tells Tommy, “She’s only been with two other guys. One was some clown way back in high school, and the other is, you know [covers his mouth and muffles the next word], Jesus.” Lou tells Tommy that the nun is leaving the order at the end of the month. Tommy asks if that means the nun is cheating on Jesus with Lou. Lou responds, “I got a hundred pounds on the guy and look [holds up his hands], no holes in my hands. Bring it on, Jesus!”

John Scurti is given the story writing credit in this episode, but it's not clear who came up with the witty dialogue. One thing is clear: Denis Leary's contempt for the Catholic faith has been a continuing feature of his work. A change of direction is long overdue.

“SURVIVING EDEN” ISN'T EASY

A new film from writer-director Greg Pritkin called “Surviving Eden” opened in select cities late this summer. The comedy, about a down-on-his luck fellow who wins a “Survivor”-type reality show, centers on how fame and fortune can change a man. Sounds well and good, so far.

However, “Surviving Eden” features one character, Sister Agnes O'Malley, who is a vehicle for pot-shots against the church. Not only is Sister Agnes a contestant on the reality show (which involves living naked on an island) she informs the other characters that not all nuns are virgins.

Most gratuitous of all is a bit of dialogue between Sister Agnes and another character, Maria. After Sister Agnes reveals she is a nun, Maria offers: “That must suck.” When Sister Agnes asks why, Maria responds, “‘Cause priests only like boys.” The filmmakers evidently found this bit so clever it was featured in the film's trailer.

“Surviving Eden” was only played in select cities, and attracted little media attention. We're pleased, but not surprised. There is nothing new or original about this sort of gratuitous attack on the Church.