

What Is Wrong With This Picture?

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If you have ever watched a child look for the inconsistency in a “What is wrong with this picture?” puzzle, you have seen the joy of discovery as the child points out a bird flying upside down or circles a clown with his head on backwards. Recently, while I was listening to the turmoil generated over a number of high school seniors who thanked God at their commencement exercises, the “What is wrong with this picture?” exercise came to mind.

In a society that prides itself and even boasts of the right of free expression that every citizen enjoys, no matter how crude, vulgar or ignorant it might be, suddenly a number of people reached near hysteria because these young people out of joy and faith-filled hearts simply said “Thank you, God.” Mind you, this was not a call for insurrection. They had not denounced any parties in the blood bath in the Balkans. Nor had they waved condoms, burnt the American flag, or held up religious articles for profanation – all constitutionally guaranteed expressions of free speech, some of which are actually paid for from taxpayers’ dollars. Those who represent the future of our nation had merely said “Thank you, God.” The results of their action were editorials, articles, interviews, threats of lawsuits, a call for punishment, even the suggestion that they be arrested simply because they had said in a public forum, “Thank you, God.” When we hear of the outrage directed at those youngsters we have to ask “What is wrong with this picture?”

We live in an age where serious effort is being made to sterilize the context in which our young people grow and are

educated – to sterilize it of any moral content. This is regularly done in the name of a supposedly valueless secular order which children are to enter when they begin their education. It is precisely in this so-called secular and “neutral” or valueless world that things get turned upside down. While it is perfectly legal and, in some cases, even mandated at taxpayers’ expense that condoms be distributed, thus encouraging young people to sexual promiscuity; while it is perfectly legitimate for the National Endowment for the Arts to use taxpayers’ money to support the public desecration of religious articles that are sacred to people; and while the burning of a flag or a radio talk-show host’s explanation of how you can best shoot a law enforcement officer are considered worthy of national freedom of speech awards, a simple “Thank you, God” is denounced as attacking the very foundations of American liberty. What is wrong with this picture?

What is essentially wrong is the blurring of some very basic distinctions that have served our nation well from its foundation until recently. There is a clear difference between supporting any one religious group or church at the expense of the taxpayer and the simple public recognition that “God is.” It is simply wrong to say that recognition of the existence of God by the people of this nation is the same as establishing a state- supported religion. Using taxpayers’ money to foster abortions and encourage so-called “safe sex” among kids is far more an imposition of a moral code and doctrine on our school-age children than any “Thank you, God” could ever be. The so-called “wall” that separates Church and state is intended to protect the Church from any unwarranted or increasingly intrusive action of the state that limits the effectiveness of the Church in preaching its message. The First Amendment was established to protect the state from the hegemony of any one Church, religious group or denomination. This was clearly the mind of the founding fathers who had witnessed the imposition of “state churches” in the colonial period.

Such a prohibition is necessary and healthy. Government should not attempt to regulate religious faith by telling bishops, for example, where they should establish parishes, what church building should be left open and when or how the sacraments should be celebrated. Nor should any one faith community become the state-supported "official" Church such as we see in England or Sweden.

The so-called separation of Church and state is a far cry from the exclusion of God from any expression in public life. Separation of Church and state, until very, very recently, was never understood as the separation of God from our communal lives-our society. The attempt to interpret the separation of Church and state to mean the elimination of any mention of God from public life is not only new, it is having a devastating effect on the life of our nation. By bleaching out the mere mention of God we wash out as well the source of moral responsibility and the foundation of moral obligation.

To call our young people to a sense of truth, justice, obligation to others and personal integrity in the name of a vague secular "correctness" is to offer them little of any lasting value for either their own lives or for our efforts together to build a truly good and just society. We struggle for racial equality, justice in the workplace and care for the poor and elderly not from a vague sense of momentary political correctness but rather from the profoundly theological reason that we are all children of the same God, sisters and brothers of one another and sharers in God's bounty-the goods of this earth. To erase God from this picture, to silence the recognition of God's place in our lives, is to remove the very substance that holds us together, gives us common purpose and calls all of us to moral obligation.

One of the most firmly held convictions of the vast majority of American citizens is the important role that God plays in our lives. Regardless of the church, synagogue, mosque or other worship place that we attend, there is a common and

widespread – not to say nearly unanimous – conviction that life without God is meaningless.

In recent years, as litigation has become more narrowly focused and court rulings have become more constrictive, attention has shifted from concern over fostering the beliefs of specific churches, religious groups, synagogues, faith communities and congregations of all types to the very mention of a supreme being. The desire to eradicate the very mention of God now drives the engines of litigation. While you could take a crucifix, immerse it in body waste and have the federal government pay for it as the National Endowment for the Arts did, you could not mention the name of the person depicted on the crucifix in a public setting without risk of a lawsuit, threats of fines and now even arrest.

What is wrong with this picture? You can celebrate “sparkle season” with government support but face expulsion from some public schools for wishing another student “Merry Christmas” on school grounds. What is wrong with this picture?

We are a nation of people who place our trust in God. We say so on our money and in our oaths. We proclaim it on our buildings and, more importantly, we try to live it in our hearts. The prohibition of any reference to a supreme being in our public life is not the time-honored application of our Constitution, nor is it the will of the people, but rather an exercise in “political correctness” gone to the extreme. It also has the effect of making our society schizophrenic. We tell our young people, “You may mention this important value and determinate factor in your life at home but in public God does not exist.” Most children, by the time they reach the midpoint of their elementary education, are aware that God is illegal in public school.

This curious twisting of the Constitution for the purpose of removing any public reference to God has resulted in the devastating effects that we see increasingly around us as the

bitter fruit of a secular society. Once any reference to God is omitted, moral obligation, virtue or that internal sense of responsibility which calls us to more than just minimal adherence to manmade and imposed laws also disappear. Virtue rests on religious conviction. Religious faith is a response to God. Break that chain at any point and our society begins to unravel.

Is it any wonder that in our streets, in the schools, in homes and communities across this land we witness increasing violence, disregard for human life, and a harshness and coldness that is increasingly described as "remorseless." Some of the older prisoners in jails have told me that they do not want to associate with younger prisoners precisely because they are "Godless" and have no feeling, respect or sense of right or wrong.

The secular model of life has failed us. It has not served us well at all in its claim to exclusive possession of the public order and its pretension that it can take the place of God. While the secular model of life can bleach out moral integrity, self-restraint and virtue as it does the mention of God, it has nothing to offer in their place. The belief that we can sustain our human society and our community life simply by the power of externally imposed laws enforced by police and supported by an ever-increasing number of prisons and jails is baseless. The secular model of life is essentially and ultimately bankrupt. Not by bread alone do we live.

The recognition of God in our public life is not a call to establish a theocracy. Nor is it a claim to control of the state by any one religious community. In the past, when this has happened in our country we Catholics have suffered severely. What I am emphasizing is that we cannot build a good, free and just society without the recognition that God is a part of our lives. Ultimately what we will be as a people, as a society, as a commonwealth, will reflect the personal values that each of us holds most dear, most

fundamental and most important.

What is wrong with this picture?

Do we really need to ask what is wrong with threatening to censure young people because in their joy and faith they mention God?

What is wrong with a society that places condoms into the hands of our young people and slaps those same hands if they fold them in prayer-all of this in the schools that we have established, paid for and sustained to teach our children how to live?

The next time you see one of those pictures with the bird flying upside down and with the caption "What is wrong with this picture?" think of our nation, our society, our community. Do we really want-does the Constitution truly demand-a nation where God has been removed of any aspect of public life? What is wrong with this picture?