

REFLECTIONS

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A Nation Divided

“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” said Abraham Lincoln in June 1858, less than three years before the Civil War began. “It will become all one thing or all the other,” he continued. “Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it...or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States.”

Today, the social compact of the United States is again being severed, not by the issue of slavery, but by race, sex, ethnicity, color, national origin, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other lines of fragmentation that can be exploited by wedge politics. As intense as the controversies arising from these matters are, they are more like lacerations on the surface of society. The underlying, fundamental chasm centers on divergent beliefs in God and the importance of religion for leading one’s life.

The divide was exemplified by two recent events held days apart. On Jan. 21, hundreds of thousands of women gathered for the first Women’s March on Washington and its companion demonstrations in other cities and nations. They claimed the recent presidential election insulted, demonized and threatened women. Those favoring pro-life, however, were not welcome because the core issue of the demonstration was a woman’s right to abortion. On Jan. 27, hundreds of thousands of people participated in the 44th annual March for Life in Washington, with companion parades across the United States and the world. They had one message: every human life is valuable and must be protected from conception until natural death. The opposing views expressed at the two gatherings are irreconcilable.

The divergence in dealing with religiously-based issues is clearly exhibited in opposing actions of the Obama and Trump presidential administrations. Forty-eight hours before the end of Obama’s term on Jan. 20, a rule went into effect to prohibit states from withholding federal funds for family planning from Planned Parenthood. Four weeks later on Feb. 16, the House voted to void the rule. Senate action and the President’s signature are expected soon.

Under the Obama Administration, annual funding to Planned Parenthood increased significantly, rising to \$554 million in 2015. On Jan. 30, the *Protect Funding for Women’s Health Care Act* (S.241), which would prohibit Planned Parenthood from receiving any federal funding and redirect the amount it would have received to health care providers that do not perform abortions, was introduced in the Senate.

Last August, a Federal District Court enjoined the Obama Administration from enforcing a directive ordering public schools to allow students to use bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender choice, rather than biological sex. The Obama Administration appealed, but on Feb. 10, the day after Jeff Sessions was sworn in as Attorney General, the Justice Department withdrew the petition.

On one side of the divide are religiously-committed people who uphold the innate dignity of every human being, the sanctity of human life at all stages, marriage as only between one man and one woman, and freedom of conscience in guiding one’s public actions. On the other side are the religiously-indifferent. They overwhelmingly view human dignity as being conferred when one can function as a person, a woman to have a right to abort her own child,

marriage as a union between consenting adults regardless of gender, and a religious-formed conscience as subordinate to LGBT demands. The two groups conflict not only theologically, but clash culturally and politically, as well. They allow no middle view, no room for compromise.

America is a pluralistic nation, in which people of numerous persuasions must live and work together in freedom, peace and justice. This can only occur and be sustained if the people are bound together by common principles, shared values and underlying societal mores. It is morality, not laws, which forms such bonds. Throughout most of America's history, morality and its attendant virtues were rooted in Judeo-Christian teachings. These religious ideas shaped people's beliefs and convictions, and guided their behavior. They provided the basis for the nation's social policy and law, and created a framework for the nation's public life.

The various Christian denominations have many differences, but they share more convictions than separate them. The gulf between belief and unbelief, or commitment and indifference, borders on the unbridgeable. The religiously-committed and the religiously-indifferent have very divergent perspectives on the purpose of human life, on the reason for creation. A person who believes that life on earth is transitory and that one will spend an eternity in heaven or hell depending upon how that life is lived will make vastly different choices than one who believes that the here and now is all there is.

A large and increasing component of the religiously-indifferent are nones, that is, those who are atheists, agnostics or have no religious affiliation. According to Pew surveys, the number of Americans identifying as nones was just under 23 percent in 2015, compared to 15 percent in 2007. A most distressing finding is that the largest single factor driving the rise of nones is Catholic defections. About 28 percent of nones are former Catholics. In the eight-year period between the two Pew surveys, the number of Americans claiming to be Catholic decreased by 3 million, shrinking their share of the U.S. population from 24 to 21 percent, which now is less than that of nones.

Although one-third of American adults were raised as Catholics, four in ten no longer identify themselves as such. Beyond defections, there are those who claim to be Catholic, but do not faithfully practice it. Among self-identified Catholics, only 64 percent are absolutely certain that God exists, 58 percent consider religion important in their lives, and a mere 35 percent attend Mass each Sunday.

This apathy, along with desertions, has consequences. The future of religious freedom in the United States may well rest on the outcome of the struggle to establish a materialistic, religiously-intolerant society, spurred by the growth of the religiously-indifferent, or a religiously-tolerant, secular society grounded in spiritual values, advocated by the religiously-committed. Like Lincoln's view of slavery, this struggle will end only when the supporters of one of these immutable views have no further means to resist the supporters of the other.

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