

'UNDER GOD' EXCLUDES MANY

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MEMO: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I lean toward supporting the 9th U.S. Circuit Court's decision that "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional. In the 1980s, several members of the U.S. Supreme Court said that references such as "In God We Trust," which appears on our money, do not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment because their religious significance had been lost through rote repetition. As an Episcopal clergyman, I cringe to think that the religious significance of "under God" would be lost in any circumstance and would rather omit God than neutralize the sacred affirmation.

Furthermore, what of citizens who are agnostics, atheists, Buddhists or those who are prohibited for religious reasons from saying the word God? (Classical Buddhism acknowledges no ultimate reality as "God.") Is it right for them, especially children, to be subjected to the theistic declaration in a publicly sponsored assembly? Finally, is it clear that the intent of the Founding Fathers was to imply that we are a theistic, Christian, or any other religiously based nation? I'd welcome a Supreme Court decision about these historical and constitutional issues.

RICHARD T. NOLAN

West Palm Beach

THE RIGHT TO BE A FAMILY IS NOT A 'SPECIAL RIGHT'

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MEMO: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I thank The Post's Lindsay Jones for the June 3 report "Gay couple's plight brings problem to national forefront." The lawsuit against the University of Maryland Medical System for its insensitive prohibition of a man from visiting his dying partner is an example of the action being taken by individuals and groups such as Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund when homosexual individuals are denied the rights other citizens exercise. The implications of documents, including that couple's health-care surrogacy, were ignored.

During a heart attack in February, I was rushed to the hospital by my partner of 47 years. We keep documents ready for emergencies. We realize, however, that our claim to be a family can be ignored, and we always wonder whether we'll be allowed to be with each other at crucial times. Fortunately, the two admitting hospitals allowed Bob to be with me. We do not want "special rights." Lambda Legal and similar groups are using our nation's legal system to establish equivalency. Many of our religious heritages are becoming increasingly supportive, too.

Regardless of one's views on homosexuality, would anyone with a heart prevent someone's closest friend from being present at critical times?

RICHARD T. NOLAN

West Palm Beach

Editor's note: Richard T. Nolan is a canon with the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut.

GUSHEE'S COMMENTARIES A BOON FOR PHILOSOPHERS

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MEMO: Letters to the Editor

Recent negative letters about Steve Gushee's columns on religion brought to my mind the comment made by Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura, "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers." Mr. Gushee's weekly, insightful commentary is the only public resource available in this region for those of us who have studied Christian theology at Northeastern universities and divinity schools; we hope that we do not exhibit the qualities targeted by Gov. Ventura.

My one lament in moving to this area is the utter lack of a theological center that welcomes illuminating scholarship, thoughtfulness not designed for weak minds. The Post is to be congratulated for its courage in providing Mr. Gushee's columns in this theological desert. The public is well-served by his writings.

RICHARD T. NOLAN

West Palm Beach

Editor's note: Richard T. Nolan is a retired Episcopal priest and philosophy professor.

CLERGY KEEP PEOPLE UNINFORMED

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PUBLICATION: Palm Beach Post, The (FL)

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MEMO: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Steve Gushee's excellent essay "Jesus' sexuality really not an issue" (April 6) reflects one of many contemporary discussions in theological schools. These faculties and students are among the explorers who honor tradition while they inquire about many issues that no one dared raise in the past. While not everyone in such institutions would agree with everything Mr. Gushee wrote, neither would they gasp in horror at his representative position.

Very few of these careful studies reach local congregations, which generally consist of preservers rather than explorers. Especially in the South, the gulf between the two is vast. Clergy here appear to focus on what has been rather than what might be. Consequently, their flocks are shocked when they run into commentaries such as this one by Mr. Gushee - who I know is a committed Christian. The anger that will inevitably be directed toward Mr. Gushee might be better directed at leaders of congregations who are keeping their people uninformed. Far from static, theology preserves, explores and evolves. Thanks to articles such as this one, Post readers are kept abreast of one current theological discussion.

RICHARD T. NOLAN

West Palm Beach

GAY PEOPLE SHOULD CELEBRATE ROLE MODELS, NOT FLAMBOYANCE

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MEMO: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Monday's Post there was a decent story ("Something to be proud about") about last Saturday's Gay Pride Fest in Lake Worth. The one picture, however, was of a grotesque, unshaven drag queen identified as "Momma." I am certain that the majority here and in most locales mistakenly equate this depiction as representative of male homosexuality.

I would urge that discretion be used by participants in such public events, simply for reasons of public relations strategy/education. I realize that for "idealists," this discretion would seem too compromising, but I'm a pragmatist. This did not advance "the cause" or educate the public. (Even "good-taste" drag is not intrinsic to homosexual orientation.) Is it too much to ask gay people to plan public events in ways that educate the public positively, such as by including two dads or two moms with their children? If one were to equate that picture - and ones often used by the media - with homosexuality, the public cannot be faulted for saying that they don't want "THAT" in human service occupations, as a model for children or living next door.

Moreover, the editorial choice of the article's title placed above the picture elicits a resounding "NO" from most citizens of all orientations.

RICHARD T. NOLAN

West Palm Beach

SHOP OWNERS LACK ONLY SAVVY, NOT HEART

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MEMO: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Frank Cerabino and The Post must have been desperate for a front-page commentary Aug. 20. The article ``Embarrassed wheelchair merchants sued for no handicapped parking" seemed to me to be unnecessary ``gotcha" coverage.

I have a positive story about Action Mobility in Lake Worth to tell. After having surgery on both feet a few weeks ago, I found myself desperately in need of a walker.

Although Action Mobility was closed for the day so some internal business matters could be taken care of, the owners opened the store to allow a member of my household to purchase the needed equipment.

Their courtesy was much appreciated.

As a retired Episcopal priest and philosophy professor, I cringe to think that my professional errors (past, present, future) might end up in a newspaper. I may have misquoted the Bible or some philosopher; I can only hope my positive contributions will outweigh my gaffes.

Neither, though, is really newsworthy.

The Rev. Richard T. Nolan
West Palm Beach

WRITER MEANT NO INSULT TO MUSLIMS

DATE: August 18, 1996
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PAGE: 4F
MEMO: Letters to the Editor

I understood Steve Gushee's introduction to his article "A mosque is born" very differently from the writer of the letter "Mosque article maligned Islamic faith." I read the article as dismissive of any notion that Islam should be linked to terrorism or wealth, that in the new mosque on Purdy Lane one will find Muslims faithful to their peace-loving religion as it is, not as it is so terribly misunderstood by many Americans. I am virtually certain that the letter writer misunderstood Mr. Gu shee's words.

Richard T. Nolan
West Palm Beach

FAULT WITH SCHOOL PRAYER: ONE CAN'T ADDRESS ALL GODS

DATE: June 7, 1996
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PAGE: 17A
MEMO: Letters to the Editor

As a former world religions and philosophy professor, I agree fully with religion writer Steve Gushee's "What is Buddhism? `It's about being joyful' " summary.

In that "Buddhism has no supreme being or god as in Western religious traditions" (which includes Islam as "Western"), how can an ecumenical, nonsectarian, neutral prayer be composed that would respect the beliefs of Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist citizens? Certainly not the Lord's Prayer! Some other religions embraced by Americans also have no god compatible with the biblical God worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims. The notion that all religions pray to the same sacred ultimate being is wishful thinking and uninformed.

Canon Richard T. Nolan
Palm Beach

Editor's note: Canon Richard T. Nolan is retired assisting priest at Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Palm Beach.

INTERVIEW, COUNTEROFFER REVEAL FLAWS

Date: January 27, 1996 Publication: The Palm Beach Post Page Number: 11A Word Count: 117

The interview of Dr. Joan Kowal in The Palm Beach Post ("` `Today's the day' ") suggests to me that her workaholism is no model for teachers or students. She appears to be addicted to her job and living an imbalanced life indeed.

Now we learn of another shortcoming detracting from her ability to serve as a model - greed. How did these flaws escape the board's notice in its interviews? Is there time to reconsider her suitability?

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Richard T. Nolan
West Palm Beach

HOPE - AND DANGER - OF PROMISE KEEPERS

Author: STEVE GUSHEE Date: August 13, 1995 Publication: The Palm Beach Post Page Number: 1F Word Count: 1139

They came to pray and give their life to Jesus. They made promises to be godly men. And they shook the rafters.

The enthusiasm of 50,000 men at a Promise Keepers conference in St. Petersburg's ThunderDome last weekend was extraordinary - and a little scary. Men came searching. They met Jesus in song and sermons, and in one another. They embraced, prayed and shed tears of remorse, repentance and joy. They made promises: to build strong families, support the church and reach out.

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BYLINE: STEVE GUSHEE

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Those promises are crucially important to mend our social fabric. And they are in the best tradition of the Bible. So why should that be scary?

Because, sadly, religious enthusiasm often breeds dogmatic certainty. Inevitably, intolerance follows the absolute conviction, and zealotry is not far behind.

Tolerance - love, in fact, of those who are different is the fundamental word of Christian Scripture. Yet, intolerance is the almost inevitable result of absolute, uncritical faith.

For centuries, Christians have hurled down judgments in the name of a God who says "judge not" upon Jews, blacks, gays, Arabs, whites, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and others. Yet the New Testament suggests that Jesus died for the very people many Christians condemn.

Christians are not alone in contradicting their sacred texts out of enthusiasm for them. Religious fanaticism of any stripe tends to be absolute in conviction and judgmental in outlook.

“There is a common denominator among many religions - some Christian, some Orthodox Jewish, some Muslim - that it's their way or not at all, and you are damned if you don't go their way,” said the Rev. Richard Nolan of West Palm Beach. The Rev. Nolan is a retired professor of moral philosophy, an ordained minister and author of *Living Issues in Philosophy*.

Promise Keepers has been wildly successful. Full stadiums are one measure. More hopeful is the reaction of many wives who call themselves “promise reapers.” They rejoice that their men are becoming good fathers, husbands and church members.

Founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, the former head football coach at the University of Colorado, the nondenominational, Protestant movement will touch more than 700,000 men in 13 stadium conferences this summer, according to Joe Potts, manager of the Florida office.

The women's movement, a changing economy, affirmative action and a spiritual malaise among men are among the complex currents that feed the popularity of Promise Keepers. “Men have begun to think they are a subspecies of the race,” said the Rev. Larry Krewson, associate pastor of Good Shepherd United Methodist Church in West Palm Beach. “At the same time, there has been a time of searching for the spiritual.”

Promise Keepers is clearly well-intentioned. Men are called - in the name of Jesus - to a high standard of integrity in their personal lives, their families and communities. But the premise of that integrity is complete submission to the will of Jesus as Promise Keepers understands him. The message, implied in sermon after sermon in St. Petersburg, is that only those who embrace the Promise Keepers' interpretation of Scripture will be saved.

A T-shirt worn at the conference said it the way T-shirts often do, with an “in your face” statement that leaves no room for discussion:

Turn or burn

Try or fry

Live or die

It's a no-brainer.

Simple answers and absolute trust are a popular solution to the dilemma of life. They are also a dangerous combination because they are the tools of tyrants, religious charlatans - and genuine saints.

Promise Keepers projects a sense of absolute certainty in the midst of an ambiguous world and offers seven simple solutions. That may explain its popularity in a complex, terribly confusing time, but it rings of self-righteousness. To Promise Keepers, their view of Jesus is the only valid view - that Jesus is the only way to full life and salvation. One wonders about the lot of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, the honest agnostic and countless other Christians.

The place of women in the Promise Keepers universe is at least open to question. Women are to be honored, cared for, valued and led. They are to take their proper place, subject to their husbands. Promise Keepers' view of homosexuality, however, is not open to question. Homosexuality is a sinful abomination. One preacher at the ThunderDome, the Rev. T.D. Jakes, prayed, in the same sentence, that God would deliver drug addicts and homosexuals in Jesus' name.

Yet Scripture, according to many biblical scholars, claims that God has embraced the entire world in his forgiving love - Jew, gentile, saint, sinner, Christian or not. Christians claim to follow one who said very clearly that he came not to judge but to give life, to forgive, to heal, to love and to draw people together that all might be one.

Jesus was admittedly hard on the Pharisees. They were the religious enthusiasts of the day, good citizens and faithful Jews who raised their children with integrity. Hypocrites, Jesus called them. He preferred those whom society scorned, people who were different, those whom many religious people are quick to condemn. They were the people with whom Jesus ate, drank and shared jokes, whom he loved and forgave. Those are the people for whom he died, the Bible says. That's reason for enthusiasm - a Greek word that means "in or inspired by God."

So how can Christians be enthusiastic - in Christ - with the conviction and energy Promise Keepers generates and avoid the danger of dogmatic intolerance? By not insisting on a narrow understanding of a limitless God and calling that Good News.

Jesus was the only one who ever understood the broad dimension of the Gospel, according to an Orthodox Christian layman I know who wrestles with biblical truth. The Gospel for Jesus, he said, is this: "I love you, Jesus said, and I have a way for you that will lead to fullness of life. If you choose not to follow it, I love you."

Promise Keepers holds great promise for men, their families and their communities, if the movement can resist the seductive lure of a T-shirt mentality. And there is a way.

Follow him.

Steve Gushee, an Episcopal priest, covers religion for The Palm Beach Post.