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A mistaken identity -- or no real identity at all?

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From *Where I Stand*

Who are we fooling -- except maybe ourselves?

The national myth is that we hold a common moral ethic, free of cooptation by any particular religious group and devoted to religious equality. Materialistic, secular USA, that blind behemoth of national equality, child of the Enlightenment and beacon of freedom to all, promises the world to leave faith to the faithful and legislate justice justly.

At the same time -- has anybody noticed -- all of a sudden our politicians can't be elected to do politics unless they talk religion and our religious figures are expected to demand that politicians legislate whatever brand of religion they each represent or be called irreligious. Immoral. Unfit for either church or state.

The problem is not only that we are beginning to wonder where the two lines cross but that the rest of the world, it seems, has already come to some conclusions about this strange new admixture of church and state that swears to be separate but wants to act as one.

When I think back now, the conversation was at very least an unexpected one. I was an American Catholic nun who had been carefully schooled on the non-religious character of American politics. He was an Australian cloistered monk who knew as much about the incestuous relationship between politics and religion in this country as any American I had ever seen. Clearly, the dirty little secret is out of the international bag.

He was telling me things about the country that regularly embarrass me these days. And he was doing it with a twinkle in his eye, a teasing smile around the corner of his mouth. I was being put on and I knew it.

"You haven't prayed even once since I've been here," he said, "for the coalition soldiers." I guess that means that you all have finally figured out that there isn't one." He looked at me a minute and the smile got a little broader. "Coalition, that is."

"We don't really believe in such things where I come from," he went on. "We (meaning the people of his country, I gathered) didn't like it at all. I guess the politicians figured that a couple hundred or so professional soldiers was more than enough to satisfy their political payoff to the United States."

Clearly, he had a point. Of the 152,000 soldiers in Iraq, Australia has supplied about 900, hardly a great display of commitment or even eagerness for the task. If the world had really embarked on the "great global war on terrorism," Australians, for one, were at best ho-hum about the project.

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Right. I knew that there were no real "coalition forces," I had to admit. In fact, there were just a few uniformed guards thrown in here and there to give the thing a global flavor and satisfy the international political need to be on the right side.

But, at the same time, politicians around the globe knew that they definitely ought not to do too much to curry political favor with the moral indignation of the United States if they wanted to stay in office at home.

Many, in fact, have not managed to achieve the balance between

political obligation and national integrity. In Italy, for instance, Prime Minister Berlusconi, hearty ally in a foolish endeavor, found himself recently unseated. In Spain, for instance, former President Aznar could not parley his support for the invasion of Iraq into a second term. Even in England, for instance, Tony Blair, George Bush's most powerful ally in the struggle to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction -- other than ours, of course -- has limped off the battlefield, shot in his own foot by his own aim at empire.

"And you execute on the average of one person a day here. In the 21st century!" The monk paused a little. "You and Saudi Arabia and Yemen and a few other little places that you call 'backward' or terrorist." And then he mused: Uncivilized. Positively uncivilized."

"It's an interesting country you have here," he concluded quietly.

But I wasn't fooled. In his mouth, the word "interesting" had more the ring of "strange" to it than it did "interesting." "So Puritan," he added.

It was finally my turn to smile a bit. "I know," I said. "You were founded by prisoners; we were founded by Puritans. And it shows."

It certainly does.

Now we have a man going around the country planting yard signs that say "Jesus." He hopes to unite Christians -- "to bring down denominational walls," he says. He has sold 300 white vinyl signs, 12 inches by 18 inches, with large black block letters (JESUS) on them for \$11 each. He hopes to sell 20 million more of them. The motive is laudable, of course, but in a pluralistic country will yard signs trumpeting one religion over every other one really do it?

And why is he doing it? It is a response, he says, to the removal of the Ten Commandments from public buildings. Apparently, it does not bother him, on the other hand, that we threaten the very foundation of those commandments. When we invade a country to save it and kill people in our prisons in order to teach them a lesson, it's hard to make the case that where the Ten Commandments are concerned, we're purists. But, the idea seems to be that as long as we buy the signs, that will prove our Christianity.

In the meantime, too, the Republican Party is trying to assure

themselves another election by making the world safe from same- sex marriages.

And the Democratic National Committee is hiring a ?Catholic Outreach? director and staff, whose role it is to also assure Muslims, African-Americans, mainline Protestants and Jews, as well Catholics that Democrats are as religious as anybody else and certainly the same brand of religious that each of them desires -- maybe even more so.

So what is going on? Are we a democratic state gone theocratic. Or are we a political entity playing at religion? Or are we a Puritan people pretending to be religious? Or are we a collection of religions, each of them trying to get the state to legislate what they cannot get their own people to accept.

From where I stand, one thing, at least, seems obvious: There is far more irreligious religion here these days than they ever educated us to expect. So are we still an aspiring democracy -- or not?

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