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New 'religious' group just as deadly as the ones that preceded it

Joan Chittister | Mar. 19, 2014 From Where I Stand

Here's the problem with religion. You never know which religion you're going to meet: the "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" kind or the "Get thee behind me, Satan" kind.

You have to be very careful not to confuse one with the other. Your very life could depend on it.

The golden-rule types take people into the center of the community; the get-out-of-my-sight kind keep people out of it. One kind of religion embraces those who are different from themselves; the other excludes those who are different, the ones who are not like them: blacks if they're white; Jews if they're Christian; women if they're men.

Some people have lived restricted lives and even died at the hands of those who sought to restrict them -- some for trying to eat at white lunch counters or sitting down on buses; some for having ancestors in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago; some for serving soup that was cold or not ironing the shirts right.

The important thing to remember is that it doesn't really matter how the transgressions were defined. What matters is that the arguments in defense of doing it were always the same: God didn't want mixed races, or God wanted women to obey men, or God wanted Jews punished because the Romans crucified Jesus. Go figure.

And we forswore them all and thought we had learned something.

Until, lo and behold, we now discover that we have a new group developing, just as deadly, just as "religious" as the ones that preceded it. This new group made its first great public move in Arizona last month, just after the country in a great sweeping gesture of goodwill voted against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Most disconcerting, perhaps, is the fact that this group's power grab was as bold and shocking as the exclusionists before them. It was done as if we never learned anything from all our previous attempts to exclude multiple other groups before this -- Native Americans, women, the Irish, Eastern Europeans, anyone who fell outside the pale in the past.

This time, they wanted to discriminate against people in the name of "religious freedom" -- read lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. They wanted public businesses that had been formed under the auspices of state law for the sake of public commerce to have the legal right to refuse to serve patrons who seek the services promised to the public under those same laws.

It was a matter of "religious freedom," they said. A business owner could refuse service to those whose lives offended his/her religious beliefs. It was a personal matter, they argued, a matter of private conscience.

But the argument is not all that simple.

The state that gives businesses tax breaks and public security protections and requires quality control of goods and services for the sake of the public good has the right to require that those services be available to the public.

Or forget the tax breaks and the public police and fire protection and the legal recourse to protection of that business under the law.

After more than a century of segregation, people across the country stood up to refuse another century of shunnings in the name of God.

We have all watched our gay children committing suicide to avoid the bullying and social discrimination that dogged their lives. This time, Arizona said, "Enough of that."

We all see young gay women and men doomed to lives of rejection and ridicule for choices not their own, and people everywhere are beginning to say no to that.

We all remember Matthew Shepard's beaten and bloodied body hanging cruciform on a farm fence in the name of the one whose own crucifixion was due to his defiance of exclusion. And courageous people are now saying "Never again" to that.

So now, the exclusionists whose "religion" defies the very principles of the God who created the others as well as themselves are working again to sequester and silence those who are other than themselves. And all for simply wanting to share the services the rest of us take for granted in the public square.

So if they get the right to do those things, what will the future look like for the rest of us?

Well, if this new kind of exclusion becomes standard, beware of your own social fragility. If your Mormon grocer finds out that you drink, you may never be allowed in the store again. Or your Jewish restaurant owner finds out you eat pork. Or your Muslim gas station owner does not approve of women drivers. Or your Catholic pharmacist figures out that you take birth control pills. (Don't worry, Viagra will apparently be allowed.)

Just a thought.

"Oh, nonsense," do I hear you saying? "Those things couldn't possibly happen."

I hope you're right. I just want to remind you that people have been killed because they were Jewish, or black, or women -- or gay. So why not again? Why not here? Why not, if it's all legal?

From where I stand, I would caution against complacency about this issue. After all, there are already other states with movements to write "moral" discrimination into law under the guise of "religious freedom," among them, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Utah.

After all, the next time, you may be what someone considers "morally offensive to their deeply held religious convictions." Just as were Jews, Catholics and blacks to the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Or gypsies to the Nazis. Or now, homosexuals in Uganda. All of them by very religious people, they tell us. The other kind.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent *NCR* contributor.]

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