

Religion Today
November 16-22, 2008
In order to form a more perfect union ...
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In the last week before the election, the local paper injected religion into the election debate by printing a series of readers' letters concerning the place of religion in public debate.

The discussion began with a call for Americans to repent from their sinful ways. "America is turning her back upon God," the first letter said and so "America needs to ... repent."

The writer then defined repentance as "acknowledging error and turning 180 degrees about and going in the opposite direction." By this, Americans were encouraged to change their "sinful" and "secular" ways and convert to following Jesus Christ.

A second letter responded by discussing the evil things religions have done and by expressing disappointment on the letter's publication. "Shame on (the newspaper) for publishing your needlessly close-minded drivel."

This inspired a third set of letters defending the first author's right to speak. Referring to the First Amendment, one respondent wrote, "(He) has every right to believe what he wants to and to espouse his views in public if he so chooses." Others echoed these sentiments. And they got it right: the First Amendment's goal is to protect freedom of speech and expression and freedom of religion, for everyone.

But let's consider the content of the first two letters for a moment. The second letter was angered by the content of the first and the writer wished that the first had not been printed. The second author's position was that such religious speech should be kept out of the public arena. It seemed he wished religious expression be silenced.

What did the first writer call for? Repentance. By which the letter meant the turning back to God of all sinful Americans who have a "secular liberal mind set." If repentance means a 180 degree about-face and a turning back to God, then the writer calls for conversion of all Americans to his religious views. If everyone heeded the first author's call and converted, what would be the result? There would be no one whose views were

religiously divergent; all would believe the same. So, the first writer called not for the silencing of those who disagree with him, but for their elimination. If all repented, no one would dissent.

Rather than dwell on the potentialities of that position, I think there is a more important point. Both sides, and everyone in between, are here to stay and to speak. American society has been both secular and religious from its birth. The Puritans may have arrived seeking religious freedom, but they came on a ship that contained more adventurers and businessmen than believers. Rather than calling for each others' elimination or the invalidating of their constitutional rights, we today need to be more tolerant of everyone's right to speak and everyone's right to hold their own beliefs.

Perhaps we should extend to the realm of public discourse the practice we have learned from dealing with our e-mail, namely, if you don't like a message, delete it from your inbox. In other words, ignore it.

Once upon a time, we lived in small villages with little communication outside them, or so we romanticize. Everyone was more or less the same; the height of difference was the other Christian church on the other side of town. Now we live in the global village, where everyone's speech is available to us, often instantaneously. We not only hear about people in other parts of our nation, but from around the world. The Internet enables us to access information, remarks, debates and beliefs from around the world. And most of that world is not Christian, not democratic and maybe not even capitalist. We cannot eliminate it, we cannot even silence it. So, instead, we should teach ourselves how to deal with it, learning or borrowing from it where it is helpful, and leaving it in peace when it is not.