

Danville News Column  
Robert John Andrews  
“A Meddling Religion”  
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“Why do religions have to be so political?” he asked. The petty and tawdry side of religion can tax you. We weary of those so convinced they’re doing the will of God that the rest be damned.

Allah wants me to explode my bomb in the crowded market. Jesus wants me to murder this doctor because he performs abortions. Crosses topped with flagpoles signal that Americanism is Christianity, and vice versa. Skewed voter guides accompany bulletins with a ‘*nudge nudge wink wink*’ that only real Christians vote a certain way. We should vote only for Christians, even if they’re dumber than a stump and more inexperienced than an intelligent Jew or Muslim. Scranton Bishops bicker that Congressmen who are Roman Catholic and support abortion rights should be denied communion.

There are many ways the church swims in the political pool.

Most denominations fund lobbyists in DC. Denominations pass resolutions about social issues. Some pastors stand on Court House steps and offer prayers. “In God We Trust” says my dollar bill. Your tax dollars pay for military chaplains. Flags stand in sanctuaries. Since Reagan, your government sends an Ambassador to the Vatican (us Protestants ask, “can we get an ambassador too?”). The IRS distributes guidelines detailing which political activity by churches is impermissible, lest our non-profit status gets yanked.

Historically too. Faith wades hip deep in politics.

Were not Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed'nego political when they refused the unjust laws of Nebuchadnezzar? Was not Jonathan Witherspoon political when he preached about the necessity of the American Revolution? Who do you think confronted slavery as incomprehensible to humanity, religion, and good government? Who first challenged Nazism as demonic? Who do you think publicly challenged Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, calling him un-American for equating dissent with treason? John Mackay, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. Was not Martin Luther King Jr. political when he led boycotts?

We’ve been meddling for centuries. Take the people trying to love God out of politics and where would we be?

We recognize how some blame religion for causing conflicts. They say that in the name of God more suffering has been inflicted upon humanity than for any other reason; religion incites wars.

Exactly which wars are they talking about? World War I and II caused by religion? Korea? Vietnam? Iraq? I don't think so. More likely because of oil, greed, revenge, fear, pride, power.

I'll own up to what we need to own up, but blaming religion is banal and boring. Sure, we can wag our finger at the inquisition, crusades, the knee-capping IRA and UDL, or at the Taliban. But don't you think we'd find another excuse to brutalize each other? Religion is just very convenient at galvanizing emotions and justifying agendas. Can't we all just get along? No. On our own, we really can't. Which is why we require both religion and government.

If we are concerned with oppression, poverty, violence, how can we not be political? If we grieve the tortured soul, how can we not free tortured lives -- whether tortured by others or themselves?

Two weeks ago one of Danville's Police Officers found an 18 year old girl freezing to death in a parking lot off Mill Street. 3 AM. Her age and the temperature were the same. She had been dumped there by her boyfriend. Jerry draped a blanket around her shoulders and took her to the Gate House, which welcomed her and gave her a warm bed and warmer love. Yes, religion and government can collaborate.

You know all those big bank bonuses bandied about? I think we should make sure the silk suits get their bonuses. Give them bigger bonuses. But on one condition: they must fly into Port-au-Prince and, for one hour, walk the rubble, corpse-strewn streets of Haiti.

Do you know the real reason thousands are dead in Haiti? It wasn't the earthquake that killed but decades of bad government and corruption, failed policies and suffocating poverty. Death came because of greed, ignorance, prejudice, tyrants.

Can anything not be political? We're political beings. We also are spiritual beings. This is the distinction that we who are religious must bring to this aching and broken world. We speak of soul-force, compassion, justice, of the terrifying majesty of truth.

For we admit the ultimate inadequacy of all systems to redeem. Solutions come not from the exercise of power but from love. Government can prevent you from lynching your neighbor but it cannot make you love him.