

Good Citizenship is Enhanced by an Understanding of Religion!

All of us receive plenty of newsletters covering current controversial issues, primarily Donald Trump's performance both domestic and international at the beginning of his second term. I for example particularly enjoy Richard Haass's *Home and Away*, Dan Rather's *Steady*, Heather Cox Richardson's *Letters from an American*, and Ralph Nader's *In the Public Interest*, all very well researched, and representative of varied political leanings. I can't add to these so, I'll stick to our usual bag of subjects.

Our newsletters are intended from time to time to focus on any one of the specific 19 lessons in living promoting good citizenship as addressed in my books, and how that lesson applies to current social, economic and political issues. So today, let's discuss religion. When I opened this lesson in *Bachelors of Citizenship*, I noted that this lesson probably will be the most difficult of all to get into a national program and/or the education core, but it is an extremely important lesson, if one of the purposes of the program is to give us all a better understanding and appreciation of our friends and colleagues from other and diverse backgrounds. (hope the DEI police won't jail me for publishing the D word)

The convention of separation of church and state keeps religion per se out of primary and secondary education --- and social norms also tend to discourage us from discussing religion seriously or even casually with friends or colleagues who might be of different persuasions. I, on the other hand, think it can lead to very enlightening, even fascinating, dialog when addressed openly in the form of questions and options since many of our answers are based

on faith rather than factual evidence that can't be proven or disproven.

All religions rely to a degree on the observer's faith as taught typically by family and church, in addition to, or perhaps in place of, some limited historical evidence. We should feel free to discuss issues that demonstrate this, for example evolution versus creation, and we should not be uncomfortable addressing the existence of God or a God, and what kind of God.

If only all humanity could appreciate or at least understand the opinions of others, organized religion would cease to be the underlying cause of so many national and global conflicts. We must stop opposing those of faiths other than ours, be they Jews, Christians, Muslims or others, for no other reason than worshipping another God who typically has nothing to do with our own personal daily lives. And what better opportunity to foster mutual understanding and acceptance than during our early schooling when we are becoming more and more exposed to immigrants and others from diverse backgrounds.

In his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Harari asks the question "Does God exist?" --- and answers "That depends on which God you have in mind: the cosmic mystery, or the worldly lawgiver?"

The former, the cosmic mystery, he describes as "a grand and awesome enigma about which we know absolutely nothing" and which we invoke "to explain the deepest riddles of the cosmos. Why is there something rather than nothing? What shaped the fundamental laws of physics?"

The latter, the worldly lawgiver, on the other hand, we claim to know only too much about, for example, what he "thinks about fashion, food, sex and politics," based on which, we "justify a million

regulations, decrees, and conflicts.” He tells some of us what we can and cannot, should or should not, think or do. “This is the God of the faithful servants of a beneficent God, but also the “God of Crusaders and jihadists, of the inquisitors, misogynists, and homophobes.”

A good question that could be addressed in a middle or high school class on religion would be “Does religion unite or divide us?” On the world stage, unfortunately, the end has been in many cases throughout history to divide us as I indicated above. In the local community arena, on the other hand, religion in America has historically been a great uniter. But as we all know, over recent decades, belonging to any community group, religions included, has been on a continuous decline. Look around you at the open pews on Sunday. However, Ross Douthat in his February 1 *New York Times* article “Looking for Faith? Here’s a Guide to Choosing a Religion” claims that “The long rise of the Nones, Americans with no religious affiliation, has seemingly reached its limit....Within the intelligentsia there is a wave of notable conversions and a striking nostalgia for belief.” He then goes on with an interesting approach to those seeking a religion or a new religion noting that “secularization has created a cohort with little acquaintance with organized religion,...But for the open-minded person who hasn’t received divine direction, a religious quest can still be a rational undertaking -- not a leap into pure mystery but a serious endeavor with a real hope of making progress toward the truth.”

Regarding these desperate times, we think of religion as the root cause of many conflicts including the war in Gaza, and this could be addressed in a lesson or course in religion. However, there’s a lot more that should cause us to think about the role of religion in these desperate times.

And here is where I am compelled to digress for a bit from what we might address in a school classroom setting to what should make an “interesting” discussion in a civilized adult social setting. Ralph Nader in his January 17 *In the Public Interest* newsletter said that “the organized church has traditionally been the custodian of the norms and standards that bind members of society together. The ‘Golden Rule’ is one of the greatest precepts ever dedicated to guide human and institutional interactions. The Ten Commandments have served a similar secular purpose to the extent they are observed.” But he goes on to lament that our current President has “chronically violated these principles....”

How can this possibly be reconciled with the apparent aim of some evangelicals and white Christian nationalists to remake America in their image. And specifically, how can the actions of Donald Trump in his first 100 days with little advance warning layoff, fire, or otherwise deprive employment of thousands of public servants, at least 9000 in his original sights, currently serving all of us in veterans affairs, health and human services, environmental protection, and homeland security be justified by his vague goal of eliminating waste, fraud and abuse. Why isn’t every Senator or Representative, Republican and Democrat alike, screaming out “hold on, these are my constituents you’re dealing with, my constituents that your team has gone on record as wishing to traumatize?” We all support a massive effort to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse, but there are better ways to do it.

Needless to say, as an advocate for universal national service including public service, I am appalled at the above treatment of public servants and other fellow Americans engaged in bettering our lives. All of our elected officials and other notable pundits promoting national service over the years, including William F.

Buckley, Jr. the author of *Gratitude*, considered the Bible for universal national service, would undoubtedly agree. The hardest nosed corporate CEOs and their HR departments give more warning and better justification for such actions. Whether you admire or abhor Ralph Nader, he's right on the mark about the Trump-Musk team and the Golden Rule. And carrying this to its extreme, we now have seen the team of Donald Trump and his VP J. D. Vance instead of following the Golden Rule as the defender of the free world, treating our allies as if they too were expendable employees.

For many of us, our positions on one of the more significant issues in the recent elections and aftermath that divide us, i.e. gender identity, also relate to our religious identity. I favor school classes in religion addressing this at the appropriate age to the extent that individual states and school boards deem suitable. There are guidelines in many states for this, and they are mandatory in some states

The civil rights act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on sex, and in 2020 the US Supreme Court ruled that sexual orientation and gender identity are included in that protection. However, it does not clearly include all aspects of gender identity. While the ACLU works to ensure that LGBTQ people have equal rights, The Equality Act that would guarantee all equal rights to LGBTQs based on sex has yet to be passed. Certainly, some deniers oppose this, not only based on a legitimate opposition to men participating in women's sports but also in part based on their religious beliefs.

Surely, a better understanding of religion --- all religions --- and all the above aspects related to our social order and politics would enable all of us, old and young, voters and future voters, to be better citizens, and that is why I included religion in my lessons in living, ---

controversial for sure, but if some of our high school students are old enough to vote, they should be well educated on the issues.

For comments, further information or requests to unsubscribe, contact me at tedhol@charter.net .

Step Forward America

Ted Hollander