

A PREZ RELEASE

from AGTS

(Monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary)

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Religion is finding its way into the public eye lately in somewhat interesting ways. John McCain accuses George W. Bush of being anti-Catholic because Bush visits Bob Jones University whose vilification of the Pope is legendary. Bill Bradley distances himself from the days he gave his personal testimony at Billy Graham crusades and Al Gore mistakenly notes John 16:3 (instead of 3:16) as one of his favorite verses. (Check out John 16:3)

I'm not about to enter into candidate evaluation, that's not the purpose of this commentary. I do believe that a very visible event, such as the presidential race of 2000, provides us an excellent example of the American public's perception of religion. Yale lawyer Stephen Carter puts it this way in his book *Culture of Disbelief*, "having lots of public religion is not the same as taking religion seriously. The presence of religious rhetoric in public life does not mean that citizens to whom that rhetoric is precious are accorded the respect that they deserve."

The public arena exists on uneasy terms with religion. The "public square" looks at religion with attitudes that range from hostility all the way to seeing religion as a hobby. Witness the dissonance that occurs whenever Alan Keyes argues natural law and unapologetically calls for a return to morality based on the existence of a holy God. It's as if Keyes is an alien from another planet who hasn't yet learned the rules of living here on earth. The American public is much more comfortable with religious platitudes; with seeing the Bible as a nice book of quotations devoid of any theological significance. Our society fears any kind of subversive force that would seek to dethrone human autonomy from its prominence. So our society treats people who take their faith seriously as persons who don't really count in society, or worse yet ... as fanatics.

There are a variety of pathways that we could take to evaluate how America has reached this uneven perspective on the place of religion in society. However, the more important question is how can we as people of faith actually live in this kind of reality. Our first acknowledgment should be that we are not the first Christians to have lived in such an environment. Countless generations of Christians, beginning with biblical times, have faced a similar situation.

Regardless of the state we find ourselves in, we have a faith that enables us to live confidently in this world. Our faith can answer clearly and eternally the universal questions all people must answer. Where did we come from and who are we? The Bible speaks clearly in the creation accounts of our origin and our human significance. Christians do have an explanation for what has gone wrong with the world? We are a fallen people and suffer from the limitations that occur when people try to live life by their own rules. What can humanity do to fix its problems?

Christians affirm that our hope is not in our own strength, we cannot solve our own dilemmas, but we can have hope because God has a solution to humanity's dilemma: redemption in Jesus Christ. In short, transformed people transform their societies. They live confidently in contexts where they are either taken for granted or treated with hostility, but despite the public's response to their deep faith they live as testimonies to the transformational power of Jesus Christ.

So the rest of the year 2000 will be an interesting display of the seriousness with which we take our faith in America. I don't think God has a favorite political party and we need to be very careful of thinking that the right religious words will get God on our side and our cause. The greatest testimony to the power of the Gospel is still a community of faith where men and women (boys and girls) believe the truth of the Gospel and act out its implications in obedient response to its claims on their lives. The local church is still God's plan to demonstrate, in visible form, the reality of a God who sent His Son to reconcile lost humanity back to Himself. The power of that faith community cannot be refuted or hindered because it is central to the relentless commitment of a redemptive God to rescue lost humanity. Vote for your candidate in November, but remember who is the King over all *kings* and Lord over all *lords*.

Byron D. Klaus

agtspres@agseminary.edu

Check it out...

Books

The Culture of Disbelief by Stephen Carter, Anchor Books 1993 ISBN 0-385-47498-9

The subtitle *How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* really identifies the focus of this volume. A very thought provoking apologetic for the acknowledgment that religion has always and must continue to play a role in American public life.

Surf the web

www.leonardsweet.com This is a site by the author of two current hot books on the church in the 21st century. *SoulTsunami* and *AquaChurch*

One last reminder. . .

There is still room for you to attend *Seminary Day* at AGTS, **Friday, March 24**. A great opportunity to see AGTS in action. Check it out at www.agts.edu or call Joyce Swartz at 1-800-467-AGTS to to reserve your place.