

Dear All,

If I led you to think that I was done dealing with ‘reductions’, I must apologize. There is one that is typically American and a really ‘hot potato’ in an election year, but it must be addressed: the reduction of every public issue to a **political** issue.

The First Amendment to the Constitution forbids Congress to abridge the free practice of religion. The strictest reading of the that text would seem to suggest that the legislators of the USofA are to maintain a public agnosticism in the face of the internal and inter-religious arguments that so delight bodies that base their activities in dogmatic propositions. But, with no lesser light than Thomas Jefferson to endorse it, a wider reading assumes that it forbids faith-based organizations from voicing judgments or urging action on matters contested in elections or pending before legislators. According to the ‘Johnson Amendment’, such a body would lose its tax-exempt status.

In the hurly-burly of American political life, where there is really no such thing as an election-free year, this would effectively ban any moral teaching in churches, synagogues, ashrams, kivas, covens, Masonic temples, etc.. By extension, it would force voters to choose between using those values in the voting booth or the punishment of those who taught them.

I got a powerful lesson in this brand of thought when I went, in full clerical garb, to a public meeting on physician assisted suicide. The ‘pro’ speaker, not even a Vermonter, could not miss me – speaking of the elephant in the room. Coincidentally, then (?) though(?), he began his comments with the assertion that “PAS is not a religious or moral issue; it is purely legal and political. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” For once – and probably the last time in my life – I bit my tongue. There was no need to speak when everyone knew I was being attacked for my obvious religious beliefs. It is sad to see someone shoot himself in the foot.

But do you see how political reductionism works? Do you see how it effectively disenfranchises religious organizations and figures? Imagine trying such a rhetorical ploy against trade unions, film stars or ‘the media’, or some PAC or other! It would appear that, in this reading of the Constitution, everyone enjoys freedom from Congressional interference except religious groups and their leadership.

So pervasive is this way of thinking that ‘faithful’ religious people will walk out of congregations when they think that religion is challenging their electoral preferences and ‘religious Americans’ will scold their leadership when they are suspected of heresy over the secular dogma of ‘separation of church and state’.

This is neither an instruction of ‘conlaw’ nor a political rant. I mean it to show how easy it is to slip into reductionist ways of thought and how easily those ways of thought become ways of acting. This is necessary background for a presentation on the genius of **Catholic** thought on how to think – about anything.

With any luck – and great relief -- I will be able to start that presentation next week.

Really and truly and present-ly yours,

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