



Don't let religious right's anti-gay rhetoric chart course

COMMUNITY VIEW • By DOUG MARSHALL- STEELE • August 8, 2010

Various religious authorities have moved against gay Americans who seek civil rights equal to those of other Americans. The Mormon Church bankrolled 71 percent of the money behind Prop 8, the California referendum which nullified same-gender civil marriage.

The Vatican opposes even gay civil unions and gay adoption, calling the latter "violence" against children. Protestant fundamentalists predict social collapse if gays attain legal equality, Dr. James Dobson even warning that gay marriage "will destroy the Earth."

In light of such strong and united disapproval of equality for gay citizens by religious leadership, should not that position prevail in our courts and legislatures? Uh, no.

Religious anti-gay sentiment, while shrill and easy for the media to report, is not the whole story. People of faith can be fully supportive of civil rights equality.

Take me for example. Many know me only as a gay man and an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) civil rights. I am also an evangelical, or born-again, Christian. I attended a Bible college and a missionary training school, and served as a pastoral assistant and a missionary assistant. Although a cradle Methodist, my spiritual journey included membership in other Protestant denominations before finally becoming an Episcopalian, to which church I remain faithful.

Those who know me know I take my faith seriously and would call me devout in my religious observance and active in work that helps others. My ancestors include Christians who were activists in the social issues of their day: anti-slavery, women's suffrage, temperance -- and I see myself as an LGBT advocate, not because I am gay but because I am a Christian

Beyond my "testimony," consider that over 100 Delaware clergy members have signed a statement supporting full civil rights, including civil marriage, for LGBT Delawareans. (The "Revised Spiritual Leaders' Statement" is found at www.Towardequality.org.)

Consider also that the Presbyterian Church USA recently approved same-gender domestic partner benefits for its personnel, a direct result of an initiative at First and Central Presbyterian in Wilmington, Delaware. The Episcopal Church in 1976 declared that gay persons should have full civil equality. The United Church of Christ has been marrying same-gender couples for years. Even 58 percent of evangelicals 18 to 29 years old support marriage or civil union for gay people (Greenberg Quinland Rosner Research). They see it as just fairness and indeed consistent with Jesus' embrace of Samaritans, Gentiles, women and other outsiders.

There are thus varying religious views concerning whether gay Americans should have civil equality. Which should prevail in a diverse democracy such as ours? Actually, none.

Religious adherents have the right to propagate their beliefs in church and in society, and to petition government as any other citizen. But civil law cannot legally be decided on religious grounds, which would characterize a theocracy not a democracy. Who thinks the Salem Witch Trials were a good idea?

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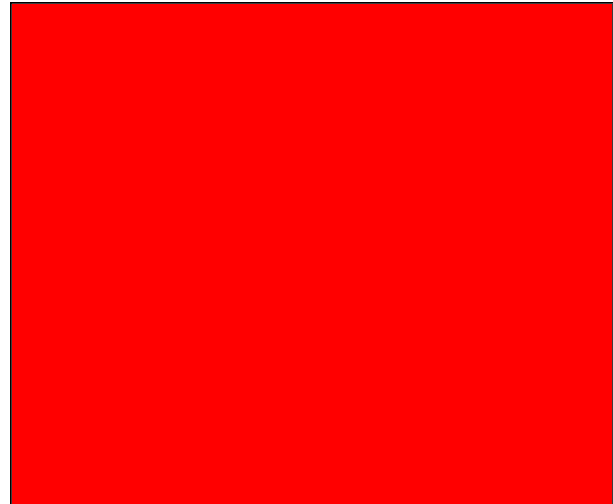
In fact, nobody, religious or secular, should be voting on the civil rights of any lawful minority, yet this for the first time is occurring relative to LGBT citizens. Since when do citizens get to vote on other citizens' civil rights in this country?

If women's suffrage were decided by referendum, women still would not have the vote. Indeed, no racial or religious minority could expect a fair shake. Happily our Constitution, as a safeguard against mob rule, champions minority rights, which would not exist if only numbers were considered. Sadly, however, our courts are not doing their job and disallowing referenda deciding people's legal equality.

As a Christian I pray and work for God's kingdom to come. As a gay American, I am thankful our Constitution does not permit preference of one religious perspective over another.

Douglas Marshall-Steele is a member of The News Journal Community Advisory Board.

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