**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

 *By Dr. Riley B. Case*

**INDIANA’S RFRA LAW AND THE WAR AGAINST CHRISTIANS**

 The controversy generated by religious freedom issues in America has revealed a disturbing new development, namely, a new hostility toward Christians and Christian faith that has been generated by secularists, atheists, and several of the gay activist groups. In Indiana the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was designed to protect Christians, Christian organizations, and Christian businesses from government intervention that would require them to act in violation of their Christian convictions. However, the passing of the act actually served to give gay activist groups an excuse to launch a well-funded and well-organized propaganda operation designed to undermine Christian faith in the name of non-discrimination.

 Within hours of the passing of the RFRA in Indiana web sites and social media weighed in with articles like the following: Jeffrey Taylor in *Salon*: “Our Coming Theocratic Hell: The Right’s ‘Religious Freedom’ Act Is Just Beginning.” Zaid Jilani wrote for *AlterNet*: “How Religious Freedom Has Been Used to Justify Racism, Sexism and Slavery Throughout History.” Valerie Tarico, the once-evangelical writer who turned atheist, wrote for *Salon*: “Right-Wing Christianity Teaches Bigotry: The Ugly Roots of Indiana’s New Anti-Gay Law.”

 The argument in these and other articles goes something like this: to believe in the Biblical view of sexuality which promotes celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage, and to hold that marriage is defined as man and woman, is by definition an ideology motivated by hate and bigotry. This kind of bigotry should be resisted by any means possible. Unless RFRA was repealed or amended Indiana as a state would be boycotted and economically crippled.

 It did not matter that there had been no instances in Indiana where service was being denied to gays and lesbians. A new narrative was being created to convince the media, businesses, educators, many otherwise well-meaning persons, and even the Disciples of Christ (who said they would move their national convention out of Indiana to get away from the hatred), that Indiana legislators, influenced by right-wing Christians, were passing laws with the sole intent of legalizing discrimination.

 Greta Christina wrote for *AlterNet*: “Why Should Atheists Have to Show Respect for Religion.” The thrust of this article was that while it is generally good to show respect for the beliefs of others, right-wing Christians are so hateful they are beyond the deserving of respect.

 It was the well-known atheist Christopher Hitchens who wrote*: I am absolutely convinced that the main source of hatred in the world is religion and organized religion.*  Never mind Nazi Germany or Marxism or the starving of 50 million Russians under the atheist social planning of the Soviet Union, or the horrors of Red China, it is really religion, according to Hitchens, and specifically right-wing Christianity, that is responsible for discrimination, violence and destruction in the world.

 While there are many gay and lesbian advocates who claim to be Christians, including numbers of United Methodists, a lot of the big money and loudest voices promoting a gay agenda come from atheists or “humanists.” Adam Lee wrote in the *Guardian*, “It’s Time for Atheists to Stop Debating God’s Existence and Decide What to Do About It.” The article was not about atheists feeding the hungry and visiting the sick; it was atheists about doing more for the LGBT cause. In the course of the article Lee remarks that the primary opposition in America and other Western nations to the gay cause comes entirely from religion, especially Christianity and so Christianity needs to be opposed.

 *AlterNet* carried an article: “A Brutal Christianity: We’ll See More Cruel Laws like Indiana’s Until the Christian Right Is Defeated.” More from *Salon:* “The Right’s Made-Up God: How Bigots Invented a White Supremist Jesus.” Andrew Aghapour wrote in *AlterNet*: “The End of Religion as We Know It: Why Churches Can No Longer Hide the Truth.” Aghapour’s argument is that only a religion that is progressive and adaptable to modern times has any future in the world (an argument secularists have been making for 100 years).

 Frank Bruni wrote in the *New York Times*, “Bigotry, the Bible, and the Lessons From Indiana.” Bruni argues that evangelical Christianity is the last hold-out against full acceptance of lesbians and gays. The reason for this is an outdated view of the Bible, offensive parts of which Christians need to jettison, in order to submit to the “enlightenment of modernity.”

 Bruni is one of a number of writers fighting evangelical Christianity who remark that not all Christians are full of hatred. Progressive Christians, acting in enlightened ways, see that the Bible is a human book and subject to correction by those with insights from the present day.

 Brittany Cooper (a college professor), claiming evidently to be a Christian, writes as an inspiration for Holy Week: *“The Evangelical Right have pimped Jesus’ death to support the global spread of American empire…(through) “free trade,” the abuse of native peoples, the continued subjugation of Black people, and the regulation of the sexual lives of women and gay people. Let us mark their Holy Week by declaring the death to the unholy trinity of white supremist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy. And once these systems die, may they die once and for all, never to be resurrected*.”

 Do we have a response? Yes.

 1. The present conflict is not between gay rights and religious liberty, but between the sexual revolution and Christianity. The principles of radical sexual autonomy and freedom from any form of moral judgment, if they prevail, will undermine the truth of Christianity. Christianity is based on a moral order revealed by God and reflected in what we understand to be western civilization. Several mainline denominations--especially Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the United Church of Christ--have, at least on an official level, caved under secularist pressure, have compromised on the Biblical Christian sexual ethic, and as a result are simply disintegrating as viable Christian communities. There is tremendous pressure to add the United Methodist Church to that group. This is why the UM General Conference, which will be held in Portland, Oregon in 2015, is so important. A severe compromise at Portland on issues of human sexuality will mark the beginning of the disintegration of the United Methodist Church to irrelevancy.

 At the moment, while religious progressives seem more than willing to join the sexual revolution, it is worth noting that not a single orthodox Christian denomination is reconsidering its stance on sexual revolution issues. This explains why there is tremendous hostility against Christians, especially those labeled the “right-wing.” The entertainment world and the business world and the academic world might compromise under secular pressure to abandon long-standing standards of right and wrong; there is a strong core of Christian believers, however, or all ages and all nations and all races, who will stand firm in their Christian convictions.

 2. Evangelical United Methodists would do well to keep some perspective. We are blessed to live in America, where we have more freedom to live out our Christian convictions than in any other place in the world (the exception might be some countries in Africa). Despite the opposition by many in the entertainment world, part of the secular media, and even in the business world (perhaps the group most susceptible to intimidation and pressure), Americans have freedom to worship according to their consciences, to evangelize, and to hold convictions even in the midst of much secularism. Much is made over the recent Pew study showing that the percentage of those identifying as Christian has declined from 78% to 70%. In case anyone has not noticed 70% is still an overwhelming majority.

 3. Evangelical believers, like others, are always called to repentance. Let us be the first to admit we have not always loved our neighbors as ourselves; we claim to believe that all persons, including gays and lesbians, are persons of sacred worth, but our actions do not always match our claims. I have at times been embarrassed by remarks made from evangelical pulpits and in Sunday school classes about gays and lesbians. It is understandable why gays and lesbians feel rejection. There has been discrimination against gays and lesbians. For this we repent and ask for grace to love.

 May God give us strength as we face the days ahead.