

# *Hate Speech and the Religious Right to be a Bigot*

by Herb Silverman

Religious hate is protected speech. Everyone has the right to hate anyone, but not the right to commit crimes based on that hatred.

Perhaps that's why **Bob Jones III**, former president of Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Christian institution in my home state of South Carolina, apologized in 2015 for his 1980 remark that we should follow the biblical injunction of stoning gays to death.

So what about hate crime laws? I'm somewhat conflicted over this issue. I support laws that prohibit acts of discrimination, including threats and intimidation. But I tend to think it's problematic to give longer criminal sentences for crimes motivated by religious hatred. I don't want to hold the accused guilty of the free speech right to have an opinion, however hateful it may be. I also doubt that some bigot would be dissuaded from taking an action because a few additional hate crime years might be tacked on to a justifiably long sentence.

A more serious problem in criminal cases, I think, is that the race, color, religion, or sexual orientation of the defendant may unfairly sway the jury. For example, an atheist who refuses to swear an oath with his hand on the Bible, asserting a legal right to simply affirm, would likely prejudice some on the jury.

We also have the free speech right to not be "politically correct," however politically correct is defined. It could mean opposition to language and behavior that upsets or offends certain groups. To be fair and balanced, I've criticized both politically correct liberals and conservatives. Some liberals give a pass to human right violations in Muslim countries because it's part of Muslim culture. I also disagree with liberals who block conservatives from speaking on college campuses. Similarly, I disagree with conservatives who stop liberals from speaking in certain forums or claim discrimination against Christians when they don't receive special rights not granted to those of other faiths or no faith at all.

Some people proudly proclaim themselves as politically incorrect in order to justify bad behavior, which may include refusing to vote for an African American or a Muslim, or not believing in scientific theories like evolution and climate change. Since when did rejecting the overwhelming consensus of scientists around the globe become a proud, politically incorrect position? I suppose I'm politically correct because I like to make evidence-based and reality-based decisions.

The ultimate in (literal) political correctness are politicians who won't acknowledge they are atheists because they assume such an admission would hurt them politically. Fortunately, we now have a Congressional Freethought Caucus which, as of this writing, has 13 active members.

In 1990 I did the most politically incorrect thing possible — I ran for governor of South Carolina to challenge our state Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. Of course I lost the election but after eight years of litigation, the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in my favor, thus nullifying the religious test clause in our state constitution.

Religious leaders may preach that I will suffer an eternity in hell because I'm an atheist, but I still believe the little ditty I learned in kindergarten: "Sticks and stones may break my

bones, but words will never hurt me." Religions can prohibit women from sitting next to men in their houses of worship and can shun or excommunicate members for not appropriately following certain rules. Members who disagree with doctrines are free to leave the religion, as millions have done and continue to do.

The United States government can't legally favor one religion over another or religion over non-religion. Religious freedom should include the right to be free from people imposing their religious views on the public through discrimination in employment, housing, education, and public accommodations. We are a secular country with secular laws that apply to all citizens.

Equal treatment under the law is not a radical idea. Same-sex couples should have the same rights, benefits, and protections as opposite-sex couples. Some people assert a biblical justification that marriage should only be between a man and a woman, just as a few generations ago they gave a biblical justification that marriage should only be between members of the same race. I could just as easily give a biblical justification for marriage of a man and 700 women (I Kings 11:3). Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which shows that his brain was not his most active organ. Those who want to make civil laws compatible with a particular interpretation of a so-called holy book might think about moving to a theocratic country.

Unfortunately, the United States government favors religious institutions in many ways. Religious entities don't pay property tax or state income tax, substantially increasing the tax burden on the rest of us. Our politicians and courts have also approved laws that give preferential treatment to religious institutions over secular nonprofit organizations. Such special accommodations include taxpayer-funded school vouchers for religious institutions that need not comply with the same standards as secular schools, faith-based initiatives that allow hiring discrimination, and denial of certain types of healthcare because of the religious beliefs of a provider.

With government benefits given to religion, numerous controversies have raged over what constitutes a religion. Religion scholars can't seem to agree, but religious privileging has forced the Internal Revenue Service to make such determinations. I find all attempts to define religion problematic. Is religion a sincerely held irrational supernatural faith-based belief? If so, why should the government privilege irrational beliefs over rational beliefs?

Of course there are both theistic and nontheistic religions, the latter placing more emphasis on rational beliefs. Some rational religions include the Society for Humanistic Judaism (with atheist rabbis), the American Ethical Union (with Ethical Culture Societies), Unitarian Universalist Humanists, and the Cultural and Secular Jewish Organization. All four are nontheistic and are active members of the Secular Coalition for America. Some secular groups have used satire in forming religions, primarily to draw attention to unfair advantages afforded religion and how foolish religions can be. Examples include the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Satanic Temple.

The First Amendment prohibits the government from privileging one religion over another. I also don't think

religion should be privileged over conscience. If the government agrees to an exemption from a law because of religious belief, that same exemption should be available for conscientious belief, as in the 1965 case where the Supreme Court ruled in favor of an atheist conscientious objector to war (*Welch v. United States* 578 U.S.).

Special treatment for religion defeats society's promotion of the general welfare. Neither religious nor non-religious people can invoke conscience to avoid paying taxes. A pharmacist should be required to dispense prescriptions regardless of religious beliefs, just as a supermarket cashier must check out meat products even though eating animal flesh might go against her vegan beliefs.

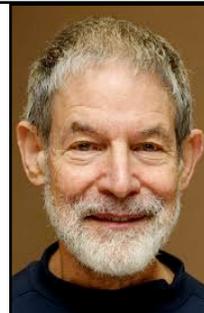
Our secular Constitution makes no mention of any gods. The only references to religion are in Article VI (no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office), and in the First Amendment (barring Congress from making any law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof). Our founders supported freedom of religion because they understood that religious diversity would

help our new country avoid the kinds of religious wars that had plagued Europe for centuries. Freedom of religion must include freedom from religion, which means our First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion and conscience.

We might even honor the godless Constitution established by our founders, who had no "under God" pledge of allegiance and no "In God We Trust" motto. The Great Seal of the United States of America contains the motto *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one), and we the people are free to trust in gods or reason, without government promotion of religion. □

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## Facts About the Amish

by Margaret Downey

When people learn that I live near Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, America's oldest Amish settlement, I'm asked a lot of questions about the thousands of people that still live a centuries-old "Plain" lifestyle. Other Amish communities exist in Ohio and Indiana. In Pennsylvania, beautiful Amish hand-stitched quilts can be easily found for sale.

The Amish lifestyle still reflects roots in rural 17<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland. Amish adherents live apart from society, dress modestly, practice humility, avoid modern technology, "shun" members who stray, and follow *Ordnung*. The *Ordnung* is an oral tradition regulating all facets of life. It is a set of rules for Amish, Old Order Mennonite and Conservative Mennonites. This article, however will only highlight the Old Order Amish.

The Amish avoid temptation and sin by living apart from the outside world. Adherents never want to become arrogant or prideful and they consult the *Ordnung* for all their decisions. There is no need for the Amish to agonize over decisions; everything is covered in *Ordnung*!

Next to the *Ordnung* and the *Bible*, the Amish consider the book *Martyrs Mirror* (aka *The Bloody Theater*) as the most significant. *The Bloody Theater*, was first published in Holland in 1660 in Dutch by **Thieleman J. van Braght**. It documents the stories and testimonies of Christian martyrs, especially Anabaptists. The book includes accounts of the martyrdom of the apostles and the stories of martyrs from previous centuries with beliefs similar to the Anabaptists.

The Amish religion includes a belief in Heaven and Hell. The Amish community follows basic concepts of Christianity that provide a foundation for their beliefs. They believe in God ("Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit"). The Amish way of life is geared toward achieving salvation on a daily basis. Sinning is not tolerated and any perceived sin is punished by *Meidung* (shunning).

If a follower leaves the faith or is shunned that person will not be admitted to heaven. The Amish practice *Rumspringa*, which is when adolescents (age 16) "run around," party, and see the outside world before committing to the adult Amish lifestyle. Young adults (18-21) get baptized a second time after

committing to the Amish way of life as an adult. The formal education of Amish children ends at 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They must speak Pennsylvania Dutch (also referred to, more correctly, as Pennsylvania German) or English.

The Amish have strict gender rules and often separate women from men. Both men and woman must not use finery or ornamentation and this is why they are referred to as "Plain People." Restricted ornamentation applies to zippers, and jewelry. Women must wear long sleeve dresses, black bonnets or white caps. Men's pants must not have creases, cuffs, or zippers. Amish coats do not have pockets. The men grow long beards without mustaches after marriage. Divorce and birth control use are prohibited.

Amish households must not use electricity. Electricity is viewed as having a connection with the world. Well, at least they are safe from power outages and any post-storm fallen power wires! And for those who enjoy a quiet life an Amish home guarantees no radio, television, or other electronic noise. All farming equipment must be controlled manually.

Modes of transportation are either a horse-drawn buggy, bicycles, roller skates or scooters. The Amish must abide by local road rules, but there is no fear of ever getting a speeding ticket since horses stay well within safe road speeds.

Amish folk enjoy visiting each other. They conduct lengthy wedding ceremonies, large feasts and help each other with things such as "barn raising" and other needs. While these events are exciting times for the community, there must be no visual recording of these events. Cameras and photography are prohibited within the community.

Violence is not allowed in the Amish community and during wartime they are conscientious objectors. The plain and simple Amish are peaceful people and are respected for their farming, cooking, building, gardening, and quilting talents. Their business locations are open Thursday through Saturday only. They are always closed on Sundays as that day is considered a special time for the family and community. Typically the Amish have worship services every second Sunday in private homes.

Despite the "no use of modern technology" rule, many Amish contractors and business owners enjoy lighting, heating, and telephone service when it's provided by people who are not Amish — a survival loophole. □