

Church, State and Campaign '08

by Bill Boyarsky via fish - truthdig.com *Friday, May 2 2008, 9:00am*

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When Adolf Hitler came to power, he said, "I am not going to do anything in my lifetime that hasn't been done by the Roman Church for the past 800 years. I am only going to do it on a greater scale and more efficiently."



Two nutters in a pod, Hagee and McCain

This comes from the Rev. John Hagee, a hugely popular televangelist who is an important supporter of Sen. John McCain, the prospective Republican presidential nominee. Hagee's congregation in Texas has 19,000 members, and he appears on more than 150 television stations, 50 radio stations and eight religious networks. Although Hagee is not McCain's personal minister, Hagee gives McCain an entrée to the Christian right, a group that has considered McCain too liberal.

Could anything be more bigoted and inflammatory than Hagee saying the Roman Catholic Church inspired Hitler when he crafted the Holocaust? Certainly it ranks with or exceeds the ranting of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Sen. Barack Obama's former minister. McCain's religious nut is every bit as destructive as Obama's.

Considering the importance of Hagee to McCain, I would think such an outburst of anti-Catholicism would have created a frenzy of stories and comments by political journalists and their cousins, the cable news network analysts. Yet Hagee's words have disappeared into the limbo of news not hot enough for prime time.

Similarly, there was minimum attention paid to Hagee's declaration that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment to New Orleans for permitting a gay pride parade. "I believe the judgment of God is a very real thing," said Hagee. "I believe that Hurricane Katrina was in fact the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans."

On another occasion, he said, "Those who believe in the Koran have a scriptural mandate to kill Christians and Jews."

And where's the outrage over his belief that Jews who do not convert to Christianity will be banned from Hagee's heaven-bound express during the Rapture and forced to remain behind and boil on

Earth? By the way, the segment of right-wing Jews who welcome Hagee's support for Israel and his advocacy of a pre-emptive United States-Israeli strike against Iran should study this particular belief carefully. They should be aware that the Jews are doomed on Rapture day unless they convert.

Compared to the torture inflicted on Obama over his association with Wright, McCain has mostly escaped bad publicity from his Hagee connection.

The subject came up when McCain appeared with George Stephanopoulos on ABC's "This Week." Stephanopoulos asked if it was "a mistake to solicit and accept his [Hagee's] endorsement?"

McCain replied, "Oh, probably, sure." But the candidate said he's still "glad to have his endorsement."

The senator criticized the pastor's "condemning of the Catholic Church," but added that "I admire and respect Dr. Hagee's leadership. ... I admire and appreciate his advocacy for the state of Israel, the independence of the state of Israel."

The Arizona senator was interviewed by Stephanopoulos on Sunday, April 29, the day before Wright's disastrous appearance at the National Press Club in Washington. Actually, Wright was thoughtful and positive when he gave his speech, just as he was when interviewed the Friday night before by Bill Moyers.

He said, "The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God's children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation. ... We root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred or prejudice."

As happens to many a person in love with his own voice, Wright got into trouble during the question-and-answer session. There he praised the anti-Semitic Louis Farrakhan. He also said Obama was playing politics when he distanced himself from Wright. And when asked about a sermon in which he "said the government lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color," Wright replied, "based on what has happened to Africans in this country, I believe our government is capable of doing anything."

All this is crazy, but not any worse than Hagee saying the Roman Catholic Church inspired the Holocaust or that God punished New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina.

Why has McCain gotten off so easily while Obama is being battered unmercifully?

One reason is that the Obama-Wright story is about race. The fact that Obama is the first African-American with a real chance of becoming president has made race a central part of the election story. This is especially true now, when the superdelegates and the media are carefully counting white votes, which Obama will need for victory. Wright's words, especially when reduced to short pieces of video and sound bites, won't help Obama.

Another reason is that the media love McCain, his war record and the access to him on the campaign, the "straight talk" reputation. These subjects have captured more attention than his support of the Iraq war, his ineffective health care proposals and his muddled economic policies.

News coverage aside, the most important lesson to be learned from the wild-card ministries of Hagee and Wright is that religion should have no place in the campaign.

The men who founded the country understood this. They wrote a Constitution that separated church and state. They were not especially religious. Thomas Jefferson was a deist who doubted the divinity of Christ. As biographer Ron Chernow wrote of Alexander Hamilton, "Like other founders and thinkers of the Enlightenment, he was disturbed by religious fanaticism and tended to associate organized religion with superstition."

We are letting religious fanaticism dominate the presidential campaign. The candidates have brought it on themselves with tedious references to their churchgoing piety. Now we're all paying for it. Who cares what their preachers say? The voters want to hear about how the presidential candidates would restart the sick economy and get us out of Iraq.

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