

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



Is History Repeating Itself?
– Bishop John Shelby Spong*

October 12, 2005

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” These words of philosopher George Santayana are terrifyingly true. Recently, I have looked again at what happened to the Jews in Christian Europe in the 1930s and 1940s and compared that to what I believe is happening today to homosexual people in the United States. The similarities are both eerie and frightening. Lest we prove guilty of not learning from history, allow me to recall that anti-Semitic horror from the last century for the sake of comparison.

The latent hostility against the Jews began to be stoked by Adolf Hitler in his book *Mein Kampf*, which was written during the mid-twenties while he was in prison. The historic roots of this hostility, however, had been nurtured by years of Christian rhetoric that had portrayed Jews as Christ-killers and as the cause of such catastrophes as the Bubonic Plague. Killing Jews had been legitimatised by the Vatican during the Crusades and it was fed by the writings of Martin Luther during the Reformation. In each instance the Jews were defined as the cause of all the trouble the ruling authorities were experiencing. When Hitler’s political star began to rise this killing prejudice was newly affirmed. The Pope, Pius XII, saw nothing in Hitler’s attitude that he deemed worthy of condemnation. Instead he offered the Fuhrer his stamp of approval. The German Protestant Church leadership, with one or two notable exceptions, was also generally silent. Political leaders in the United States, Great Britain and Canada acted so as to lead others to think that this German behavior was not inappropriate. Hitler’s anti-Semitic rhetoric was unchallenged, allowing a specific group of people to be regarded as worthy of persecution.

Today, a similar drumbeat of hostility is being loosed in our world against a different victim. Listen to the words that emanate from high places regarding gay and lesbian people in our time and compare it with the hostility spoken against the Jews during the 1930s in Nazi Germany. There is much to suggest that attacks against gay and lesbian people today serve the same political purposes that attacks on Jews served in that earlier time. Prejudice at its core is a diversionary tactic to shift responsibility toward an identifiable enemy. Hitler blamed the depression on “Jewish bankers.” His inability to bring about an alliance with Great Britain, which in his mind made World War II inevitable, was, he said, the result of an “international Jewish conspiracy.” Political and religious leaders in America today blame homosexual people for the breakdown in family values, the rising divorce rate and the decline of public morality. Having a designated scapegoat always makes hostility seem legitimate. I shudder at the direction in which I see my nation and the world walking.

The episode that for me ignited these fears in an incontrovertible way came with the recent announcement from the Vatican that the new Pope Benedict XVI, the former grand inquisitor Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was planning to make the signature issue of his pontificate the purging of all gay candidates studying for the Catholic priesthood. The directive indicated that this purge was to be total. The Pope, like Hitler, is acting on a long history of prejudice that has also been justified by the dominant voices in the Christian Church. His own church has consistently called homosexuality “deviant, unnatural and depraved.” In our slang homosexuals are called ‘faggots,’

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the name of the stick used to ignite the fires that burned numbers of homosexuals at the stake. Roman bishops do not allow homosexual groups like 'Dignity' to meet in their churches. Yet these prelates know full well that a major percentage of their clergy, including bishops and cardinals are in fact gay men.

In this new campaign for public favor, however, the Vatican is suggesting that it matters not that gay men seeking ordination live celibate lives, or even lives of exemplary holiness. If they are homosexual, they are to be purged. One's behavior is no longer to be the basis of judgment. People are now to be removed because of who they are. That was also Hitler's rule. 'Jewish,' for Hitler, meant anyone who had at least two Jewish grandparents, or one Jewish parent. If a gentile married a Jew he or she was also to be treated like a Jew. Hitler's purge, like Benedict XVI's, was not about one's doing; it was about one's being. The very being of a homosexual person is deemed to be sufficiently evil as to warrant action, for homosexuals are assumed to infect the purity of the Catholic faith like Jews were thought to infect the purity of the Aryan race.

Interestingly enough this Vatican Report stated that those already ordained would not be subject to this purge. That was to be avoided since the scandalous revelations would be a public relations disaster. The goal of cleansing the ordained ranks of homosexuals was thus only to start at the entry level. This means that the task of freeing the priesthood of its homosexual pollution, as they regard it, would require a time span of 50 years or so. In this manner the Pope promised that the "stench of homosexuality" would ultimately be removed from "the citadels of holiness."

Church leaders have blamed the recent publicity regarding the abuse of children by priests, rather conveniently it seems to me, on homosexual clergy, as if homosexuality and pedophilia were somehow the same. There is absolutely no evidence to support that assertion. In fact, 90% of the child abuse in America takes place in the family of the abused child and it is overwhelmingly heterosexual in nature, not homosexual. So this new anti-gay initiative is little more than a campaign to clear the church's image. That hardly has integrity. I recall that the hierarchy met this child abuse crisis not with honesty but with massive cover-ups. The greatest culprit in this cover-up was Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, who in an overt act of duplicity was transferred to a place of honor in Rome, thus removing him from the possibility of being brought to trial and having to testify under oath.

When attacking homosexuals becomes an acceptable thing to do then we have surely entered a dangerous period of history. Yet the Vatican is only one of the symptoms of this PPage 3 of 4 impending 'Dark Age.' During the last presidential campaign, the incumbent President of the United States, George W. Bush, and his top political advisor Karl Rove, managed to exacerbate the fears of the people of this land about the threat that homosexuality is supposed to bring to the institution of marriage. By placing this issue on the ballots of eleven states, Bush and Rove called out the mob spirit and blatantly encouraged America's growing homophobia. It proved to be a winning tactic. Once the seeds of hostility are sown and the victim identified, however, the result is inevitable. America's homosexual population has been, in effect, nominated to play that role. When Mr. Bush called for an amendment to the Constitution to ban gay marriage, he sought to institutionalize this prejudice. If hating or fearing homosexuals is proper for the Pope and the President then it quickly becomes proper for all. One has only to look and listen as this destructiveness, now unleashed, roams the land relatively unchallenged. Television evangelist, Jerry Falwell, has already suggested that the disaster of 9/11 was an act of divine punishment because America had begun to tolerate homosexuals. His not so subtle message is that if you do not want to be attacked by terrorists you must oppress homosexuals. Not to be outdone by his fellow Virginian, Pat Robertson was busy denying that he had said that the hurricane was divine punishment on New Orleans because it is the hometown of lesbian comedian, Ellen DeGeneres. In his

denial, however, he repeated the same mentality by stating that God was planning an earthquake for Hollywood, where the one he calls Ellen ‘Degenerate’ now lives. It was bizarre thinking, but both of these men have convinced themselves that God hates everything that they hate. That seems easy in today’s world of religion

The Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, has stated that “Homosexuality is a greater health hazard than smoking,” and has let it be known that homosexuals and their sympathizers are not welcome to receive communion at Catholic altars in Australia. At the funeral in Wyoming of a murdered gay man, Matthew Shepard, picketers organized by a Baptist preacher from Topeka, Kansas, carried a placard that read, “God said fags should die (Leviticus 20).” Does everyone not yet understand that when religious or political voices suggest that prejudice is both legitimate and blessed by God, they are opening this society to violence?

Adding to the weight of our cultural homophobia today are the voices of third world Christian leaders who, far more than is publicly acknowledged, are aided and abetted by right wing sources of money in America. Finally, there are the waffling main line Christian leaders, best symbolized by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who cannot bring himself to confront this blatant prejudice that impacts his church because he believes that “Church unity” is more important than countering this rising evil spirit. People simply do not seem to realize that if hostility, prejudice or persecution against any person on the basis of that person’s being is considered legitimate today, then no one is safe tomorrow. History can repeat itself. One German Lutheran pastor, Martin Niemoeller, who did oppose Hitler, wrote these words, which I believe, are as true for us today as they were in the 1930’s:

“First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist. Then they came for the socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.”

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I intend to speak out against this rising tide of homophobia in both the church and the world today. Silence constitutes the betrayal of all that I hold sacred. I hope you will also join in this public witness.