

Mixing government and religion never ends well

Theocracy: a system of government in which priests rule in the name of God or a god.

Those who would toy with creating a theocracy in the United States — and they are frighteningly numerous — need only look to the disastrous result of religious conflict in other countries and other centuries, as well as its too-often negative impact here, to see what a horrible idea it would be. And if they won't look, the rest of us should.

Some of our country's most conservative religious zealots are determined to declare the United States a Christian nation, which would be governed by Christian doctrine. They, of course, would be the "priests"

who define that doctrine as it relates to society. We are not so far from that happening. In fact, we have taken major steps in that direction.

Eighteenth and 19th century racist Christians used the Bible to defend slavery. Late 19th and 20th century racist Christians continued using it to defend segregation and the Jim Crow apartheid structure in the South and regrettably, part of the north, that has done so much to hold back African Americans trying to claim their share of what we are wont to call the American Dream.

More recently, anti-abortionists have picked up the mantle and have driven the country far to the right of much of the world in legislative restrictions that dictate the right of women to control their own bodies. Women are dying and girls

barely into puberty are being forced to carry the children of depraved relatives who have raped them.

We weren't finished with that fight when LGBTQ ostracism was added to our growing list of culture wars, also known as things to hate. And we are now determined to give individuals the right to restrict what others are allowed to read.

The separation of church and state wasn't an accident. It was a direct outgrowth of both the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. Seventeenth and 18th century philosophers, whose work we regularly praise as the foundation of our democracy, correctly saw that when civil power was given to religion, man's progress was inevitably hindered. They didn't have to look back too far to see clear examples of it in the Spanish Inquisition and the excesses of Papal Rome.

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John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, John Knox, Martin Luther, John Wesley and other religious reformers believed to varying degrees in religious freedom from government interference.

By the time the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights were penned, the concept of religious freedom was widely accepted, though not in law.

I believe our Founding Fathers were, in fact, divinely inspired when they declared a clean separation of church and state.

Thomas Jefferson, the leading proponent of the concept, envisioned it as a “wall of separation.” Jefferson considered one of his greatest contributions to be the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, upon which the First Amendment heavily leaned.

The First Amendment, its application later broadened by the 14th, has defined our view of religion and government until recently. Now, however, there is a serious movement to undo that model. Zealots of the right are arguing that the First Amendment restricts government from interfering with religion but does nothing to prevent religion from dictating the parameters of government.

That’s been the basis for the anti-abortion movement and now the anti-gay movement. Rest assured that, given the opportunity, racist views that have never gone away will be embraced by the more extreme of that ilk if given the opportunity.

In short, they see religion as the bludgeon with which they can achieve control over segments of the popula-

tion by defining actions they don’t like as “anti-Christian” and thus “anti-American.”

Recent hate crimes have all too often been a reflection of religious intolerance, and their numbers are increasing rapidly. Rather than fueling hate by trying to redefine the U.S. as a religious institution, we should be embracing the cultural and racial diversity that has been our strength.

Instead, we find ourselves philosophically not all that far removed from the Salem witch trials, which were a deadly homegrown example of intolerant religion dictating social norms.

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Long live the sweet pickle, a Southern delicacy

There are few summer aromas that match that of cucumbers steeping in vinegar and herbs, on their way to becoming sweet pickle. And once made, of course, there are few things that equal the taste of a good, crisp sweet pickle slice. I can never stop at eating one.

Sweet pickle has been a part of local lore and taste across the Virginia countryside for generations and generations. Anne uses a recipe handed down by her grandmother, who received it from hers and so on. It's about the same recipe my mother used, and it was passed down as well. So, our pickling fancy has multiple roots, all well established.

To explain the importance of the summer pickling tradition, I'll relate a short anecdote. A very dear aunt of

mine, Annie Seward of Surry, had a heart attack in 1997. She lived for several days, but at 89, the attack proved

fatal. My last visit with her was in the hospital, on the day she died. Putting things in what to her was the proper perspective, she said, "Johnny, I'm worried about my cucumbers. They were in the sink soaking."

I never found out what happened to Aunt Beck's cucumbers, but I've missed her sweet pickles, as I've missed her, a country lady who never lost sight of the important role she played in life.

I took sweet pickle for granted most of my life until the

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year 2000. When the millennium began and most of the world's computers didn't crash, as had been predicted in the infamous Y2K fright, I thought things were going to be OK.

That is, until I attended the county fair that year with plans to write a Short Rows about the canned goods. That's when I learned that, right here in Isle of Wight County, not a single sweet pickle had won a ribbon — not Blue, Red or even White. The dills had walked away with the honors, and I walked away saddened that one more link to our county history — one very harmless

Southern tradition, I might add — had been trampled by an interloper.

A few years later, we were eating lunch in the Ice Cream Parlor. Our oldest granddaughter, Maddie, was a toddler at the time and was in a high chair. Her mother handed her a slice of dill pickle and she loved it. She has ever since. She barely tolerates sweet pickle to this day, and we keep a jar of dill in the refrigerator for her. I've contemplated marking a skull and crossbones on the label, but thought it might be uncharitable.

To be fair, I'll eat a dill pickle occasionally since

that's the only thing sandwich shops and restaurants seem to have available. And if you don't want a touch of sweetness in a sandwich, then dill's OK. It just can't replace sweet pickle.

I use sweet pickle in sandwiches that I make, and for Virginians, sweet pickle juice is a valued commodity, an important ingredient in coleslaw and deviled eggs. As a kid, I even drank small glasses of the sweet pickle liquor. Boy, was it good. And I'm proud to say we have a grandson who'll take a sip as well. And his appetite for sweet pickle combined with mine prompts Anne to make

an extra batch each summer.

There are numerous Southern traditions that we would do well to forever bury, but not so our cuisine. Black-eyed peas and stewed tomatoes (served together, of course), clabber biscuits or their modern equivalent, fried chicken and dry-cured ham — the list is long and mouthwatering. And as a condiment to most meals, the sweet pickle has no equal.

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IW School Board erases half-century of progress

Three Isle of Wight School Board members seem to have accomplished what multiple states and the federal government have failed to do during the past century and a half. They have, with a single vote, declared systemic racism in both the United States and each of its states and localities to be non-existent.

Systemic racism no longer exists because those three School Board members say it no longer exists? And if it doesn't exist, then it cannot be taught in Isle of Wight public schools. Thus sayeth the three.

The three also have mandated that parents will henceforth fully determine what their children think about controversial issues. Good luck, parents. You have always

had that right, of course, and generations of parents before you have tried — and often failed.

Their failure is the reason why, a couple of generations ago, there was an upheaval of thinking across the nation that enabled adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But Isle of Wight County parents now have a 3-2 mandate solidly behind you to try once again, if you wish to do so, to put the genie back in the bottle and return the nation to the 1950s.

Now, this is all with good intentions, mind you. The three have also mandated that in Isle of Wight County there are, henceforth, no victims. No one shall be oppressed, consciously or unconsciously. And thus, no one among us has a right to feel oppressed because of their race, skin color,

gender, religion, national origin, medical condition, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity or even military status.

Understand, teachers, that you are prohibited from mentioning that gender thing, or empathizing with those students who have gender identity questions, but those students should certainly not feel discriminated against. Of course not.

The slim School Board majority's target in all this was originally history. It makes such an easy target. If you are made uncomfortable reading about Jim Crow, then ban it. Don't like to think about African American slaves being whipped for disobeying their enslavers? Then, don't teach it. God forbid that Johnny would come home upset because he had learned about such unpleasantness.

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While it's true that history is an easy target for the culture wars, it becomes more difficult with math and science, but not impossible. The genetics that create conditions prompting young people to question their sex are scientific, so now it is genetic science that must be openly questioned.

Likewise, the math and chemistry that drive knowledge of global warming are vulnerable to a School Board declaration. After all, there are few things more controversial, or in local parlance, more "inherently divisive," than talk of global warming. And few things that go to the heart of the culture wars any quicker.

It might be said of the School Board Three that it is they who sow the wind, but tragically, all of us who will reap the whirlwind.

There is talk — and it's more than idle chatter — that some good teachers will be leaving Isle of Wight at the end of this year. They have struggled for the past two years to teach students who spent a year outside

the classroom during the pandemic. Many of those students returned to school with serious learning deficits. Many of them also returned with serious discipline issues. Having been outside the classroom for more than a year, they no longer know how to play nice, and aren't inclined to do so.

Teachers — good teachers — are struggling to overcome those obstacles, to restore order, to raise skill levels to pre-pandemic levels. And now, in the midst of those difficulties, a slim majority of the School Board is determined to ban instruction in areas they find uncomfortable.

The exodus may have already begun. During the past 12 months, the county has lost more instructional personnel than it has hired, according to a review of School Board minutes. What occurs during the next couple of months could exacerbate that.

We cannot afford to lose teachers at this point. We should be lifting them up, supporting them as never

before, rather than threatening them with censure if they say the wrong thing, upset the wrong parent. For those we inevitably do lose, their loss must be regretted, but those who come to replace them must be welcomed with open arms and a show of solid support.

If there is a significant teacher loss from our public schools during the coming year — and God, I hope there is not — it will have been the responsibility of the current School Board, not the previous one.

Isle of Wight has spent the past half-century building one of the region's finest public school systems. It hasn't been easy, but dedicated teachers and administrators have made it happen. Are we now willing to throw all that away, along with the future of students now in the system?

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