Thou Shalt Separate Church and State

May God save us from those who would reunite Church and State. Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore has been suspended from the bench and his monument to the Ten Commandments has been removed from the state judicial building, but he hasn’t given up. The Associated Press reports that Moore has offered the 5,300-pound graven image of the tablets of the law for display in the U.S. Capitol. So far, there is no word whether or not Congress will accept.

Encouraging thought: for thousands, maybe millions, of people in the U.S. and abroad, Roy Moore represents Christianity. The argument is that the Commandments can serve as a symbol of the laws common to all faiths, or at least the Big Three: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. But Christians are the only ones making the argument. Jews, for whom the Ten Commandments are central, don’t seem to have any particular wish for them to be displayed in courthouses, schools, and state legislatures. Muslims, who might see the Ten Commandments in much the same light as Christians do, are similarly uninvolved. That would seem to show false the claim that the Commandments are a symbol of monotheism in general rather than Christianity in particular. That means that Moore’s agenda is not to endorse religion in general, but to make Christianity—or his brand thereof—the official religion of the United States.

The irony is that the true core of Christianity is not the Decalogue but the Gospel. True, Christ fulfilled the Old Testament law without abolishing it (Matt. 5:17), but he also brought a new commandment that transcended the old order: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

So Moore’s agenda is attempting to Christianize a nation using something other than the core of Christianity. That doesn’t sound likely to be productive. Furthermore, seen through the lens of Anabaptist history, Moore’s goal is rather unsettling. Anabaptists know what happened the last time we lived in “Christian” nations, back in 16th-century Europe: people got burned at the stake. But of course Moore’s sort of Christianity would never burn anyone at the stake. Not anyone of consequence, anyway.

—jby

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EMU Not Involved Enough

By Anna Ressler

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Despite the EMU focus on social action and justice issues, I amtroubledby the limited EMU engagement in the many problems of the Harrisonburg community. When I was young, I knew very few Mennonites and no Mennonite institutions. My pride in my Mennonite heritage was based on the belief that Mennonites were justice-oriented. I was shocked, on my arrival at EMU, to discover the gravity of some of Harrisonburg’s issues and the limited EMU interaction in solving them. I have sat through what seems like hundreds of lectures about the misuse of labor in Latin America, but what of the misuse of labor in the Harrisonburg poultry factories?

I should, at this point, commend the few programs at EMU that foster community service. I believe that the freshmen are required, among other things, to do some community activities. Such institutional steps are important, but what of the larger student body? EMU continues to exist in a bubble of security. Perhaps this is the result of a historically seclusionist Mennonite personality; nonetheless it is disturbing.

I recently heard that Harrisonburg was one of the most diverse cities in the United States. I know from personal experience that the levels of domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism, and drug abuse are phenomenally high in the valley. I even heard a rumor that gang participation is rising in Harrisonburg. We live in Harrisonburg and are part of the community. By not addressing these serious issues, we become part of the problem. In general, there is a concentration of wealth in the Park View area that does not exist in other parts of Harrisonburg. Yet, very little is done to deal with the economic inequalities or remedy the other problems that exist in Harrisonburg.

I have often heard professors and students at EMU talk about the need to establish sustainable economic systems, encourage education, support equitable labor policies, and so on. Generally, the conversation is about the global or national need for the aforementioned. These problems certainly exist at the global level, but they are local issues as well. Buying chicken at Food Lion supports the poultry industries here in Harrisonburg. Some of the industries barely pay their employees a sustainable income and definitely overwork their labor. How many of the stores and shops that EMU students visit are owned by members of the Latino community in Harrisonburg? If there is a rising number of Latinos in Harrisonburg, why are they not adequately represented in the growing upper class of Harrisonburg?

I am proud to be part of an institution that struggles with issues of justice and equality. I am ashamed, however, to recognize that this institution and its participants have done little to rectify the problems in our community. This is a call to be aware of what you buy, who you buy it from, and how your money contributes to economic inequality in Harrisonburg. This is also a call to step outside the EMU bubble and to engage in the community in which we all live. If we are not part of the solution, then we become part of the problem.

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