

Reality Check: Julaine, Ralph & Sully - The DOMA Debate Drags On

By Mike Fitzpatrick

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By the time you read this column, the Wisconsin Assembly likely will have voted on and passed the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" (AB475) or DOMA. The vote was scheduled for the street date of this edition of IN Step.

Though I suspect the vote will be somewhat lopsided and bipartisan, I doubt it will be the 78-20 drubbing the gay community saw back in 1997 on a similarly hateful bill. Action Wisconsin's lobbying efforts certainly have had some effect, most notably in the number of straight allies contacting their legislators to oppose this unnecessary bill.

Even more interesting, however, has been the increasingly ineffective efforts to mobilize the hard-core religious right grass roots on gay issues. Even as the rhetoric of Wisconsin's two anti-gay groups becomes more strident, their impact lessens. Here are two cases in point:

First, Julaine Appling of the Family Research Institute of Wisconsin (FRI) continues to whine on the radio and online that her allies at the State Capitol are still report the electorate contacting legislators to oppose the DOMA bill overwhelm those supporting it, despite two months of what appear to be under-funded efforts by the FRI.

Julaine also went so apoplectic over Governor Doyle's meetings with LGBT activists she even linked her website to IN Step's, which contains some not very pro-FRI rhetoric. Thanks for helping us get out our side of the story, darlin'!

Second, Ralph Ovadal's "International Conference on Homo-Fascism," the self-described "firebell in the night" that has been touted for nearly a year on the Wisconsin Christians United website plays to a choir of fifteen or so at a "secret" location in Milwaukee on October 9-10. Dinner bell is more like it. This column is the first printed public mention of that little taffy pull.

Ralph's one coup? He snagged a "state senator" to spend some time with his fellow bigots. My sources say that was freshman Republican Tom Reynolds, not exactly a new convert to the extremist right.

Of course Wisconsin's "real issue"-diverting drive toward DOMA is reflective of the national scene. The just completed "Marriage Protection Week" of October 12-18 saw a lot of gay-bashing but not a single, documented "save" of a troubled, traditional union.

The week actually got off to a rocky start with the widespread reprinting of an op-ed by a widely read and respected right-wing journalist. In "The State of Our Unions," his pro-same sex marriage piece in the Wall Street Journal, gay conservative pundit Andrew Sullivan struggled mightily to "keep it civil". In other words, he focused solely on civil marriage equality.

Sullivan expressed amazement that social conservatives “oppose, for the most part, every single practical measure that brings gay citizens into the mainstream of American life” and asked if anyone could name another “legal, noncriminal minority in society toward which social conservatives have nothing but a negative social policy.”

Multiple respondents to his piece pointed what he, as a devout Roman Catholic, should have already known. Organized Christianity, with minuscule denominational exception, officially considers homosexuals evil. As such, that evil should never be allowed to become mainstream. Sullivan’s beloved Holy Mother Church, while claiming homosexual orientation is, of itself, morally neutral; considers any thought, word or deed related to understanding or expressing that orientation as venially or mortally sinful. At least the fundamentalists refuse to slice their baloney that thin.

By avoiding the religious underpinnings of the social conservative’s opposition Sullivan merely begs his own question and deflects a greater one. The gay marriage debate is symptomatic of a much larger concurrent social development occurring both in American society and in human history. For American society the issues are the place of organized religious values in the dialogue developing social policy and the hierarchy of civil rights. For human history it is the very place of institutional religion as science continues to reveal the very nature of existence and the inner workings of the consciousness.

To address the core American social dilemma first: How do America’s lawmakers and policy wonks uphold the Constitutional separation of church and state, yet reconcile the differences between, say, the Baptists and the Unitarians, whose attitudes toward homosexuals are directly opposite? The historians among us like to point out that the forefathers of the contemporary American social conservatives vilifying same-sex marriage also opposed abolition, women’s suffrage, women’s marital property rights, racial integration and interracial marriage on “deeply held religious” grounds.

As to the civil rights conundrum, ongoing independent scientific research -- including a major California study released earlier this week -- continues to support the contention that sexual orientation is genetically predisposed, and thus joining such other immutable identities such as race, gender, handedness and age. Do civil rights based on immutable identities trump civil rights based on personal choice, such as freedom of religious belief or political philosophy?

For humanity as a whole, the future of religion as we know it also is in flux. For 99% of the multi-millennial march of human progress, the world has been explained by shamans, priests and other holy men and women. (Don’t forget, only the monotheists among that group thought a Supreme Being was talking directly to them.)

It’s critical to comprehend that those explanations were not created in a vacuum. A terracentric cosmos, an agricultural understanding of human reproduction and sexuality, and a testosterone-dominated social hierarchy produce both world views and sacred texts that are at odds with that how we know the real world works today.

Only in the last 500 years -- and especially in the last century and a half -- has science corrected those core misconceptions, typically with sometimes-lethal dissent by organized religion. In the last 15 years alone scientists have even deciphered much of the brain chemistry and activity that produces so-called "religious experiences."

Organized religion has reacted accordingly. Darwin in essence begat 19th Century fundamentalism, whose "every Biblical word is true as written" tenet underpins the modern Christian evangelical movement and its pseudoscientific offspring such as "intelligent design" creationism and "reparative therapy" for homosexuals. Christian evangelicals may make up the overwhelming majority of the American social conservatives, but similar fundamentalist movements in organized Islam, Hinduism and other world religions also explain much of the muddle in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and perhaps even America's most recent day of infamy: 9/11.

As you may have noted, I have consistently referred to organized religion as opposed to personal philosophies of the primogenitors of the world's great religions (Abraham, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Krishna, Confucius et. al.). There is a difference. History has clearly documented that religious institutions as a whole are more about power, control, influence and self-sustenance than they are about the genuine promotion of the philosophies that lie at the their foundations. Before you disagree, ask yourself this question: Do you really think the Roman Church needed more Cardinals, or was John Paul just stacking the deck for the next papal election?

Those who follow the Baha'i tradition like to point out that all of the world's great religions, from Wicca to New Age, hold within their various screeds one universal tenet: the Golden Rule. In that commonality, not in FRI or WCU propagandizing nor in Sullivan's civil catechizing, lays the ultimate resolution to not only the same-sex marriage issue, but also the future place of religion both in political dialogue and in the heart of all humankind. Sullivan and citizens of all political persuasions (not just social conservatives) should demand an answer to the question: what part of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" don't you understand?"

Anyone up to asking Wisconsin's state senators, Tom Reynolds notwithstanding?