

Each faith warrants our respect

By Tim O'Toole

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I am amused — and frightened — by those who proclaim America a Judeo-Christian country. Invariably, conservative Christians making that assertion tack on the "Judeo" prefix to draw others into their delusion. They hope that the rest of us have no sense of history.

While everyone is focused on the current election season, with assorted candidates appealing to the electorate with blatant or thinly veiled religious overtones, I find solace in Stephen Greenblatt's mesmerizing book, "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern." In it he chronicles the activities of Poggio Bracciolini, a 15th-century scholar, who served as "apostolic scriptor" to several popes and at least one anti-pope (during the so-called Babylonian Captivity — when three prelates claimed St. Peter's throne). Poggio's skill with languages came second to his exceptional penmanship in that pre-Gutenberg era.

At a time when church and state were inseparable, Poggio dared to resurrect banned ancient tracts from Greek and Roman philosophers, most notably Lucretius — an atomist whose "On the Nature of Things" was prescient in a number of areas, though his underlying atheism was anathema to Poggio's employer.

In Lucretius' discourse he likened organized religion to "delusional superstition and cruelty." Yet he appreciated how the universe worked with deep wonder. A universe that he insisted was not created for humans alone. A poisonous thought at a time church leaders considered the Earth the center of the universe.

While Lucretius did not believe in an afterlife, I look forward to meeting him there someday. His notion that the universe is made up of atoms in constant motion in an infinite void has been vindicated. His claim that nature is constantly experimenting won't sit well with creationists, nor will his assertion that early days on Earth were not a golden age, but rather a primitive battle for survival. A battle that rages to this day in places like Darfur, Afghanistan and Syria.

Delusional superstition and cruelty. We sound the alarm when fundamentalists gain political power in the Mideast, but conveniently overlook world history. Whenever religious authority is joined with government policy, cruelty becomes the order of the day. The Roman Empire fed Christians to the lions, to the amusement of their pagan citizens (bread and circuses). Centuries later, Christian leaders emulated their former oppressors, with inquisitions in England, Italy, France and Spain, burning heretics at will.

The Catholic church led the way in cruelty, but Protestants also tried their hand at exterminating malcontents like biblical scholar William Tyndale (who opposed the first of Henry VIII's multiple divorces).

Time and again, local monarchs converted to one or another branch of Christianity, forcing all their subjects to follow suit — conversions often prompted by political, not theological considerations. Even minor religious disagreements were equated with "treason," requiring public execution.

Savonarola, a Dominican friar reigned over the "Christian Republic" of Florence for several years, outdoing the Puritans (centuries later), with his Bonfire of the Vanities, when the good citizens of Florence were encouraged to throw secular and sinful objects into a large fire in the city square. Cosmetics, jewelry and mirrors made the hit list. There were no comic books or rock 'n' roll records back then. The good citizens of Florence tired of Savonarola in 1498, hanging him in chains, then burning him at the stake for good measure.

Let us not overlook America's own history of religious intolerance. Roger Williams, an early proponent of religious freedom and church-state separation, was banished from Salem by the Puritans for spreading "diverse, new, and dangerous opinions." Massachusetts' Gov. John Winthrop banished Anne Hutchinson from his colony for "trading the ministers." Gov. Michael Dukakis pardoned her 350 years later. Mitt Romney's co-religionists are no stranger to persecution and distrust.

Flip the calendar forward to 2012 and take a close look at the unlikely alliance of evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics. A marriage of convenience, tied to one central issue — limiting a woman's right to control her own body. Missouri Congressman Todd Akin epitomizes intolerance and ignorance when it comes to the human reproductive process. His ill-timed utterances were an embarrassment to other GOP candidates on the eve of the party's national convention.

There can be only one orthodoxy to those convinced that theirs is the one, true faith. A faith that rarely turns the other cheek. A faith that draws on outmoded Old Testament dictates to justify un-Christian treatment of those marginalized by our society. The same Old Testament that was cited to justify slavery, then racial discrimination in America, and the world.

We are each entitled to our individual superstitions and traditions, but what right does any of us have to impose our religious views on our neighbors?

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