

Religion in public open to discussion

My Aug. 7 column, “Fundamentalists might be wrong”, generated more email and letters to the editor than anything I’ve written in my years on this page. Many chose to interpret it as an attack on Christianity. I believe that interpretation is mistaken. But misinterpretation seems to be part and parcel of religion in the public square.

The column asked readers to consider that Randy Pausch and Pat Tillman might not be burning in hell. Tillman gave up a multimillion dollar career as a professional football player to become an Army Ranger. He died fighting in Afghanistan under friendly fire. Pausch was a world-famous professor and gifted teacher whose “Last Lecture” inspired millions. He died of cancer last month.

I picked them as two people (one of whom I knew personally) with outstanding moral character who left the world a better place. I also picked them because it was very clear they did not accept Jesus as their savior. I thought the view that they were burning in hell for all eternity was wrong, and tried to explain why.

Some of you took exception.

Critical e-mail tended to fall in two camps: “That’s a strawman” and “That’s how it is.” The “strawman” group said nobody is going around saying Pausch and Tillman are burning in hell, I just made that up as an excuse to attack Christians. Christians who really believe that are extremists who shouldn’t be taken seriously.

“That’s how it is” writers, on the other hand, tell me this is exactly what true Christians believe, they can’t change God’s law. Anyone who believes otherwise isn’t a true Christian.

All I can say is, I have *got* to get you all together. Party at my place.

Both groups do have one thing in common: They are certain I am attacking Christians. Since I made it very clear that most Christians do not share the position I challenged, I think that view is mistaken. Instead, I happily admit to challenging one particular idea in one particular branch of Christianity.

I believe the belief that belief in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient to gain



OPINION

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COLUMNIST

eternal life is wrong. I did my best in 700 words to explain why. In other words, I engaged religion in the public square, the place where many social conservatives have fought to put it for most of the time I have been alive.

Religion in the public square does not mean everyone gets to profess what they believe while we all hold hands and sing “Kumbaya.” It means that others are going to say, with as much passion and conviction as they can muster, that your most deeply cherished beliefs are

mistaken. Right in that very same public square. To claim that any group is being attacked when they have been clamoring for a more public role for religion is disingenuous. This is how the public square works.

I hear the same complaints from my Christian friends who want to know why people are so disrespectful of their religious symbols. They see the “Evolve” fish and the “Flying Spaghetti Monster” symbol on cars as horribly sacrilegious and disrespectful, and wonder why they are expected to put up with it in a way that Jews and Moslems are not.

The answer once again lies in understanding the consequences of religion in the public square. A car’s bumper is not a sacred space. Jews and Muslims do not put Stars of David and excerpts from the Koran next to their tail pipe. Once you do that, you lose the protection the private sphere affords. Out on the streets, others are permitted to say directly and clearly: We know you are wrong.

Religion in the public square means that many people, some for the first time, will hear the view that their most cherished ideas are mistaken. Not because people are bigoted or mean, and not because Satan is alive in the world, but because lots of good people believe there are deep and profound reasons why some of your deepest and most profound beliefs are deeply and profoundly wrong.

Welcome to the public square.

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