The religious right in the United States has distorted Judeo-Christian teaching about the sanctity of human life to the point of sacrilege.

Hijacking religion

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Despite the astonishment of my colleagues at Drew University that I would choose to spend my winter sabbatical in Canada, I had my reasons to return to Montreal in January.

Primary among them was to enjoy a respite from the religious insanity that seems to have gripped the United States. As a professor of religion and Jewish studies at a university with a strong liberal Methodist tradition, the pain of witnessing the almost daily political triumphs of a strident strain of Christian fundamentalism was becoming too much to bear. Where better than wide-open, multicultural, liberal Montreal to escape the growing tyranny of the Evangelicals running the Washington asylum?

After months of brutal weather and some moments of doubt about my decision to fly north for the winter, it was fully vindicated as I watched the grotesque spectacle of Florida’s devoutly Catholic governor, Jeb Bush, being compared with Pontius Pilate (and not Mel Gibson’s kinder-gentler Pilate) during holy week, for not violating U.S. law by kidnapping and force-feeding a brain-dead woman.

The ugly religious rhetoric that has emerged from the Terri Schiavo controversy has not only confirmed my dread of the dangers of the rapidly spreading religious fundamentalism in America; it has reinforced my worst fears that much of the U.S. has gone theologically mad. And now, the very delicate Judeo-Christian ethical teachings about the sanctity of human life have been distorted to the point of sacrilege.

The flocked and collared priests who have surrounded the Schindler family, representing themselves as their “spiritual advisers,” do not strike me as being terribly well-versed in what holy scripture and Christian theology might be able to instruct us about this tragic situation.

By demonizing Terri Schiavo’s husband as a murderer and insisting that her unfortunate parents are her rightful guardians, they seem to have overlooked the Bible’s cardinal teaching about the sanctity of marriage. The explicit lesson from the primordial marriage—that of Adam and Eve—could hardly be more clear: “Henceforth shall a man leave his father and mother and cling to his wife so that they become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24.) It just so happens that the spouse’s guardianship is also unambiguously upheld by U.S. jurisprudence.

These media-crawling clerics also seem oblivious to the extensive and complicated history of Christian theological responses to such hard cases. In the landmark 1976 right-to-die case of Karen Quinlan, for example, it was the Roman Catholic bishop of New Jersey, Lawrence Casey, who argued before the courts in support of Quinlan’s parents’ request that her respirator be turned off. While Catholic theology does indeed insist that natural human life is sacred, from conception to death, the use of artificial modern medical devices to prolong a naturally unsustainable life—particularly that of a brain-dead person who has, arguably, lost that “image of God” that defines life’s very sanctity—raises serious theological and ethical complications.

An extensive body of theological opinions—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—regarding the “life” of a brain-dead person can be cited in support of Michael Schiavo’s decision to allow his wife a peaceful and natural death.

But the so-called right-to-life fanatics, like their leader in the White House, tend to be rather uncomplicated people. They are almost as uninterested in exploring the Bible’s ethical teachings as they are in upholding the integrity of the U.S. constitution’s separation of church and state.

The ugly truth is that the Schiavo imbroglio is neither about the sanctity of human life nor respect for the rule of law. It is, rather, a disgraceful political hijacking and distortion of religion, whose ultimate objective is overturning Roe v. Wade, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision to legalize abortion.

In explaining his decision to take the unprecedented step of signing a congressional bill that sought to overturn the decision of Florida’s Supreme Court, President George W. Bush looked into the television cameras with an amazingly straight face and declared: “When it comes to matters of life and death, I believe that we must always err on the side of life.” What a shame that he did not feel quite so passionately about always erring on the side of life, when, as governor of Texas, he earned the distinction of being the man who has signed the greatest number of death warrants in American history.

So, yes, it is so very good to be back home, if only for a while. The snow, strikes and scandals—all seem benignly enchanting compared with the monstrousness taking place, in the name of God, just south of our border.

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