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Through Rainbow-Colored Glasses

By Christine Dinsmore

Congress pushes for passage of the Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act of 2005 (H.R. 235), a bill that would allow religious organizations to endorse political candidates and not lose their tax-exempt status. I shudder.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* reports that evangelical Christian television and radio are sprouting up like mushrooms after a spring rain. I wince. According to the magazine, the number of religious radio channels has grown by 85 percent since 1998 and outstrips rock, classical, hip-hop, R&B, soul and jazz stations combined. Christian media have taken on *Roe v. Wade*, same-sex marriages and civil unions. Their staunch support for Israel has more to do with conversion and prophecies from the New Testament than any devotion to Jews.

Religion's stranglehold on politics terrifies me. In Ohio, "patriot pastors" are organizing for the next election. According to the Ohio Restoration Project Web site, the group plans to establish a network of "Christian minutemen" who can "pray at a moment's notice" and to disseminate voter guides from the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association and the Center for Moral Clarity. The project's motto is "America has a mission to share a living savior with a dying world." Not sure exactly what that means other than I won't be joining it anytime soon.

Truth be told, my lefty politics were sown in Catholicism. There I first learned that sisterhood is powerful. The Sisters of Mercy taught me my earliest lessons about equality, justice and compassion. One lesson stands out— my first-grade teacher explaining the difference between a venial sin (something that will get you time in purgatory) and a mortal sin (eternity's equivalent to the death penalty). She said that an example of a venial sin is stealing \$1,000 from a millionaire, whereas a mortal sin is stealing a penny from a beggar.

My second-grade teacher set me straight on global interconnectedness. Every week, out came her rickety projector. Through fuzzy images and barely audible sounds competing with the clicks of ongoing clashes between film and reel sprockets, we met Tom Dooley. He was a Catholic physician, described as selflessly dedicated to the poor of Southeast Asia. The good sister never let on that he was gay. Years later, I would learn that Dooley's *Deliver Us from Evil*, with its false tales of Communists' torturing of Catholic children, helped pull the United States further into Vietnam. But back in the '50s and early '60s, he was a

role model of compassion for the destitute. The image of the tireless doctor caring for lepers helped fill the coffers of classroom mission boxes, which would then “save pagan babies.”

The lessons from the nuns were not without ridiculous pro-Catholic biases. My 60-something-year-old brother still blanches when he tells of jumping out of his seat, hands flying in the air and his “Ooh, ooh, I know, I know!” when his public-school teacher asked, “Why was it surprising that the Spanish Armada was defeated?” “Because they were Catholic,” my brother blurted out. His classmates’ snickers still ring in his ears.

I don’t mean to wax nostalgic about yesteryear. Religion has been the bane of civilization since the beginning of time. Throughout history it has fueled wars. Today, the belief that “my god is better than your god” tears apart countries from Afghanistan to Israel to Ivory Coast to Sri Lanka to Uganda and beyond.

Perhaps it’s my self-serving memory, but back when I was young, it seemed that “people of faith” defended the oppressed. On the day I wrote this column, the Rev. Michael Sklucazek of St. Paul, Minn. refused to give communion to 100 parishioners for wearing rainbow-colored sashes in support of gay Catholics.