

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Candidates courting the Christian fringe

Bart Hinkle

November 17, 2015

Panting heavily and gesticulating wildly, the imam raised his copy of the holy book high. In a voice shaking with emotion, he cited chapter and verse from the text supporting the idea that homosexuality is haram — sinful — and that the proper penalty for it is death. Was he calling for the execution of gays and lesbians now? No, he said — not right now. Now is not the time. They first must be given the opportunity to repent, just as America must be.

The imam made those comments before a rapt audience at a recent religious conference — where three Democratic presidential contenders also appeared. And the question must be asked: Why were they making common cause with such an extremist? Do they agree with his prescription? Is that their vision for America — a medieval theocracy where sexual minorities must repent or be executed?

Before proceeding further down that road, let's clear up a couple of points. The events described above did occur earlier this month, in Iowa. But the speaker was not Muslim. He was Pastor Kevin Swanson, appearing at the National Religious Liberties Conference he organized. He did not cite the Quran for his assertions about homosexuality, but Leviticus and Romans.

And no Democratic presidential contenders were there — but Republican presidential candidates Bobby Jindal, Mike Huckabee and Ted Cruz were. All three attended the conference. Cruz, whose father was a conference speaker, told Swanson that “any president who doesn't begin every day on his knees isn't fit to be commander-in-chief” — which, as Reason's Ronald Bailey noted, flies in the face of the Constitution's proscription against religious tests for office.

Swanson is one of those apocalyptic apoplectics who finds Satan lurking in such unlikely places as “Frozen” and “Harry Potter” and “How to Train Your Dragon.” He claims America is “heading back into cannibalism, vampirism, tattooing, body mutilation and every form of fornication” and has praised Uganda's law mandating life in prison (formerly death) for homosexuality. He wasn't the only one at his conference preaching death for gay people, either.

Why on earth did Republicans share a stage with such a nutcase? Cruz claimed not to know about Swanson's views, but that was before the conference took place. Once informed of them, why didn't he pull out?

As a writer for The Huffington Post noted, back when Barack Obama was running for president he took a lot of heat for attending a church led by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who once warned God would "damn America" for its sins. True, Swanson is not Cruz's pastor (or Huckabee's, or Jindal's). On the other hand, Wright — unlike Swanson — has not suggested the need to execute 12 million Americans, which is the approximate number of gays and lesbians in the U.S.

As the Cato Institute's David Boaz wrote recently, if a Democratic presidential candidate sucked up to a hater who even hinted at killing millions of peaceful American citizens, Republicans would go ballistic. Yet conservatives don't hold their own candidates to a similar standard.

It's also worth comparing the blasé attitude conservatives hold regarding Christian wingnuts with the alarm they profess over "creeping Shariah." A number of states have passed legislation to ban the imposition of Shariah law, and Shariah is a popular topic on right-wing websites. Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson went so far as to impose another religious test when he said Muslims should not be president. Challenged on that, he eventually said a Muslim could be president, provided he or she "reject the tenets of Islam." Conservatives worry that Shariah would transform the U.S. from a tolerant, liberal democracy that respects individual rights into an intolerant, authoritarian theocracy that tramples upon them.

The irony, of course, is that this is little different from what the Kevin Swansons of the world would do. They might start from slightly different premises, but the outcome would be much the same.

Yet while Republican presidential contenders — or Democratic ones, for that matter — would never appear at a conference led by Islamic extremists, they apparently have no qualms about a conference led by Christian extremists. True, Christian extremists in the U.S. don't go around butchering innocent people, as ISIS did in Paris on Friday. But claiming "they're not as bad as ISIS" sure sets the bar awfully low, doesn't it?

Yes, the Republican Party base includes a large share of conservative Christians. But if Swanson is in any way representative, that gives a grim double meaning to the word "base."