

The On-Going Battle Between Social Conservatives and the Rest of America

☒ A lot of social conservatives and others on the far right of the Republican Party must feel as if they're under siege once again now that Arizona Governor Jan Brewer has vetoed a bill that would have allowed business owners to refuse service to gays on religious grounds.

According to the AP, "The bill was designed to give added protection from lawsuits to people who assert their religious beliefs in refusing service to gays or others who offend their beliefs. But opponents called it an open attack on gays that invited discrimination."

When I wrote about similar attempts to refuse service to gays in other states I heard from many on the hard right essentially arguing that a business owner who risks his own money to open a business, ought to have the right to serve – or refuse to serve – *anyone* he or she wants.

Should business people be allowed, then, to refuse to serve customers because they're black? It used to be that way in parts of our country. But we changed. We said that's not who we are as Americans. But based on the mail I received, I have the feeling that more than a few on the right are nostalgic for those bad old days. I'm sure they would say they have nothing against black people, it's just that a) the federal government had no business infringing on "state's rights" and b) no government entity – local or federal – has the right to tell business people who they can or can't do business with.

In any case, being gay isn't the same as being black, they told me. Being gay, some actually believe, is a choice – a

“preference” is the way they put it. Let’s not waste anyone’s time with that argument.

Still, today we have a twist on the old argument: We’re no longer talking about race; now it’s about religion and sexual orientation. But it’s not really much of a twist.

The argument now is that if a conservative Christian who runs a bakery or a flower shop, for example, believes gay marriage is a sin, he shouldn’t have to make a wedding cake or a floral arrangement for the gay couple to celebrate their marriage. Playing a role, even a minor one, in same sex-marriage, the argument goes, violates the business owners deeply held religious beliefs. And there is something to this.

Should the government, with its immense power, force someone to violate deeply held convictions? If I owned a catering business, I wouldn’t want to put food on the table for a neo-Nazi convention – or risk a hefty lawsuit if I didn’t. (Maybe the Arizona law, instead of focusing on religious rights, should have dealt more generally with issues that violate our conscience – like being forced to cater a neo-Nazi function.

Maybe that kind of “conscientious objector” law would have been more acceptable to more people, even with its potential for abuse.)

But we all give up some rights when we join society and when we open a business on Main Street that purports to do business with the general public.

Should a baker be allowed to turn away a mixed race couple if he sincerely believes that interracial marriage is a sin? Should a devout Muslim who owns a diner be allowed to turn away women who wear dresses that violate his religious sensibilities – or better yet, who don’t wear burqas? The short answer is no, business owners have no such rights – not in America.

I heard Rush Limbaugh say that of all the bakeries and flower

shops, why have some gays picked the ones run by conservative Christians to ask for cake or flowers? Were they hoping they'd get turned away so they could make a case? Rush clearly believes they were just looking for trouble. But maybe they didn't know what they were getting into until they were refused service – and then decided to fight back. But even if they did know they were about to stir things up, so what?

Would Rush have argued against those four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, who in 1960 picked a Woolworth's "whites-only" lunch counter for their protest. They knew blacks were not allowed to eat at that lunch counter. And that's precisely why they picked Woolworth. Before long, a few others joined them. Then more. Than more and more and more. Non-violent protest spread. It was a pivotal moment in the struggle against racism. What they did helped change America.

And this change in America, I suspect, is what really has social conservatives and radio talk show hosts in a tizzy. The country is moving forward, this time on gay rights, and they're left bellowing at the wind. They're on the wrong side of history – *and they know it!* And that must be very unsettling for them.

My friends: Please leave a comment and let me know what you think – but do your best not to depress me. (Joke)

Disagreement, as always, is fine. But try to persuade ... with interesting arguments.