

Star-Ledger, The (Newark, NJ)
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November 12, 2006

Section: PERSPECTIVE

When public moralizing bites back : THE MORALIST

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I've been doing it on television, on the radio, and for more than a year now, in this newspaper column: moralizing in public. It's not that I want to impose my beliefs on others. That's never been the point. I try my best to respect others' values and tolerate diverse opinions. But silence isn't always golden when it comes to ethics and moral life.

The case for public moralizing is a strong one. To begin with, it's a way to let people know that you stand for something. A willingness to say "This is what I believe" often signals self-esteem and character. But there is another, better reason to moralize in public. Call it civic duty.

Like voting, moralizing is a way to influence the direction of public policy. The balance of political power changed with last Tuesday's election. Why? In part because ordinary people began finally to reveal publicly the depth of their moral opposition to corruption and the on-going war in Iraq.

Public moralizing also fulfills the responsibility mature adults have to educate young adults - even if that means logging onto myspace.com to find them. But maybe we don't need special reasons to moralize in public. In a sense it's natural, as natural for human beings as sleeping and eating. We have the capacity to reason about values, make value judgments and communicate about values. And so we do.

However natural and commendable, public moralizing has its dangers. And, ironically, sometimes moralizing in public is morally wrong. Public moralizing can devolve into meddling, bigotry and self-righteousness. We see that all the time. It can also get you pegged as a hypocrite, if you take a moral stand in public that is not perfectly consistent with your private life. The world demands integrity once you climb onto a soap box.

So Ted Haggard discovered. Until two weeks ago he was pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church and head of the National Evangelical Association, which represents 30 million evangelical Christians.

Outspoken advocate of a conservative social agenda, Haggard had won the ear of

President George W. Bush. But Haggard had a secret.

Denver resident Mike Jones told the nation that Haggard was the homosexual lover to whom he had provided illegal street drugs. Haggard was a hypocrite, Jones said. Jones was angry about Haggard's leadership of a church that opposes same-sex unions and laws protecting them (like the laws the New Jersey Supreme Court recently ordered).

Haggard admitted to receiving massages and drugs from Jones. In a painful letter to his congregation, the disgraced, fired minister bleakly described himself as a "deceiver and a liar" guilty of "sexual immorality" and a "repulsive and dark" life.

Another public moralizer, one of international fame, fell from grace in August. Nobel Prize-winning writer Gunter Grass confessed on the eve of publishing a memoir that he, the "conscience of Germany," had been a Nazi. As a boy of 17 Grass had joined the Waffen SS, an affiliate of the Nazi terror unit that ran concentration camps. For years Grass spoke out against Nazi atrocities and complicity, while keeping his own past largely to himself. The author of "The Tin Drum" (1959) had stridently demanded German remembrance and guilt. Germans and Poles felt particularly betrayed by Grass' admissions, balking at the notion that his contributions to democratic equality after World War II had lessened the significance of his youthful errors.

Turning to a different sort of risk for public moralizers, heartfelt public moralizing may actually conflict with the ethical obligations of a profession. Lawyers are not supposed to take a public stand in direct opposition to the interests of their clients. If your clients pollute rivers, you are be barred from writing articles on environmental ethics passionately condemning your clients as thoughtless polluters.

Moreover, it may be unethical for physicians, accountants, clergy and many other professionals to speak moral truth that reveals confidences.

A final set of cautions about moralizing in public has to do with the limitations of the media through which we communicate moral values to wide audiences. The style and economics of some media permit only sound bites. Perhaps an invitation should be turned down to appear on television in a three-minute shout-fest "debate" on stem cell research or another topic whose truths do not lend themselves to simplistic generalities.

I have taken part in programs of that ilk and have regrets. When what you want to express are deeply felt values, a better alternative might be the spaciousness of an Internet blog, public radio, or, better yet, a newspaper column like this one.

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Language: EN

OTHER INDEXING: (MORALIST; NATIONAL EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION;
NEW JERSEY SUPREME COURT; UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA) (Anita L.
Allen; George W. Bush; Germans; Grass; Gunter Grass; Haggard; Jones; Mike Jones;
Nobel Prize; Outspoken; Ted Haggard)

EDITION: FINAL

Word Count: 974

11/12/06 STLGRN 3

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