

## ***“I Am Not a Crook”***

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“I am not a crook.” Richard Nixon made that statement during a press conference in Orlando, Florida, related to the Watergate break-in and the scandal which consumed his administration. That morphed into the Clintonesque “I did not have sex with that woman.” Thanks to Larry Flint holding out a large purse of money, people came forward to show Republican hypocrisy in that members of that party likewise had reckless sex. We now have Donald Trump saying that he is entitled to obtain the assistance of foreign leaders in confronting his domestic political rivals because everyone else does that. Indeed, some democrats have also reached out to foreigners in an attempt to trap Donald Trump.

Hubris knows no limits. Alexander Hamilton was accused of taking money out of the Treasury Department, which he virtually created to promote capitalism in the United States, in order to pay off the husband of his paramour. Hamilton was trying to buy silence. Alexander Hamilton wrote a book about his affair with Maria Reynolds in order to tell the public that the blackmail money that he paid to Reynolds’ husband was his own and not from the Treasury. Hamilton wanted the public to know that he was not a crook and did what many powerful men in politics do to protect themselves.

If the standard of behavior is what “everyone else does,” we would have people cheating on their taxes, lying to their neighbors, and flipping off each other with the middle finger every time they do not like the driving habits of the other driver. Of course, that happens in America every day. The “everyone else does it” response is one we hear from childhood. Good parents are given to say, “I don’t care what everyone else does.” Unfortunately, kids learn quickly that what adults say and what they do are oftentimes different things. Kids are parrots, and they learn from what they say and hear in an exquisitely fast time frame.

Many of my generation thought that the diminution of religion would be an improvement. Gone would be the hypocrisy of the past, and the age of Aquarius would bring truth and contentment. In Revolutionary days, it was common for the Founders to trash Catholicism and show a fair amount of disrespect for other religious virtues. Jefferson audaciously rewrote the Christian Bible to make Jesus into a non-divine enlightened man. Certain denominations within Judaism rewrote the Bible and the Talmud to assure that adherence to the Mitzvoth (laws and rules) would be voluntary, since, heaven forbid, that anyone would be required to do anything.

Interestingly, free thinking and the disregard of religious principles have not brought us eternal peace or a cleaner form of politics. We now must admit that the absence of religious guiding principles in our civic life has not improved anything, and there are those who convincingly argue that it has made the world a worse place to live. There is plenty of religious terrorism to go around, especially among certain Islamic preachers and their flock, mostly (but not exclusively) in the Middle East. Those groups have not had a Reformation such as the Western world has seen.

The ultimate question for Philosophy 101, which basically embraces atheism at the cost of religious values, is not whether the presence of religious values is good or bad for society, but rather whether the basic tenets of religious faith can lead to self-improvement. With individual spiritual awareness, whether it comes from a secular or religious point of view, comes an understanding of the role of responsibility in an orderly society.

There are many great thinkers, such as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who see no inconsistency between the pursuit of religious values side-by-side with peace, democracy and tolerance. In fact, Sacks convincingly argues in his many books that religion, as it is intended, is all about respect for the individual. Faith in God, he argues, will assist in the attainment of a fair-minded democratic state.

Some of the confusion is clearly traceable to the Enlightenment, which both rejected religion and embraced a different vision of the role of religion. George Washington famously got down on his knees and prayed, and yet accepted into the Continental Army freed slaves, Hebrews, Muhammadans and atheists. Parenthetically, and with some tongue-in-cheek, it seems that many of those recruits came from Massachusetts, although curiously the Jews Brigade arrived from Charleston, South Carolina. Washington clearly saw no inconsistency between the guiding principles of religious virtue and a civil order responsible to the consent of the governed.

Schools and academics today are almost universally anti-religious. There is some challenge to that thinking, but it is still only a small segment of the academic community.

This time of the year is known in the Jewish faith as the Days of Awe, the period of time when we celebrate the New Year by embracing self-improvement, and fast on Yom Kippur to atone for the errors of the past.

To all my friends, regardless of religion, race, color, creed or identification, all the best for a healthy and happy, sweet 5780.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire  
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,  
Waters & Dohrmann  
161 West Third Street  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)  
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

*Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.*