

# Commentary Bill Hall The kindness of pious conceit

Bill Hall

I received a call from a reader one time who was hot under the collar that Mormons had posthumously baptized her dead son.

After her son died, his young widow joined the LDS Church and the mother was offended that members of that church were trying to win the dearly departed an eternal ticket to the right kind of heaven.

The mom wanted me to chastise them for their impertinence. She was livid, and I understand why, but the offense, though insensitive, was meant as a favor. More often than not, hurtful differences among religions are based on badmouthing each other. But this was well intended.

Mind you, those LDS baptizers might at least have notified the mother what they were planning to do. But I tried to get the mother to look on the kind side of what happened. Strangers had tried to do something that they sincerely considered a favor to the son.

"Do you think they can actually succeed in baptizing a dead person?" I asked.

"Of course not," she said.

"Well then, what's the problem?" I asked. "If they can't pull off a stunt like that, then so what?"

"Well, I don't like it," she snapped. And of course, she has some right as a mom to decide whether to be irked at the effrontery of trying to jerk her kid into somebody else's idea of heaven

That phone call comes back to me now because the LDS Church has recently backed off on its posthumous baptisms of Holocaust victims, a practice that many Jews find offensive.

Perhaps that's because some Jews, being religious themselves, believe it is possible to round up Jews in the afterlife and, in effect, to convert them. And if that were possible, which I doubt, I don't blame them for objecting.

However, even as a backslider and a skeptic, I have appreciated most of the readers over the years who have told me I am so wrong about certain political and religious notions that they have been praying for me to become less stupid.

Granted, there is sometimes a certain insincerity in loudly offering to pray for someone as a way of putting the jerk in his place. It's a rather muscular version of love thy neighbor.

However, several of those who have prayed for me appeared to be sincerely motivated to save me from hell. And just in case they were right, I do appreciate their effort to get me to heaven, even if that means losing my chance to spend eternity with all of my friends in politics. And given the benevolent intent of the Mormons, I will take no offense if it pleases them or anyone else to believe they can save me from myself.

If anyone in any religion is warmly energized to rescue me in death from that Great Nothing in the Big Nowhere, then have at it. Maybe I will be like the celebrated lawyer of yesteryear, Clarence Darrow, who was asked as a nonbeliever what he would do if he woke up and found himself at the Pearly Gates being greeted by the 12 apostles. He replied that he would simply bow and say, "Gentlemen, I was wrong."

But skeptic or not, I have appreciated most of those who have prayed for me and, while at it, rubbed my nose in the possibility they were morally superior.

I have also had some experience at having my dead relatives prayed over by people whose religiosity I do not share. When my father died, I wrote a column about it. A few days later, I received a call from a priest. He said his own father had recently died and that my column was a comfort to him.

He added that he had said a Mass for my father, though my father was no Catholic and not really a believer in anything but hard work, honesty and helping his neighbors.

I'm not quite clear what the Mass was supposed to do. But the kindness of the priest in what he was trying to do gave me comfort whether I believe that a religious ritual works or not. A kind gesture of any kind to a son in mourning is always welcome.

So I wasn't angry. I didn't complain to that priest, though I did have a couple of words for him about his unsolicited church service - thank you.

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