

Other Views

The value of organized religion to a representative republic

Fewer Americans are attending traditional church services. Fewer are attending Catholic schools, too.

According to Gallup, the number of Americans who belong to a church, synagogue or mosque continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend.

And thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, ABC News



TOM PURCELL
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

says enrollment in Catholic schools has seen the largest single-year decline in at least five decades.

I'm not sure what this rapid secularization of America means for our future.

But I do admit I wish more of today's children could experience the memorable upbringing I enjoyed growing up in a Catholic family.

Growing up Catholic in the 1970s meant going to a Catholic school.

Unlike too many schools today, in which some teachers fear their students, it was a time when we students of St. Germaine Catholic School feared the sisters.

The sisters ran their classrooms in a structured, orderly manner, and they took guff from no kid.

The floors were so clean, you could eat off of them. The blackboards had a brighter sheen than a Cadillac fender.

And our desks, which were subject to frequent and unannounced inspections, were expected to be organized at all times.

Our precious egos, fragile feelings and self-esteem were not part of the Church's teaching plan.

Either we got with the sisters' program or we got into big trouble.

There was no daydreaming, talking, joking or doodling. It was expected that each student would put forth his or her best effort.

Anything short of excellence was grounds for severe punishment, which included everything from a call home to mom to a whack on the hand from Sister Mary Brass Knuckle's ruler.

Every day the sisters taught us to embrace the virtues — prudence, temperance and courage — and to fend off the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed and sloth (activities I like to save for the weekend!).

When they weren't pounding moral values into us, they worked us hard in math, science, reading and writing — the basic skills necessary for thriving as an adult.

I know this harsh approach to educating children is considered outdated and quasi-barbaric today.

But, I dare say, I think the lessons the sisters and my religion taught me are beneficial to a representative republic like ours — a sentiment shared by one of our country's wisest founders, Benjamin Franklin.

I'm rereading his autobiography and delight in his commonsense approach to government. Franklin said that true religion and good morals are the only solid foundations of public liberty and happiness.

As he put it, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

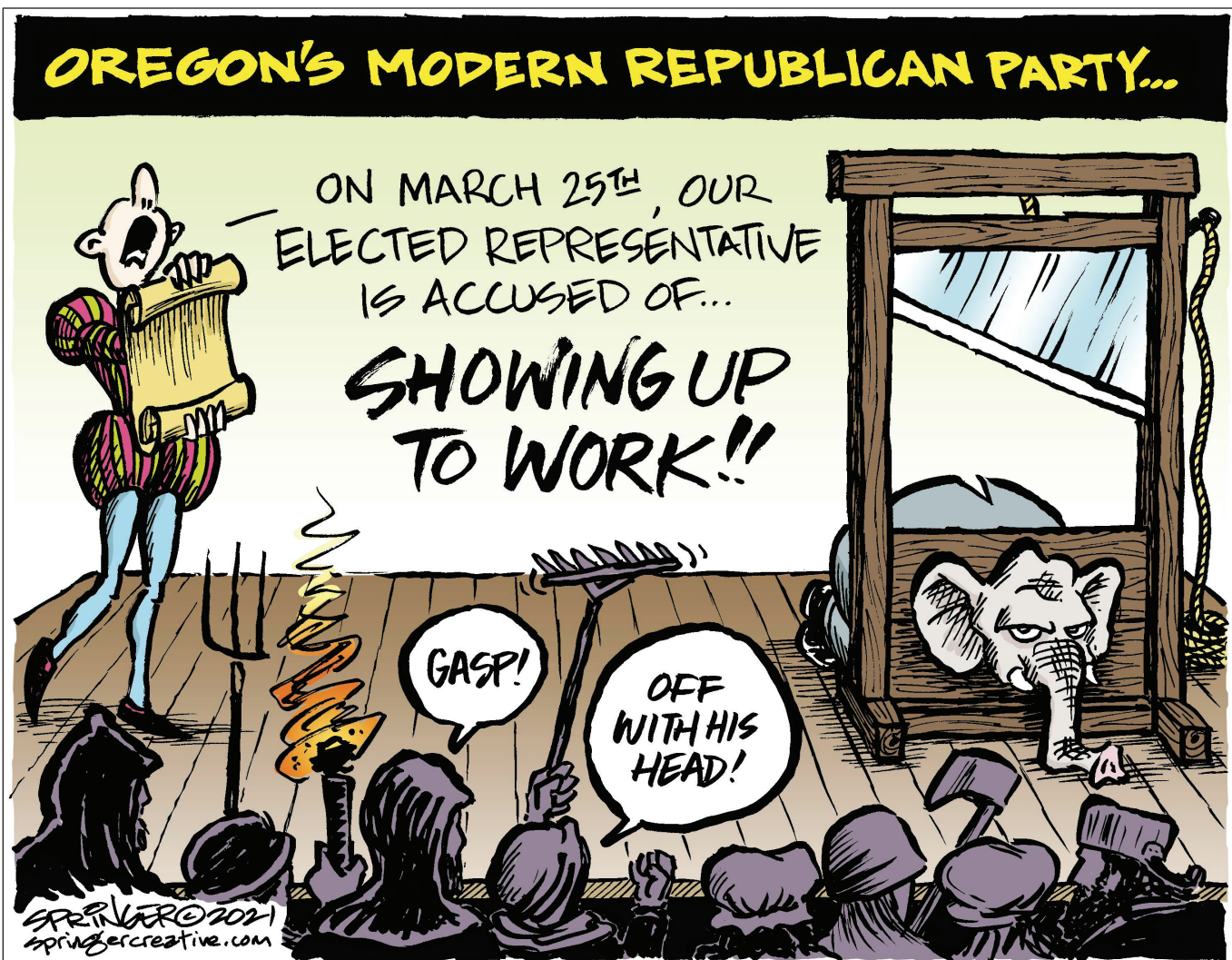
Franklin didn't often participate in church services himself, but he saw the benefits to society of citizens doing their best to practice and live virtuous lives and to demand virtue in their government leaders.

I'm not saying that you have to embrace a traditional religion to be virtuous or to understand the meaning and purpose of life.

But half a century later I can still see the value and order that religion has imparted on our republic throughout our history.

And I still have a lot of laughs when my old St. Germaine pals and I swap stories about our close encounters with Sister Mary Brass Knuckle's dreaded ruler.

Tom Purcell, author of "Misadventures of a 1970s Childhood," is a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review humor columnist and is nationally syndicated.



Our View

Legislature should not trim prison terms

It might surprise you to learn that some members of the Oregon Legislature believe convicted rapists, murderers and people who exploit children for pornography in certain cases spend too much time in prison.

Among the issues lawmakers need to address — the effects of the pandemic, most obviously — molycoddling felons can certainly be reserved for a future legislative session.

Yet the Legislature is considering Senate Bill 401. It would replace Oregon's system of mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain violent or especially heinous crimes — a system in place since voters approved Measure 11 in 1994 — with one that would give judges



East Oregonian, File
Corrections officers in September 2012 deliver toilet paper to inmates in the segregation unit at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton. The 2021 Oregon Legislature is considering Senate Bill 401, which would replace Oregon's system of mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain violent or especially heinous crimes.

the authority to impose prison terms for such crimes.

Oregon district attorneys, most of whom oppose the bill, say its passage would result in people spending less time in prison — up to 40% less — after being convicted of crimes including first-degree

sexual abuse, first-degree kidnapping and first-degree assault, along with rape and murder.

Lest you think Oregon's mandatory minimum sentences are excessive, consider that a person convicted of first-degree rape will serve eight years and four months. Exploiting

a child for pornographic purposes brings a sentence of five years and 10 months. The harm these criminals cause to their victims, of course, has no release date.

Although correlation doesn't always equate to causation, it is beyond dispute that violent crime rates in Oregon have dropped by more than 50%, to the lowest level since the 1960s, since voters approved Measure 11.

It's conceivable, of course, that a significant number of Oregonians have changed their mind about mandatory minimum sentences over the past 27 years. If legislators believe that's so, then they should give voters a chance to replace the current system rather than making the decision for them.

Letters

We are responsible for our democracy, economy

Nowadays, I hear employers talking about being unable to hire workers for the jobs they have. I am told that some people are not taking responsibility for their bills and rent, because the government's stimulus package is providing extended unemployment and because renters believe their landlords are not able to evict them. I would rather not believe this is true.

When the pandemic hit the United States, people lost their jobs, making it difficult to pay rent and buy groceries. The economy of the country was in danger of tanking and something had to be done. The administration with the approval of the majority of voters decided to provide a stimulus for the economy by putting almost \$2 trillion in the hands

of lower-income families, state and local government agencies and small businesses.

The idea is to stimulate the economy by giving dollars to those in the most need to be spent on necessities, and those dollars will "trickle-up" to benefit the economy of the country. This is the opposite of past efforts to boost the economy by providing huge tax breaks to corporations with the expectation that the tax breaks will "trickle-down" to benefit everyone.

Whether the "trickle-up" or "trickle-down" method is used to stimulate the economy, neither plan can succeed without the cooperation of those who receive the boost. If the corporations use their tax cuts to benefit only their shareholders and their top management, the lower wage earners and the unemployed are no better off. Similarly, if the stimulus to ben-

efit low-wage workers and the unemployed is not used to get jobs or to improve an opportunity to get better jobs, pay bills and rent, there will be no benefit to the economy.

The United States of America is a free country only as long as all of its citizens accept their responsibilities to make its systems work. This includes responsibility for our capitalistic economy, our systems of education and health care, and voting for and keeping in touch with those who operate our government. Abraham Lincoln said the U.S. is "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

President John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Freedom is not free. Let's do our part.

Evelyn Swart
Joseph

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