

## CHURCH AND STATE

“Hey, good morning, your Holiness. Pour me one, will you?”

“Turning to see Josh Green amble into the room, the man in black reaches for a cup.

“Shalom, my friend. Black with sugar, right? No offense, 'Shuckles', but you look a little rough around the edges. Not used to this hour?”

“Hour! ... hour! ... what hour, Bob?” Josh asks, good-natured exasperation in his voice, a twinkle in his eye. “Five a.m. isn't an hour; it's a penance. Bless me Father for I have sinned.”

“Hey, monks get up at three or four every day.”

“Yea, right. Let me guess, they're trying to get purgatory out of the way early.”

Handing his friend his coffee, Father Bob shakes his head. “Penance, huh?”

“Yea, that's one good thing about being a rabbi, no 6 a.m. morning mass.”

“Ahhh, it's not that bad. You get used to it after a while.”

Rabbi Green chuckles. “Yea, Bob, but I've gotten used to the morning paper and my wake-up coffee at eight.”

**Hi, I'm Tony Baggz. Welcome to the neighborhood. Dawn is breaking here on the South Side; a beautiful October morning promising to be sunny, warm and dry. Just perfect for today's festivities. We're in the meeting room at St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Nine people are gathered around a table set with coffee and pastries and all by one are church leaders.**

**Let's see, there's Temple Beth Shalom's Rabbi Joshua Green, known to his friends as 'Shuckles,' St. Mark's Episcopal's rector, Mike Daniels, Reverend Paul Jacobson of First Presbyterian, St. Katherine's Father Bob Scanlon, Christ the Redeemer Lutheran's Pastor John Randall, Liberty Street Assembly of God's Pastor Billy Swanson, Mt. Nebo Baptist Assembly's Pastor Martin Williams, Reverend Dave Walsh of First United Methodist and Dr. Norm Rogers, Chief of Thoracic Surgery at the University Medical Center. They're the driving force behind today's activities.**

**You see, today's the first morning of the Interfaith Council of Churches' semi-annual yard sale. A three-day event, it's become a tradition here in the city. It started as an effort between two Catholic churches and a synagogue to help the less fortunate with medical expenses. Now a joint effort with the University Medical Center, it's grown to include over twenty churches and synagogues, and in ten years it's raised over eight million dollars. A lot of people look forward to this day ... a lot of people need it.**

**In a few hours the place will be jumpin'. You see, this ain't your Grandma's yard sale. You can find anything here ... sky's the limit ... furs, appliances, jewelry, antiques, furniture, all sorts of collectibles, toys, clothes, knick-knacks, art, used cars ... and even houses. And now with rides and games for the kids, it's taken on the added air of a carnival. And the food; it's a smorgasbord of the best the city offers. Osso bucco to burritos and everything in between. You name it, it's all here, and it's all good.**

**Everyone pitches in; churches, schools, civic groups, restaurants, car dealers, local artists, musicians, businesses both large and small, and even the pro football team. The O'Grady family owns the "Boys in Black" and they can't do enough to help this effort. The city lets the vendors use the parks, the streets, and parking facilities and provides an array of services. And therein lies a problem.**

**Blowing the steam off his coffee, Mike Daniels walks over to the Baptist minister.**

**"Hey Martin, got a minute ..."**

**This ought to be interesting. Let's listen in ...**

"Sure Mike, what's up?"

"Haven't talked in a while. What's the latest on Gaffner's lawsuit?"

"Well, it's on the docket for November, and he's rounded up the usual suspects."

Looking up from the pastry table, a wary look ambles across John Randall's face.

"Usual suspects?" he asks.

"The ACLU."

Wary turns to disgust and I don't think it's the coffee.

Chuckling at the look on John's face, Martin continues.

"Anyway, Nate Kramer and Judge Zaleski are working on it. Nate's dealt with this before and the judge has handled a few similar cases."

"I'm confused, exactly what is Gaffner's complaint?" Billy Swanson asks, picking up a Danish. "It's not like we're nailing the Ten Commandments to the courthouse door."

"No, we're not. But his argument isn't religious, it's economic."

"How? We pay all the required licenses and fees."

"Well, Gaffner claims we're a commercial activity masquerading as a religious event. He says the city loses tax revenue because sales taxes aren't collected on the raffles and donations, and isn't compensated for city services, utilities, police, that sort of thing."

A mischievous look crosses Reverend Williams face. Winking, he looks in John Randall's direction. "You want to hear something rich, Billy, get this; he's gone as far as claiming Brownie Troop 25's lemonade and jellybean stand violates code by failing to collect state and city sales tax. He says they're no different than any restaurant."

The sound of someone choking startles the group. Everyone turns to see the Lutheran minister with coffee running down his shirt.

"Don't drown, John," Dave Walsh says, laughing.

"Yea, throw me a life preserver, will ya? For heaven's sake, my little Jennifer's in Troop 25."

A devilish grin crosses Doc Rogers face. "At least that orange prison jumpsuit will go good with her freckles, John. Who knows, maybe you can sneak a hacksaw into her next birthday cake." Doc pauses a moment. "Tell me, does she have an accounting merit badge?"

“Sure, Doc, right between the ones for jacks and double-dutch. C’mon, she’s six for Pete’s sake.”

The levity of the moment lightens the mood. Chuckling, Father Bob sets down his coffee cup. “Look, it’s simple. It’s an end run, a Trojan horse. The guy simply detests religion.”

“And this is his way of attacking it,” Reverend Walsh asks, muted disgust in his tone.

“Exactly,” Mike Daniels says. “But what I don’t get is; do people like him understand the hit his wallet would take if churches couldn’t do what we do?”

“Or stopped,” Reverend Jacobson says softly.

“Sure he does, Mike,” Dave Allen says. Gaffner’s an intelligent man; he just chooses to ignore it.”

“Okay, but even so, how can he ignore the benefits society realizes from just the cost of education alone? Every kid in a parochial school saves the taxpayers, what, about eight, nine grand a year, or more? In the city and county there are eleven Catholic schools, and seven by other churches. We’re talking over 8000 kids. That’s about seventy million dollars. And that’s not counting the home-schooled kids supported by various churches. There’re probably another thousand kids or so there. And that’s just education. How about food, clothing, and medical care? Martin’s church runs a food pantry program that’s the model for the area, and we all have some sort of outreach beyond the Thanksgiving and Christmas programs. Now, add in everything else, counseling, legal assistance, monetary assistance to seniors on fixed incomes to help pay utility bills or medicines; ‘intangibles’ as Gaffner calls them. I’d bet the combined efforts save the taxpayers another five million, at least. Do guys like Gaffner understand that? Sure they do. Do they care ... no. The only thing people like him care about is their own self-righteous indignation.”

“I’ve learned never to underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups,” Josh chuckles, looking out the window.

“Or self-righteous people in groups of one,” Reverend Jacobson says, chuckling softly.

“So, Martin,” what’s the outlook?”

“Well, Nate doesn’t see a problem at the local level; but it could get sticky in the appeals process if Gaffner pursues it. And no one knows anymore how the Supreme Court would rule.”

Reverend Walsh nods. “Well, at least the Supreme Court has some new blood. Some younger judges. Maybe that’s a good sign.”

Rabbi Green chuckles. “Forget the fountain of youth, Dave; what we need is a fountain of smart.”

“Well, it’ll take time, Martin says, topping off his coffee cup ...

... meanwhile, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

**Someone once said wisdom is simply common sense in an uncommon degree.**

**What does religion contribute to society? Want to find out? Simple, shut down the food banks, the clothing, housing, and health care assistance, the counseling services, and park every kid in a parochial school on the doorstep of the nearest public-school next Monday morning. You’ll get an idea. Want to see taxes go through the roof? Just let the government provide those services churches now do.**

**Do you ever wonder why, when the self-righteous call for elimination of tax breaks on churches, they never express outrage at the faithful who, at their own double expense, educate their kids in private schools and lift a considerable burden off the taxpayer? Where’s the ire when the less fortunate are fed, clothed, or provided the necessities in bad times? Something government would have to supply with the contents of the taxpayers’ wallet. Taxpayers like Mr. Gaffner.**

**How does shackling the efforts of churches benefit anyone except the self-righteous, or the myopic? Where’s the sense in that?**

**Talk about “straining at a gnat ... and swallowing a camel.”**

**Thinkaboutit. I'm Tony Baggz.**

Copyright 2015 Tres Angel Publishing LLC