

God, Life, and Everything Let the Market Decide

Now that Easter is over, let's look at what else is going on in the world.

How about the flap over Indiana's Religious Freedom Law? Boy, what an unnecessary debacle that was! In case you missed it, Indiana passed a Religious Freedom bill, and the governor signed it, which made it legal for businesses to - among other things - refuse to serve certain people if those people's way of life clashed with the business's religious convictions.

It caused a huge flap for several reasons. One was that it became quickly and painfully obvious that this law was passed primarily to enable discrimination against gays who might want to get married. Another reason is that it gave businesses religious rights. Traditionally, the government has accorded religious rights only to individuals or religious organizations such as churches (which are collections of people come together for religious purposes). I mean, how can a business have a religion?

The whole flap came to a head last week when the governor backed away and promised fixes.

Why did he do it?

Because of the backlash.

But what backlash?

Well, it wasn't the protests by religious or gay-rights groups, that's for sure.

No, it was the businesses, specifically the corporations which told the politicians, "We are not going to allow you to do this." The NCAA questioned whether it would hold any more tournaments in Indianapolis. Apple talked of boycotting the state (even though it has no problem working in Saudi Arabia where the laws are much more draconian).

Once Big Business had spoken, it was all over (not only in Indiana but also in Arkansas which was just a step behind Indiana. Once Wal-Mart put its foot down, the anti-gay law vanished almost into thin air).

Did the corporations let their consciences rule them, prodding them to take a moral stance against such a bad law? No. They saw a PR disaster in Indiana. Even though most of the negative attention was aimed at the state, corporations did not want to be seen supporting the law. There are just too many in this country who think gays ought to be able to marry.

Most corporations have made public their policies of equal treatment of gay employees, not out of a particularly moral stance but because it made sense at a business level. It was the most efficient way to get the most out of employees with the least hassle.

Once they had these policies, they could not remain quiet in Indiana. Besides, Indiana is not exactly a powerful state. It needs these businesses more than the corporations need Indiana. So when all those big business representatives started fussing, Indiana sat up and took notice.

What does this incident mean for the larger society? Other than the fact that businesses might not be able to discriminate against gays, that is.

My libertarian friends tell me this incident shows how well the free market system works because the free market corrected the government. One friend said that

we need to let the free market govern pretty much everything because it will always do a better job than government.

Seriously, he said that.

But does the free market fix all? Actually, when it comes to selling a product, it does have a fairly practical record. If you sell something that people want, they buy it. If it turns out to be too expensive for perceived value, if it fails to deliver on promises, if it just doesn't work or if it gets outdated, people quit buying it.

The free market is pretty good at getting you to want things, too. We don't think of advertising as being part of the free market, but who do you think told you that you needed a personal computer all those years ago? Who got you to try Pilsbury's Poppin' Fresh Dough? Who made you believe that you have to have an SUV in the suburbs?

Granted, the best marketing won't keep a lousy product on the market for long, but it gets you looking for more.

So the free market makes you want stuff and works well at making sure only the "best" stuff stays on the market.

But it doesn't have a soul or a conscience. Corporations - Hobby Lobby aside - do not believe in God. They exist for one purpose only - to take your money and put it in the pockets of their shareholders. People boycotted Indiana, sure, but not because it was the right thing to do. If corporations refused to work or build or sell in places where it is immoral to do so, they would have to remove half their factories, and we'd be paying a lot more for our smart phones and gasoline.

The free market has not ended modern-day slavery, nor does it have any interest in doing so. (And no, Apple is not the only corporation abusing contract workers around the world so that we can send tweets wherever we are.) The free market did not require seat belts in cars despite their proven record in reducing death and injury in accidents. The free market did not expose the danger of cigarette smoke. Government forced the businesses to do these things. If it were up to the free market, we still would have no seat belts or anti-smoking laws.

The free market does not care about you.

The reason people even know about poor labor conditions or homophobia or gender discrimination is because people outside of corporations pressures their governments to do something about it. And government, when it's working properly, responds by investigating the conditions and proposing solutions for the welfare of the population. That is government's job.

So, while many businesses exerted tremendous pressure on Indiana and Arkansas to change their stances on religious freedom laws, don't ever expect them to act morally for the sake of acting morally. They will always act in their self interest.

I have little faith in the free market to make the world a better place. Don't get me wrong, it has a role. But if you want the right thing to be done for the welfare of the community, you want to look somewhere else. We the people are a good place to start.