

MIXED-DRINKING, RELIGION AND POLITICS

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When you mix a portion of alcohol with equal parts of religion and politics; throw in some economics, social welfare, civic mindedness, emotion and prejudice; then for good measure add a dash of pious righteousness and a trace of medical authority; the resultant concoction is unlikely to promote tranquility or cure stomach ulcers.

It began several weeks ago with a local newspaper's story that a movement was afoot among Country Club members to organize forces for a second referendum on the mixed-drink question. This elicited a prompt letter of reply from one of our prominent anti-liquor ministers. Unfortunately, in championing the cause of teetotalism, the good minister wandered slightly afield. He posed three somewhat rhetorical and leading questions for the City Commission to answer.

- Will it go against the wishes of the people to accommodate the Country Clubbers?
- Will it be unfair to the majority of voters?
- Will it burden the taxpayers with the cost of another referendum?

All three questions he then proceeded to answer himself. The helpful pastor "thought not" to each of his own questions and indicated that unless the Commission followed a course of action that coincided with his own views, it would be derelict in the performance of its duties to the will of the majority of the local citizens. With generous benediction, however, the pastor was certain that the commissioners would be fair to all and felt secure in his faith that they would "not betray the people for the favored few."

This proclamation in turn brought forth a frosty response from one of the more outspoken commissioners who,

- 1) told the minister that it was not in the City Commission's power to deny a referendum if a proper petition was presented,
- 2) accused him of trespassing into alien political fields,
- 3) suggested that there were some inconsistencies in that devout one's past performance in regard to tolerance of mixed drinking, and
- 4) advised him to mind his own pulpit.

At frequent intervals since the original exchange, letters of comment have appeared in the paper. An aroused citizenry, taking to its pens, has included drinkers and nondrinkers, churchgoers and nonchurchgoers, and even one of our own medical colleagues, who wrote masterfully and at length. Generally, there has been a tendency among the letter

writers to lose sight of fact and the initial problem in defense of or in recrimination against the personalities of the minister and commissioner.

As with most jumbled concoctions, the multitude of ingredients, reacting, interacting and counteracting, have muddied all to make an unpalatable mixture. Metaphorically speaking, the simple elegance of a cold dipperful of clear, mountain spring water or, better yet, a glass of aged, mellow sour mash mixed with the same, would be definitely preferable. Humanity being what it is, particularly in this era of moral confusion and pressing concern about avoiding atomic disintegration as a race, it is exasperating to witness emotions and tempers fretting over inconsequential matters. In this instance, the original argument was not even the basic one of wet against dry, but only in what manner the drinkers should be allowed to pursue their inclination. Apparently, some of the church going groups prefer to see liquor guzzled from the bottle.

In all similar controversies we have tended to side with the liquor drinkers, feeling that man has enjoyed consuming fermented products since the beginning of his recorded history and having stubbornly and persistently resisted all efforts to change his habit, he is not likely now to be dissuaded by the Johnny-come-latelys in the fields of religion, welfare and social uplift. As far as we know, no confirmed drinkers ever mount the hustings to apply pressure and try to convince the nondrinkers that they should mend their ways. To enjoy the pleasures of nondrinking without molestation is certainly a right—God given, if you wish. On the other hand, many advocates of temperance do not recognize a similar, God given right for the drinkers.

Always prominent among those determined to abolish the evils of drink are members of the ministerial groups. When controversy arises over any aspect of legal consumption of alcohol, they rise to the lure, and before any sane discussion can be carried on, religion is invariably injected into the picture. The inconsistency of mixing religion and alcohol is not that any particular sect should or should not attempt to influence or direct its own followers about drinking. This again is its prerogative, but that it should try to impose its practices on others. As a related example, while the sincere Jehovah's Witness will not submit to blood transfusion, he does not demand that the Baptist do likewise.

Some religions permit alcohol; some do not. Even among the numerous, more puritanical Protestant Christian sects, the attitude varies. It seems evident that any specific interpretation or dogma about drink is sectarian and manmade rather than by Divine revelation, since all profess to follow teachings of the same Christ. However, when a crusading minister sets out to discuss alcohol, he lets it be known, and often not just by implication, that God, Christ and the Bible are on his side. Thus any repudiation or criticism against him automatically attacks his Holy Authority and demotes his critics to the realms of irresponsibility and sacrilege.

This form of pious gamesmanship is an old ploy and still in universal use. It was used by the Catholic Church in the 11th and 12th centuries at the time of the Crusades, and again during the 16th century by the Spanish Inquisitors with devastating results. Less than three hundred years ago, a Protestant sect employed it effectively in this country to burn the Salem witches. And always, those fervently pious, God-fearing pillars of the church led the way in the name of a merciful Christ. In this country today, it is a rare politician or national leader who does not admit to being a God-fearing man and regular churchgoer. Baseball players, battered pugilists and philandering, hard-nosed football coaches have been known to consider themselves smiled upon by the "Man Upstairs." Even belligerent modern armies have been so blessed . . . or do you recall the "Gott Mit Uns" around the swastika on the belt buckle of Hitler's Wehrmacht? God apparently is quite easygoing and not likely to sue anyone for infringement of copyright. So drinkers may claim him with the same impudent impunity as the righteous, Bible-quoting nondrinkers.

The local mixed drink referendum was held almost a year ago in May 1964. A total of 15,797 citizens voted and the anti-mixed drinkers registered 285 more votes than the mixed drinkers, a percentage by volume of 50.9% against to 49.1% for. Apparently, in the eyes of the contesting minister, all of this large majority of citizens sides with him against alcohol. Interestingly, it has been estimated that 15 to 20% of this majority vote came from the bootlegging element, the small liquor dealers, and a large number of the tavern and juke joint operators who feared the licensing, tighter restriction and control and loss of revenue that would follow an ordinance permitting mixed drinks. It was not a very holy alliance for the pious prohibitionists, but enough to create a majority out of a minority.

In the long run, the drinkers will continue to drink and enjoy it, the nondrinkers will continue to non-drink and enjoy it. It does seem a shame that some of the more exemplary nondrinkers find it so difficult to relax and accept reality. Medically speaking, a tot of brandy has remarkable calming properties; and the nutritive, vitamin, mineral and trace-element content of a single glass of wine exceeds that of a handful of vitamin pills, is much more pleasant to take, and more effective than Milltown. Maybe a glass of Madeira (you could mix it with soda) would help everyone.