

# IS THE ACLU CRAZY?

by Bill Donohue

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If there were a proposal to erect a statue of St. Michael the Archangel on a municipal building, it would be understandable if some objected. However, it would not be understandable to object on the grounds that a depiction of St. Michael stepping on the neck of the Devil ineluctably conjures up images of George Floyd. But that is exactly the position of the ACLU of Massachusetts.

Having authored a Ph.D. dissertation, two books, and a monograph on the ACLU, I am convinced that most of its board members and senior officials harbor a deep animus against religion. Nothing bothers them more than Christianity, especially Catholicism. This is much more than a phobia: religion is seen as a threat to liberty.

When the ACLU was founded in 1920 by Roger Baldwin (the ACLU today falsely claims that Baldwin was one of 10 who founded the organization), all the provisions of the First Amendment, save for religious liberty, were listed as part of their ten objectives. That was not an oversight: Baldwin was an atheist.

Still, the reasoning of the ACLU of Massachusetts is off-the-charts, even by ACLU standards. It is challenging a decision made by the mayor of Quincy to erect two statues of Catholic saints outside the Quincy Public Safety Building. Mayor Thomas Koch chose St. Florian and St. Michael the Archangel; they are the patron saints of firefighters and police officers, respectively. The ACLU says the statues violate the separation of church and state.

The ACLU is well aware that religious statues adorn many

buildings in the nation's capital, including the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress, the Lincoln Memorial, and other public buildings. Even in Massachusetts, the Boston Public Library features the outstanding work of John Singer Sargent: his religious murals, including "Madonna of Sorrows," are classic. At the State House, there are statues and paintings of famous Christians, clergy, and laity alike.

But none of this is enough to allay the fears of the ACLU.

In the ACLU's letter to Mayor Koch and the Quincy City Council, it said that "we note that the contemplated statue of Saint Michael is not only troubling ... it depicts a figure stepping on the neck of a demon. Such violent imagery is particularly abhorrent in light of the murder of George Floyd and other acts of police brutality throughout the country."

In other words, the revered saint who battled Satan and who is known as the guardian prince of Israel—he stood ready to defend God's chosen people—reminds the ACLU of a serial violent criminal who resisted arrest and was subdued by the cops; he had four times the lethal dose of fentanyl in his system. Maybe if St. Michael had been depicted as engaging in dialogue with the Devil, instead of crushing his head, the ACLU would have applauded.

Would Baldwin have agreed with the ACLU? Only in part.

When I interviewed him in his home in New York City in 1978, we discussed an array of issues. He was cordial and forthcoming. But when it came to religion, he was an extremist. Here is an exchange I will never forget (See my book, *The Politics of the ACLU*: Transaction Press, 1985).

**Donohue:** The ACLU has even gone so far as to deny the right of people to voluntarily take the time during the day, as a schoolchild, to say a prayer.

**Baldwin:** Not on school time.

**Donohue:** Well, whose rights are being infringed upon if there is a silent prayer voluntarily said by a student?

**Baldwin:** If they don't say anything? You mean if they don't—

**Donohue:** Right. Are you afraid they are going to proselytize the rest of the class?

**Baldwin:** Well, they've tried to get around it. They've tried to get around it even further than you by calling it meditation.

**Donohue:** What's wrong with that?

**Baldwin:** You don't say anything about God or religion or anything. I suppose you can get by with that but it's a subterfuge, because the implication is that you're meditating about the hereafter or God or something.

**Donohue:** Well, what's wrong with that? Doesn't a person have the right to do that? Or to meditate about popcorn for that matter?

**Baldwin:** I suppose that—it sounds very silly to me because it looks like an obvious evasion of the constitutional provision.

Back to St. Michael. Baldwin surely would have opposed erecting the statue, but he would have done so on conventional church and state grounds. Even if he were apprised of the George Floyd incident, he clearly would not have equated St. Michael stepping on the head of the Devil with a cop kneeling on Floyd. I spent many hours with him. He may have been an extremist on church and state, but he was not crazy.