

The Secular Crusade Against Religion

by Dinesh D'Souza

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This article is adapted from Dinesh D'Souza's new book The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11, just published by Doubleday.

Is Osama Bin Laden right when he alleges that America is a pagan society, the “leading power of the unbelievers”? Bin Laden and the Islamic radicals point to America's policy of separation of church and state to prove their point. To many Americans, of course, this charge is ridiculous. Even so, it is worth asking why America is so committed to such a systematic exclusion of religion from government and public life. Even European countries, where religious belief and practice is much lower than in the United States, treat religion more sympathetically and provide recognition and support to religious institutions and religious schools.

So why is America virtually alone in the world dedicated to strict separation of church and state? Many Americans have become convinced that religion represents, as author Sam Harris puts it in *The End of Faith*, “the most potent source of human conflict, past and present.” Columnist Robert Kuttner gives the familiar litany. “The Crusades slaughtered millions in the name of Jesus. The Inquisition brought the torture and murder of millions more. After Luther, Christians did bloody battle with other Christians for another three centuries.” In a recent book, Richard Dawkins contends that most of the recent conflicts in the world—in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in Northern Ireland, in Kashmir, in Sri Lanka—show the continued vitality of the murderous impulse that seems

inherent in religion.

The problem with this expose is that it exaggerates the crimes of religion, while ignoring the vastly greater offenses of secular or atheist fanaticism. The best example of religious persecution in America is the Salem Witch Trials. How many people were killed in those trials? Thousands? Hundreds? Actually, nineteen. Yet the event continues to haunt the liberal imagination.

It is strange to witness the passion with which some secular people rail against the Crusaders' and Inquisitors' misdeeds of more than five hundred years ago. Ironically these religious zealots did not come close to killing the number of people murdered by secular tyrants of our own era. How many people were killed in the Spanish Inquisition? The actual number sentenced to death appears to be around 10,000. This figure is tragic, and of course population levels were much lower at the time.

But even taking that difference into account, the death tolls of the Inquisition are miniscule compared to those produced by the secular despotisms of the twentieth century. In the name of creating their version of a secular utopia, Hitler, Stalin and Mao produced the kind of mass slaughter that no Inquisitor could possibly match. Collectively these atheist tyrants murdered more than 100 million people.

Moreover, many of the conflicts that liberals count as "religious wars" were not fought over religion. They were mainly fought over rival claims to territory and power. Can the wars between England and France be counted as religious wars because the English were Protestants and the French were Catholics? Hardly. The same is true today. The contemporary conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is not, at its core, a religious one. It arises out of a dispute over self-determination and land. Hamas and the extreme orthodox parties in Israel may advance theological claims—"God gave us

this land" and so forth—but even without these religious motives the conflict would remain essentially the same. Ethnic rivalry, not religion, is the source of the tension in Northern Ireland and the Balkans.

"While the motivations of the Tamil Tigers are not explicitly religious," Harris informs us, "they are Hindus who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death." In other words, while the Tigers see themselves as fighting for land and the right to rule themselves—in other words, as combatants in a secular political struggle—Harris detects a religious motive because these people happen to be Hindu and surely there must be some underlying religious craziness that explains their fanaticism.

It's obvious that Harris can go on forever in this vein. Seeking to exonerate secularism and atheism from the horrors perpetrated in their name, he argues that Stalinism and Maoism were in reality "little more than a political religion." As for Nazism, "while the hatred of Jews in Germany expressed itself in a predominantly secular way, it was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity." Indeed, "The holocaust marked the culmination of...two thousand years of Christian fulminating against the Jews."

Is anyone fooled by this rhetorical legerdemain? For Harris to call twentieth-century atheist ideologies "religion" is to render the term meaningless. Should religion now be responsible not only for the sins of believers, but also those of atheists? Moreover, Harris does not explain why, if Nazism was directly descended from medieval Christianity, medieval Christianity did not produce a Hitler. How can a self-proclaimed atheist ideology, advanced by Hitler as a repudiation of Christianity, be a "culmination" of two thousand years of Christianity? Harris is employing a transparent slight-of-hand that holds Christianity responsible for the crimes committed in its name, while exonerating secularism and atheism for the greater crimes committed in

their name.

A second justification for America's church-state jurisprudence is the claim that the founders enshrined secularism in the Constitution as the basis for their "new order for the ages." In her book *Freethinkers*, Susan Jacoby argues that it was precisely to establish such a framework that the founders declined to make America a Christian nation and instead gave us "a nation founded on the separation of church and state." Jacoby credits the founders with "creating the first secular government in the world."

But consider this anomaly. The idea of separating religion and government was not an American idea, it was a Christian idea. It was Christ, not Jefferson, who said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The American founders institutionalized this Christian idea—admittedly an idea ignored for much of medieval history—in the Constitution.

The framers' understanding of separation, however, was very different from that of today's ACLU. From the founding through the middle of the twentieth century, America had religious displays on public property, congressionally-designated religious services and holidays, government-funded chaplains, and prayer in public schools. So entrenched was religion in American private and public life that, writing in the early nineteenth century, Tocqueville called it the first of America's political institutions. In a unanimous ruling in 1892, the Supreme Court declared that if one takes "a view of American life as expressed by its laws, its business, its customs, and its society, we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth...that this is a Christian nation."

Virtually all of the actions that secular liberals claim are forbidden by the no-establishment clause of the First Amendment were permitted for most of American history. Thus

liberals like Jacoby are in the peculiar position of claiming that the religion provisions of the Constitution were misunderstood by the founders and by everyone else for a hundred and fifty years, until finally they were accurately comprehended by liberals. The arrogance of this claim is exceeded only by its implausibility.

Finally some people defend church-state separation by pointing to the religious diversity of America. Historian Diana Eck has a recent book titled *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. Since America is no longer religiously homogenous, Eck's argument goes, there is a pressing need to adopt constitutional rules that permit minorities to freely practice their religion. We frequently hear that nativity displays, monuments with the Ten Commandments, and prayers at high school graduations all make the multitudes of American non-Christians feel extremely uncomfortable.

But where is the evidence for this? It is not the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist immigrants who press for radical secularism, it is the liberal activist groups. So the mantra of "diversity" seems to be secular ruse to undermine all religious expression in the public sphere. Moreover, the factual premise is unsound. Contrary to Eck, America is not the world's most diverse nation. Surprising though it may seem, the total number of non-Christians in America adds up to less than 10 million people, which is around 3 percent of the population. Many Asian and African countries have religious minorities that make up 15 to 20 percent of the population.

In terms of religious background, America is no more diverse today than it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. How is this possible? Because today's immigrants come mostly from Mexico and Latin and South America, and virtually all of them are Christians. So not only does America remain a Christian country, but as historian Philip Jenkins points out, its Christian population relative to non-Christians is

growing. Jenkins notes that the real story of America should be titled, "How this Christian country has become an even-more-Christian country."

My conclusion is that the radical Muslims are wrong about America but they are right about separation of church and state. America's church-state doctrine, in its current form, is a fraud. It is built on a bogus historical, constitutional and sociological foundation. The real purpose of its advocates is to marginalize traditional religion and traditional morality, so that the public sphere can be monopolized by their ideological agenda. It is time to dismantle the anti-religious scaffolding erected by the party of secularism.

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