

The Secularist Assault On America's Moral Consensus

Rick Hinshaw

From the earliest days of their agitation to legalize abortion, America's modern-day secularists made inevitable the aggressive war on religious freedom they are engaged in today.

From the start, the secularists deployed the weapon of anti-religious – primarily anti-Catholic – bigotry in advancing the pro-abortion agenda, portraying their opponents as narrowly sectarian religious zealots trying to “impose their morality” on our pluralist society.

The tactic served several useful purposes.

It enabled them to divert attention from the scientific and medical certainty – “which everyone really knows,” as the pro-abortion California Medical Association publicly acknowledged at the time – “that life begins at conception,” and that every abortion takes a human life; and to instead transform opposition to abortion into a religious issue.

And that, in turn, allowed them to accuse the Catholic Church of violating America's “constitutional separation of church and state” in order to impose Vatican-dictated religious teachings upon all Americans.

And it permitted them to cast themselves as defenders of freedom of choice, advocates of a “live and let live” approach that would let Americans conduct themselves according to the dictates of their own conscience.

As the ensuing years have made clear, however, “freedom of choice” was never their real goal. They are every bit as determined to impose *their* secular agenda – their secular

religion, as some would describe it – on our pluralist society as they claim people of faith are determined to impose our religious beliefs when we stand up for the moral consensus that had previously guided this nation for most of its history.

And in truth, they have to be.

For as Kenneth Grasso, professor of political science at Texas State University, explains in an essay titled, “From Articles of Peace to Kulturkampf: Catholicism, the HHS Mandate, and the Problem of Religious Pluralism in America,” our nation’s ability to survive and flourish as a pluralist democracy has depended on our having been able to arrive at a “moral consensus” despite religious differences. This has worked, Grasso explains, because historically, “the diverse religions of America” have “shared a common Judeo-Christian tradition,” and “taught substantially the same moral code.”

“The type of natural law thinking that informed early American political culture saw the moral truths embodied in the natural law as largely congruent with traditional Judeo-Christian morality,” Grasso writes; and thus America’s “multitude” of religious sects was able to develop “traditional articles of peace” built on a shared moral consensus.

Grasso’s essay is contained in *The Crisis of Religious Liberty: Reflections from Law, History, and Catholic Social Thought*, a collection of essays by prominent Catholic scholars edited by Stephen M. Krason, director of the political science program at Franciscan University of Steubenville and cofounder and president of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

It is this shared moral consensus—and its natural law roots—that is under attack by modern day secularists. Their attack is not – and cannot be—limited simply to specific issues, like abortion and same sex “marriage.” For as Anne Hendershott writes in the foreword to the same book, “There

cannot be common ground on issues like abortion or same sex marriage.” The sacredness of pre-born human life and the integrity of authentic marriage – reflected for more than 200 years in the laws of every state in the union –are central to that moral consensus and its natural law foundations; and thus, those laws cannot be changed without dismantling that moral consensus.

The secularists have endeavored to do so, and “the result,” writes Grasso, “is the culture war that today wracks the American polity – a culture war that finds its most vivid expression in the ongoing conflicts over abortion, gay marriage and religion’s place in public life – pitting the proponents of the traditional forms of biblical theism and natural law thinking against the proponents of progressivism.”

As we have seen, for the secularists the culture war has entailed scapegoating religious institutions and people of faith – primarily the Catholic Church, for as Hendershott writes, “in the current culture wars, the Church is viewed as the major barrier to full acceptance of a woman’s right to choose abortion throughout her pregnancy or a same-sex couple’s right to marriage.”

It is not clear that this strategy ever really had its desired effect upon the American people. After all, unrestricted abortion was legalized nationwide not by the will of the people, but by the *diktat* of an unelected U.S. Supreme Court.

But the strategy did have its desired effect upon those who overrode the will of the people, as a perusal of Justice Harry Blackmun’s majority opinion in *Roe* makes clear.

In any event, having found it so successful in achieving their aims with abortion, the secularists have employed this strategy repeatedly, and over the years escalated it considerably. They have moved beyond the social pressure and cultural isolation that they employed during the early years

of the abortion debate to try to deprive pro-life voices of legitimate standing in the public square, to now using the coercive powers of government to *silence* people of faith and religious institutions – among other methods, using dubious “hate speech” laws to *criminalize* speech defending traditional marriage – and to *force* us to abandon the moral teachings of our faith and to *actively participate* in that which we hold to be immoral.

This first took the form of conditioning access to public resources on adherence to the secularist agenda. During the welfare reform debate of the mid-1990s, George Weigel wrote that “The current welfare system is managed by those same folks who have brought you Official Secularism as America’s quasi-establishment of religion. In city after city, and in order to qualify for federal funding, church-based agencies have had to agree not to do anything terribly ‘religious’ in their work with the poor.”

In a more recent example, the Obama Administration withdrew federal funding from a U.S. Bishops anti-human trafficking program – even as the Administration acknowledged that it was one of the most effective of such programs – because the bishops did not include abortion and contraceptive “services” for victims of human trafficking.

But this effort still left religious entities the option of declining federal funds in order to continue conducting their ministries in accord with their religious teachings. So now the secularists have moved to outright government coercion – under penalty of law – to force religious compliance with directives that offend against their moral teachings.

As we know, the Obama Administration’s Health and Human Services mandate *requires* faith-based entities to provide “health” insurance for their employees that includes abortions, contraceptives, and sterilization.

And in state after state, Catholic adoption and foster care agencies are being forced, by law, to either place children with same sex or unmarried heterosexual couples, in violation of the Church's teachings on marriage, or abandon their adoption and foster care services, and their moral commitment to finding homes for displaced children.

People of faith who own businesses are being told they have no discretion to decline to provide "services" that violate their religious beliefs. As we have seen play out most recently in Indiana, powerful secularized corporate interests are putting their considerable economic weight behind efforts to force states to legally require that caterers, florists, bakeries, and other family-owned businesses participate in same-sex wedding ceremonies, regardless of their religious convictions.

And of course, making all this more insidious – if that is possible – the Obama Administration, under the guise of providing "conscience exemptions" from its HHS contraceptive-abortionifacient mandate, has taken upon itself the power to define which of a Church's ministries are legitimately part of its religious mission. It has thus decreed that Catholic health care agencies, Catholic Charities, and Catholic higher education institutes are *not* part of the Church's religious mission – regardless of what Church teaching and tradition, let alone the Gospel of Christ, tell us.

That the secularists are so determined, now that they have achieved so much of their agenda, to force people and institutions of faith to actively participate in that agenda, confirms that they have never really been about "freedom of choice" – that they are, as I said earlier, every bit as determined to impose *their* secular agenda on our pluralist society as they claim people of faith are to impose our religious beliefs when we stand up for our nation's long-held moral consensus.

The secularists are not satisfied simply to have torn down the

moral standards that have guided our culture and informed our laws. They must also bring people of faith – and especially the Catholic Church – to heel, forcing us to *participate* in same sex marriage, in placing children for adoption with same sex or unmarried couples, in the destruction of pre-born life.

Why?

Part of it is strategic. If they can force people and institutions of faith to be actively involved in abortions, or same sex weddings, or other anti-life or anti-family policies, how do we credibly maintain public opposition to those practices? Our voices are effectively discredited, and the culture war is over.

I would suggest that it also has something to do with the natural law. Recall how King Henry VIII, when he wanted a divorce that the Church could not grant, simply named himself head of the Church of England, granted himself the divorce, and married the second of his six wives. Thomas More did not rebuke the King. He simply maintained his silence, unable to publicly assent to the marriage. But, as Randy Lee, professor of law at Widener University, writes in Krason's book, "that didn't seem like enough to Henry. ... incrementally, like water torture, drop by drop, Henry took from Thomas More his office, then his status, then his wealth, then his friends, then his personal liberty, then his family, and ultimately his life."

Why? Why was Henry so obsessed with forcing Thomas More to assent to his divorce and remarriage? I would submit that it was because he was himself terribly conflicted, knowing deep within himself that what he had done was wrong. But if he could get Thomas More, a prominent Catholic of saintly virtue and impeccable integrity, to go along with the marriage, perhaps it could ease his conscience.

Similarly, I submit, while our modern day secularists deny and ridicule the concept of a natural law, they cannot escape it –

it is imprinted by God on every human heart. Somewhere, deep within, there is a nagging discomfort – within individuals and within our secularist nation as a whole – a discomfort they do not understand, but cannot escape. But if they can force people of faith – and especially the Catholic Church, the foremost defender of the timeless moral teachings on which our nation was founded – to go along, maybe they can free themselves of the nagging doubts which they will not acknowledge but cannot escape.

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