

Religion and the Public Square

This month we take a good look at the relationship of religion and politics. Does religion have an important role to play in public life and is it free to engage in public debate on matters of importance? What are the forces that tend to restrict the influence of religion in public institutions and in public policy making? Is the Canadian political scene harmful to religious moral values? This is a topic key to our understanding of the problem of secularism and its current strength as the established religion of modern states.

The questions and suggested learning activities are based on the two articles that appear in the November edition of **The Interim** and on the other sources cited. The best coverage of the topic on an ongoing basis is to be found in **First Things**, an American monthly magazine.

Study questions for the articles found on page 18 of the November edition of **The Interim**.

1. What is meant by the phrase "banishing God from the public square"?
2. Do we all have equal access to the public square? Why or why not? Should we care about this issue?
3. Where is the public square? Are you in the public square?
4. Why does Francis Hill in his article suggest that the expunging of God from the public square is not an entirely tragic development?
5. How do some of his students rationalize their situation?
6. What does the fate of the family as an institution have to do with what has been happening to the public square?
7. What can you contribute to the debates on the public square? How can you restore God to the public square?
8. According to Ron Gray why is it impossible to keep religion and politics separate?

EXAMPLE 1

My former college, one of the nation's top-ranked schools, is considering banishing a highly respected national Christian group from campus for discriminatory practices....The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter at Vermont's Middlebury College is unwilling to install any leader who advocates any form of sexual intimacy outside of marriage. A proposed college policy would not only force the group to accept leaders who don't share their moral beliefs (or lose funding, meeting space, and campus affiliation), but even demand that no group "discriminate" on the basis of religion.

Christianity doesn't mix very well with success. If authentic disciples mature better amidst hostility, then when persecution comes perhaps we should be soberly grateful to have lived in such a way to have provoked it. At Middlebury, InterVarsity's campus staff worker tells me that her prayer life has never been stronger. Her students are learning to contend in the public square as never before. A campus-wide public forum on the controversy was attended by more than 300 students, one-fifth of the student body, who seemed stunned by articulate peers who took God and their scriptures seriously.

<http://www.sojo.net/magazine/index.cfm/action/sojourners/issue/soj0009/article/000961.html>

1. Briefly explain the nature of the controversy at Middlebury College. How is the Fellowship counter-cultural?

EXAMPLE 2

A one-man Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission "tribunal," retired judge Ken Halvorson, has unilaterally decreed that constitutional guarantees protecting religious instruction in the province's schools dating from its entry into Confederation in 1905 are irrelevant, and ordered that the Lord's Prayer may no longer be recited in classrooms.

In her ruling last year that the Surrey, B.C. school board could not ban homosexual-advocacy books from Kindergarten and Grade One classrooms, B.C. Supreme Court Justice Mary Saunders stated: "Freedom of religion includes freedom from religion."

These developments say volumes about our present cultural environment. In a couple of generations, we have gone from being a society that operated on Christian-based principles, to one where public affirmation of the Christian religion is outlawed and legally persecuted. Until very recently, it was generally acknowledged that the essential founding principles that sustained our traditional system of law and government were Christian ideas. The central concept was that any legitimate civil and social authority must derive from God, as affirmed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, also recently challenged by humanists, which states: "Whereas Canada is founded upon the principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law."

If God is supreme, as Christians and the Charter both affirm that He is, then His Law is supreme, rendering nonsensical the liberal humanist objective of banishing religion from the public square.

However, that is exactly what secularist liberals want to do. Richard Dawkins, Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University recently railed: "Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus, but harder to eradicate. The whole subject of God is a bore." Dawkins went on to say that those who teach religion to small children are guilty of "child abuse."

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/9318/blake.html>

1.(a) What evidence does Charles Moore offer for concluding that secularist liberals want to drive religion out of the public square?

(b) Consider your own experiences and readings and give your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with his verdict. Discuss the topic with your parents.

TRIVIALIZATION OF RELIGION

Mr. Stephen Carter's point is that in the world, according to liberal orthodoxy, religion is OK only so long as it is a purely private matter. As soon as it takes its moral convictions seriously, i.e., as soon as it presumes to see people actually live by those convictions rather than merely mouth them, religion supposedly becomes a threat to the polity and the constitutional guarantee of the "separation of church and state."

Today, we routinely assume that the "wall of separation" between church and state (the metaphor comes from Roger Williams) was erected to protect society from the possible

depredations of religion. In fact, it seems that something close to the reverse was the case....the metaphorical separation of church and state originated in an effort to protect religion *from* the state, not the state from religion.

This is pretty much forgotten today, with the result that religion is accorded only the most tenuous official recognition in public life. (Legal opinions on the subject regularly warn against an "excessive entanglement with religion.") But by banishing religion from the public square, Mr. Carter warns, the cultural elite has trivialized religion, reducing it to little more than a 'hobby.' In this sense, he says, we have fostered a political and legal culture that encourages the religiously faithful to act "as though their faith does not matter to them." Thus it is that despite many signs of religious revival in American society, religious belief tends to be treated as something "arbitrary and unimportant". The problem is that for many liberal critics, religion *should* be relegated to the margins of public life, if not, indeed, dispensed with altogether. In fact, official expressions of religious sentiment in public life these days rarely have deeper significance than the "God bless you!" uttered in response to a sneeze.

.....when Cardinal O'Connor recently warned that Catholic politicians who supported abortion rights were "at risk of excommunication", a writer in **Vanity Fair** accused him of being a "fanatic", a "religious zealot unquestioningly committed to a rigid set of beliefs." (Read:the Cardinal had the effrontery to abide by his Church's teaching on a fundamental moral issue.) But when several important segregationists actually **were** excommunicated in the early 1960s for refusing to follow the Church's teaching that racism is wrong, there were no denunciations from the media, no accusations that the bishops were fanatics and religious zealots. The truth is that in religion, as in other areas of cultural life, certification by the liberal media is strictly dependent upon passing certain political tests. Religion is dandy so long as it is a pious adjunct to the liberal agenda: otherwise it is at best irrelevant, at worst an irrational intrusion of "right-wing" ideas.

.....Mr. Carter offers a simple explanation for why the liberal establishment has become so hostile to the public display of religion: "What has happened can be captured in one word: "abortion." It was the battle over abortion, he argues, that polarized the debate on religion, pushing conservatives toward greater activism and liberals toward uneasy dismissal. In fact, though, the liberal rejection of religion was already essentially completed by the time of **Roe v. Wade**..... What happened to change liberal attitudes about religion can indeed be summed up briefly; but the operative word is not "abortion" but the "Sixties." It was the emancipationist ideology of the 1960s that turned the tide against religion, substituting hedonistic self-centeredness for the recognition of transcendent moral authority. The sudden prominence of abortion on the liberal agenda at this time was only a symptom; those who were once castigated as "abortionists" now became respected members of the medical profession and (a grisly freak of language) the deliberate killing of fetuses was now regarded as an exercise of "reproductive rights" guaranteed by a putative "right" to privacy.

On the one hand, on the other: Stephen Carter tackles religion

by Roger Kimball

The New Criterion home page

<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/12/dec93/carter.htm>

1. What is the "doctrine" of the "separation of church and state"?

2. Are religious people in effect being told to act "as though their faith does not matter to them?"

3. According to Kimball what accounts for the American liberal establishment being so hostile to the public display of religion?

4. "Religion is dandy so long as it is a pious adjunct to the liberal agenda;otherwise it is at best irrelevant, at worst an irrational intrusion of 'right-wing' ideas". What evidence does Kimball cite?

5. Are Canadian Catholic church leaders reluctant to publicly rebuke major Catholic politicians?

A MODERN HUMAN RIGHTS REVOLUTION

Excerpts from article by George Weigel appearing in July/August 1996 issue of "Crisis" magazine.

Why has *Dignitatis Humanae* loomed so large in the Holy Father's thought?...If man's nature is religious, the state must acknowledge that fact. By not acknowledging it, the state, in effect, redefines man as less than what he is....

Sir Michael(Howard) remarked that, in his view, there had been two great revolutions in the twentieth century. The first had taken place when Lenin's Bolsheviks expropriated the Russian Revolution and began the world's first experiment in totalitarianism. The second revolution was taking place even as we spoke: the transformation of the Catholic Church from the last bastion of the "ancien regime" to the world's foremost institutional defender of basic human rights.... the revolution of 1989 in East Central Europe took place because a revolution of conscience had transformed the moral-cultural condition of the countries of the old Warsaw Pact. That revolution of conscience was, in turn, deeply influenced by the Catholic Church, and particularly by Pope John Paul II....preaching to a million Poles in Warsaw's Victory Square, he invoked the great themes of *Dignitatis Humanae* by urging that Christ not be peremptorily "kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe, at any longitude or latitude of geography."

In these two documents, *Dignitatis Humane* and *Gaudium et Spes*...the Church endorsed the notion that the rightly ordered state had strictly limited and legally defined powers, having primarily to do with the protection of its citizens' basic rights and the maintenance of the public order necessary for civil society's pursuit of the common good.

It may well be that the crisis of communism at the end of the twentieth century is followed in the beginning of the twenty-first century by the crisis of democracy. The crisis of communism was, at bottom, an anthropological crisis: The communist project finally failed, not simply because communist economies could not compete in a postindustrial world, but because communism was built on a foundation of falsehoods about the human person, human community, human history, and human destiny.

Similarly, the crisis of democracy also will be anthropological

in character. The institutions of democracy--elections, legislatures, and courts, the entire edifice we summarize under the rubric "the rule of law"--are not self-sustaining. Democracy is not a machine that will run of itself; a people lacking self-command cannot be a self-governing people. Rather, the institutions of democracy are dependent for their proper functioning on the virtues of a people, and those virtues are primarily nurtured and sustained, not by the state or by "politics" narrowly construed, but by civil society....supported and sustained by an infrastructure of virtues and moral commitments.

There is a teleological structure built into human freedom: Freedom is ordered to the truth and finds its fulfillment in goodness. On this latter understanding, religious freedom is a public moral accomplishment. The state that acknowledges and protects the inalienable right of religious freedom is a state that has acknowledged a fundamental truth about the human person. That acknowledgment, as we have seen, requires the state to adopt a "self-limiting ordinance," a set of limits to the reach of its power....Religious freedom, protected in law and nurtured in civil society, gives rise to a robust public moral conversation about the "oughts" of a people's common life. And in that conversation, which can at times be quite sharp, the citizens of a democracy grapple with the truth about freedom, which is that our freedom is given to us to enable our free pursuit of the truth and our free adherence to the truth.

Democracy understood as a matter of procedures cannot "solve" the problem of plurality by transforming it into pluralism. Rather, the procedural republic will, sooner or later, "solve" the problem of plurality by imposing a *monism*, in the form of an "established" secularism or a state-sanctioned political (or ethnic, or national) ideology. Such a "solution" would, however, mark the end of democracy, for the imposition of a state-sanctioned ideology would require the state to assert full control over the "mediating" institutions of civil society; the old-fashioned word for this is totalitarianism. Less dramatically but no less ominously, the imposition of an "established" secularism in the United States would mean banishing from public life the source of those moral understandings that justify commitment to democratic persuasion and rejection of violent coercion in public affairs.

The Church will not use the coercive power of the state to advance its evangelical mission. This boundary implies a certain separation between the institution of the Church and the institutions of the state....whatever else this "separation" may mean, the "separation of church and state" cannot mean the separation of religion from public life, or the proscription of religiously grounded moral argument from public life. Any political community that did construe the notion of separation in these terms would be involved in a profoundly undemocratic discrimination against citizens on the basis of religious belief.

It is another historical irony that the "third wave" of democratization, which seemed to vindicate the notion of the universality of human rights amid the world's cultural diversity, has been accompanied, at least in its latter stages, by a new assault on the notion of universality from East Asian autocrats, the world's remaining communists, certain Islamic activists, and

western deconstructionists and multiculturalists. The new attack on universality is an attack on the very idea of a common human nature.

If we make the effort to look at matters objectively, we can see that, transcending all the differences which distinguish individuals and peoples, there is a "fundamental commonality". For different cultures are but different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. And it is precisely here that we find one source of the respect which is due to every culture and every nation: "Every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person; it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life." The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God.

Our respect for the culture of others is therefore rooted in our respect for each community's attempt to answer the question of human life. And here we see how important it is to safeguard the fundamental right of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, as the cornerstones of the structure of human rights and the foundation of every truly free society. No one is permitted to suppress those rights by using coercive power to impose an answer to the mystery of man.

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http://www.ewtn.com/library/CHISTORY/HRREVOLU.TXT**

- 1. Why was the encyclical *Dignitatis Humanae* written? What does it conclude about human nature?**
- 2. How does the modern state view human nature?**
- 3. What does Weigel mean by the "revolution of conscience"?**
- 4. What do the two encyclicals, *Dignitatis Humane* and *Gaudium et Spes*, say about the church's view of the modern state?**
- 5. (a) Why might democracy have a similar crisis as communism eventually?
(b) Why does the state need to adopt "a self-limiting ordinance"?**
- 6. How does religious freedom constitute a genuine, positive good for civil society?**
- 7. What is meant by a "monism"? Why would such a solution mark the end of democracy?**
- 8. Why must the "separation of church and state" not mean the separation of religion from public life?**
- 9. Which groups are attacking the notion of universality of human rights? Why is this an important issue in modern society? How is this being expressed in the current war on terrorism?**

MORE CONCERNS

Dr. D. James Kennedy

"Anytime you hear the concept of the separation of church and state being talked about these days, it is never in regard to maintaining the restraints on government; instead, it is always talking about what Christians and churches cannot do." (p. 50.

Character & Destiny: A Nation In Search of Its Soul. 1994)
"Indeed, there is an attack against things Christian in America. We see it in the movies, on TV, in the schools, in the universities, in the public arena, in the courts, and even within some church circles." (p. 61. *The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail*. 1996.)

"Rock and roll has had a powerful anti-Christian subtheme for decades now." (p. 105. Kennedy. *Ibid.*)

"Christian bashing is alive and well on college and university campuses also. In fact, it's ever more direct and overt because Christianity is not 'politically correct.' Never has been. Never will be." (p. 126. Kennedy. *Ibid.*)

"We live in an age in which only one prejudice is tolerated 'anti-Christian bigotry'. Today, the only group you can hold up to public mockery is Christians. Attacks on the Church and Christianity are common." (Introductory page. *What if Jesus had Never Been Born?* 1994.)

James Kilpatrick

"It wasn't the Supreme Court that expelled God from our public school classrooms. It was the textbook publishers." (*Textbooks Publishers Keep God Out of the Classroom*. Universal Press Syndicate. April 1986.)

http://naacd.com/quotes_k-o.htm

1. Summarize the chief points found in these quotations.
2. What role has public education apparently played in this?

THE ATHEIST ANGLE

The organized atheists claim that they are merely defending the principle of separation of church and state. However, their "actual" goal is the complete separation of "religion and society".

Naturally, what the atheists, the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, and others "really" desire is the 'individualization' of religion, where people may hold personal religious viewpoints and stay at home or in their churches and pray, but are strictly prohibited, both legally and societally, from joining with others in attempts to base public policy on these viewpoints. In the names of freedom and tolerance, Godless and atheistic policies achieve automatic preference at all levels.

Since they don't have the courage to attack Muslims, Jews, and Hindus, their (atheists') primary target is the Christian Church. It requires no knowledge or wisdom to make fun of another group or a person, which is the easiest thing in the world to do. And so, the atheists do not attempt to dispute current Church teachings; they instead rely upon a torrent of ridicule and distortions to establish their 'positions' on various issues.

The atheists operate on a very strange double-standard when addressing the issue of public prayer. When Christians complain about pornography in plain view on convenience-store shelves and on television, the atheists simply say something along the lines of "If you don't like it, don't look. After all, it's protected freedom of expression." However, when professional sports teams pray before and after games and the public sees

the praying, suddenly the atheists forget their own advice and snivel loudly that "their" rights are being trampled.

http://www.rlbm.tripod.com/ALL_Encyclopedia/encyc036.txt

1. Is there a strong and direct connection between efforts to legislate tolerance and the banishing of God from the public square?
2. Why is the Christian religion the main target?
3. In what way are the organized atheists and their free-lance allies following a double-standard when addressing freedom of religion and freedom of speech?

FURTHER QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH, DEBATING, AND DISCUSSION.

1. Have the events of September 11 made it easier or more complicated to reintroduce God into the public square?
2. Is there evidence that militant secularists were cowed into unaccustomed silence in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorism?
3. "The secularist claims to be areligious and demands that everyone else conducts public affairs like he does, as someone who does not appeal to the transcendent in matters of law or policy because to do so would be 'mere individualism' which produces the substitution of private morality for public law and duty". (*ibid.*) Critique the merits of this point of view.
4. Discuss the following statement: "To be religious and faithful today is tantamount to being countercultural in a modern pagan society. Symbols of religiosity cannot be tolerated since they offend too many people."
5. Can and should politics and morality be separated?
6. How can a person enjoy his religious freedom when he cannot put his beliefs into practice? Use the Scott Brockie human rights case in Ontario as an example. (see October issue of *0* for details)
7. Research the origins, mandate, and relative influence of the following organizations: (a) B'nai B'rith (b) Canadian Catholic Civil Rights League (c) American Civil Liberties Union.
8. Recently, a public service was held on Parliament Hill in Ottawa to commemorate the thousands of victims of September 11. No prayers were offered and no mention was made of God. Was this an acceptable way to honour the fallen? Why or why not?
9. In your opinion is the media (press, television, movies, music industry) indifferent to religion or hostile to it? Cite examples.

