

Politics and Religion in America: Imagine There's No Heaven

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Article VI. of the U.S. Constitution says that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

The writers of the Constitution knew the recent history of wars of religion and religious persecution in Europe. Many of the thinkers who influenced them associated political freedom very closely with freedom of religion, with the dismantling of state religion, and — in some cases — with the abandonment of religion entirely. “Man shall not be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest,” said Jean Meslier, or Denis Diderot, or perhaps Voltaire, depending whom you ask. Voltaire’s bust was, and still is, prominently displayed in Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Jefferson and George Mason led the establishment of religious freedom, first in Virginia, and then in the new United States.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, leading off the Bill of Rights, begins: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This came before freedom of speech or anything else. It was considered essential to the survival of the nation. Jefferson, George Washington, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin and other leading revolutionaries leaned toward deism in their own beliefs, distrusting churches and holy texts, prayers and miracles, and believing essentially in a deity who had supposedly created everything and then gone on break. They were not atheists, but theists who distrusted all religions, even their own. And their tolerance extended to tolerance of atheism: “Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because if there be one he must approve of the homage of reason more than that of blindfolded fear,” wrote Jefferson.

But that was personal, not political advice. Politically, Jefferson et alia aimed to instill tolerance of all religions while establishing state authority and support for none: “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions,” Jefferson wrote, “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between church and State.”

How far we’ve come. Where once there was a wall between religion and the government, and the power of the government concentrated in the legislature, we now elect presidents who launch wars after discussing the matter directly with “God” but not Congress:

In a 2005 BBC series, Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen and Foreign Minister Nabil

Shaath described their first meeting with President Bush in June 2003. Shaath recalled: "President Bush said to all of us: 'I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, "George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan." And I did, and then God would tell me, "George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq ..." And I did. And now, again, I feel God's words coming to me, "Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East." And by God I'm gonna do it.'" Mazen recalled that Bush told him: "I have a moral and religious obligation. So I will get you a Palestinian state."

I have one more quotation for you:

"Jake: First you traded the Cadillac in for a microphone. Then you lied to me about the band. And now you're gonna put me right back in the joint! "Elwood: They're not gonna catch us. We're on a mission from God."

Maybe our problem is that we've lost the wall of separation between news and entertainment, between statesmanship and Hollywood comedy. The corporate media now asks presidential candidates to name and explain their favorite Bible verses, and accuses candidates of not being sufficiently christian.

"Let's make clear what the facts are," said Barack Obama in one such debate. "I am a Christian, I have been sworn in with a Bible, I pledge allegiance and lead the pledge of allegiance sometimes in the United States Senate when I've presided."

President Bush has punched quite a few holes in the wall of separation. He has used agencies including the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Park Service, the Department of Defense (DOD), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Department of Education (DOE), the Department of Health and Human Services, and the office of the Surgeon General, to promote the establishment of a religion.

On January 20, 2001, at his first inauguration, at which he swore to defend the Constitution, President-to-be Bush announced plans to fund social services through religious institutions: "Church and charity, synagogue and mosque, lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and laws." President Bush immediately issued a proclamation establishing a "national day of prayer."

The first director of President Bush's newly established White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (FBCI), John Dilulio, reported that he was asked to leave because he opposed providing public dollars to agencies with behavioral codes and christian-only hiring policies. The FBCI quickly also became a mechanism for providing public dollars to churches that had supported the election campaign of presidential candidate George W. Bush.

An August 2004 report by Anne Farris, Richard P. Nathan, and David J. Wright, of the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, titled "The Expanding Administrative Presidency: George W. Bush and the Faith-Based Initiative," found that:

"In the absence of new legislative authority, the President has aggressively advanced the Faith-Based Initiative through executive orders, rule changes, managerial realignment in federal agencies, and other innovative uses of the prerogatives of his office. Among those innovations is the creation of a high-

profile special office in the White House, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, connected to mini-offices in ten government agencies, each with a carefully selected director and staff, empowered to articulate, advance and oversee coordinated efforts to win more financial support for faith-based social services. These ten agencies include: the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Agency for International Development and the Small Business Administration. A similar office has also been created within the Corporation for National and Community Service. In addition, the Initiative has been promoted in a myriad of other government offices overseeing programs ranging from homeownership and business development to energy conservation.

“With assistance from the White House Office, these federal agencies have proposed or finalized a host of new regulations that together mark a major shift in the constitutional separation of church and state. Examples of these regulatory changes include:

“The federal government now allows federally-funded faith-based groups to consider religion when employing staff.

“The Department of Justice now permits religious organizations to convert government-forfeited property to religious purposes after five years, replacing the previous policy prohibiting such conversions.

“The federal government now allows federally-funded faith-based groups to build and renovate structures used for both social services and religious worship.

“The Veterans Administration no longer requires faith-based social service providers to certify that they exert ‘no religious influence.’

“The Department of Labor now allows students to use federal job-training vouchers to receive religious training leading to employment at a church, synagogue, or other faith-based organization.”

In 2007, President Bush received a lengthy seven-year progress report, titled “The Quiet Revolution: The President’s Faith-Based and Community Initiative: A Seven Year Progress Report,” from then-Director of Faith-Based Initiatives Jay Hein. A letter from the president accompanying the report stated that the initiative had funded 18,000 faith-based and community organizations in 2006 alone. The report found that the faith-based initiative had “grown each year and adapted to emerging challenges and expanded its influence at home and abroad.” It stated that the “framework of this activity” included: Five Executive Orders expanding the FBCI reach across the Federal Government; [and] Sixteen agency-level rule changes and a myriad of smaller scale policy reforms....”

In February 2007 Attorney General Alberto Gonzales published a 43-page report describing the DOJ’s intervention in several cases involving religion over the previous six years. In one of these cases, the DOJ defended the Salvation Army’s right to take public money to run social services and still fire employees who do not agree with its religious creed. In another case, the DOJ filed a brief in a Florida case arguing that banning religious school vouchers would violate the U.S. Constitution, a claim the U.S. Supreme Court has never endorsed.

The DOJ, under President Bush, overhauled its Civil Rights Division to focus resources on

helping religious organizations receive grants, establishing a “Task Force on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.” The Task Force published a notice seeking an organization to run a “single faith” program in prisons, a notice that appeared specifically intended for the Prison Fellowship Ministry, an organization that previously employed the then director of the Task Force.

Government scientists in numerous agencies, including NIH and NASA have objected to censorship of information at odds with certain religious beliefs, information including scientific evidence demonstrating the promise of embryonic stem-cell research and the dangers of global warming.

Former Surgeon General Richard Carmona testified before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee in July 2007 that during his tenure under President Bush, anything that didn’t “fit into the political appointees’ ideological, theological or political agenda” was “often ignored, marginalized or simply buried.... Much of the (policy) discussion was being driven by theology, ideology, [and] preconceived beliefs that were scientifically incorrect.” On the topic of sex education, Carmona testified that “there was already a policy in place that did not want to hear the science but wanted to just preach abstinence, which I felt was scientifically incorrect.” Carmona was told to “stand down and not to speak about” embryonic stem-cell research when Congress debated a bill to fund it. Officials at the Department of Health and Human Services removed positive references to the research from his speeches.

In one of a number of similar cases, the nonprofit Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) filed a federal lawsuit in September 2007 against the DOD, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and a U.S. Army major, on behalf of an Army soldier stationed in Iraq. The suit charges the DOD with widespread constitutional violations by allegedly trying to force the soldier to embrace evangelical christianity and then retaliating against him when he refused. The suit charges that the soldier was forced to “submit to a religious test as a qualification to his post as a soldier in the United States Army,” a violation of Article VI, Clause 3 of the Constitution. MRFF said Gates is named as a defendant because he has allowed the military to engage in “a pattern and practice of constitutionally impermissible promotions of religious beliefs within the Department of Defense and the United States military.” MRFF reports having been contacted by more than 5,000 active duty and retired soldiers who say they were pressured by their commanding officers to convert to christianity.

The Inspector General of the DOD issued a 47-page report in 2007 highly critical of senior Army and Air Force personnel for participating in a video promoting a fundamentalist christian organization while in uniform and on active duty.

In 2008, President Bush convened a “White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools,” where he said:

“[T]here are a variety of solutions. One is to work hard to improve the public school system, but also another solution is to recognize that there is a bright future for a lot of children found in faith-based schools. ...[I]t’s in the country’s interest to get beyond the debate of public/private, to recognize this is a critical national asset that provides a critical part of our nation’s fabric in making sure we’re a hopeful place. First, ensuring that faith-based schools can continue to serve inner-city children requires a commitment from the federal government. Federal funds support faith-based organizations that serve

Americans in need. We got beyond the social service debate by saying that it's okay to use taxpayers' money to provide help for those who hurt. I mean, what I'm telling you is that we're using taxpayers' money to empower faith-based organizations to help meet critical needs throughout the country.... So my attitude is if we're doing this, if this is a precedent, why don't we use the same philosophy to provide federal funds to help inner-city families find greater choices in educating their children."

Indeed, why not? What the heck! Senators Obama and McCain each sat for an hour of questions from a preacher at the front of a church on August 16, 2008, as part of their campaigns for the White House, and the event was no longer anything to be remarked upon. McCain's vice-presidential running mate, who would be a very uncertain heartbeat away from the presidency of a nation capable of destroying the entire planet at the push of a button believes the planet was created in six days and that she can simply choose not to believe the evidence of global warming. We now have government programs run by religions, which are called "faith-based groups" instead of religions. We have candidates promising to defend discriminatory marriage policies in obedience to religion. And we have christian proselytizing in the U.S. military. This trend in the direction of state religion has swamped a small current in the opposite direction that in 2007 saw Congressman Pete Stark become the first Congressman in U.S. history to dare to admit he was an atheist.

"Like our nation's founders," Stark said, "I strongly support the separation of church and state. I look forward to working with the Secular Coalition to stop the promotion of narrow religious beliefs in science, marriage contracts, the military, and the provision of social services."

The worst result of the current against which Stark is swimming is not the opposition to useful scientific research or the hiring of incompetent cronies because they "believe in" the right things. It's not even, I think, the day-to-day discrimination against jews, mormons, buddhists, muslims, atheists, etc. It's the message conveyed to the rest of the world, and the message conveyed to Americans about the rest of the world, especially those parts of the world predominantly inhabited by non-christians.

Chris Hedges, a reporter who has written wonderfully about war, but who has perhaps seen too much of it and sought comfort and escape in religious belief, has lately been writing extensively in opposition to atheism. In a recent article called "The Dangerous Atheism of Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris," he failed to include any indication of what he thinks is dangerous about their atheism. Hedges thinks these other writers have horrible political opinions, but does not explain how those relate to atheism. He thinks they have a fetish for science and technology, but does not explain how that relates to atheism. He thinks they cherish a simplistic utopian vision of progress, but he himself traces that to christianity. He thinks they are fanatics willing to kill for their magical belief in human progress, but that would just mean they had something in common with a lot of theists. Sadly, attacks on atheism have never been required to make any sense.

There is good and bad to be found in our religious heritage, and our world is full of noble and ignoble acts by theists and atheists alike. For every admirable or offensive trait in an atheist, we can find one in a theist. For every Martin Luther King Jr., there's a Pat Robertson, for every Robert Ingersoll a Christopher Hitchens. But does theism or atheism, on the whole, tend to encourage more, or less, desirable behavior?

Hedges concludes his article by remarking that his new book is “a call to reject simplistic and utopian visions. It is a call to accept the severe limitations of being human. It is a call to face reality, a reality which in the coming decades is going to be bleak and difficult. Those who are blinded by utopian visions inevitably turn to force to make their impossible dreams and their noble ideals real. They believe the ends, no matter how barbaric, justify the means. Utopian ideologues, armed with the technology and mechanisms of industrial slaughter, have killed tens of millions of people over the last century. They ask us to inflict suffering and death in the name of virtue and truth.”

While plenty of idealists have not turned to violence, and have in fact realized their dreams, and while Hedges’ fatalistic defeatism possesses no more reasonable claim to certainty that does someone else’s announcement that paradise is nigh, there is truth in what Hedges writes, if he means to apply it to theists and atheists alike. But he calls his book “I Don’t Believe in Atheists,” and he adds one more sentence to the end of the article: “The New Atheists, in the end, offer us a new version of an old and dangerous faith. It is one we have seen before. It is one we must fight.”

So we need old atheists and new theists? Hedges’ opposition is clearly to violent fanaticism, and perhaps to optimism, both of which he knows can be found in theists and atheists alike. But his marketing plan for this useful but less-than-groundbreaking insight is decidedly not headlines like “The Dangerous Fanaticism of a Few People Who Happen to Be White, Male, and Atheist.” His whole brand is opposition to the supposed danger of atheism. So it comes as a disappointment to discover that Hedges doesn’t even try to identify a connection between atheism and fanaticism. He describes a group of atheists who are fanatical about things that millions of theists are fanatical about too. He does not suggest that atheism in any way encourages fanaticism, or the belief that there has been moral improvement through human history, or any of the other notions he rejects. Hedges is convicting atheism of guilt by association with a handful of atheists. After all, the mere failure to believe in a particular cultural myth could hardly be a cause of their habits of thought. (A-theism simply refers to the absence of a particular belief.)

Belief in theism, on the other hand, can have serious consequences. In fact, theism is unavoidably a simplistic and utopian vision. It may not result in adoption of any other simplistic visions, and it may not result in the use of force, but it does put one’s mind in the habit of accepting nonsensical wishful thinking. Theism includes a “belief” that something called a god controls the world, and usually includes a “belief” that death is not real. Some of the most admirable people in the history of the world and living today have held these beliefs, and some of them have not. But these are beliefs that, if they have any impact at all, tend as a rule to encourage acceptance of the status quo, to discourage personal responsibility, and to put one in the habit of believing transparent falsehoods. That many people overcome these influences, with various degrees of success, does not make them less real.

A front-page story in the Daily Progress here in Charlottesville, Va., recently described a group of people who said they had given up on politicians and were beginning to gather at gas stations to publicly pray for cheaper gasoline. These are people who are seriously hurting because they need gas to get to work and back home, and they can no longer afford it. I don’t want to laugh at their acts of desperation, but that is exactly what politicians will do, politicians who are no doubt thrilled to see people standing in parking lots talking to the sky rather than standing in their offices talking to them.

While President Bush may have spoken frequently with “God”, he also spoke frequently with his top advisor, Karl Rove, who had long been reported by numerous sources not to “believe in God.” On October 16, 2006, ABC News reported on new statements about Rove made by “David Kuo, former deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, which channels federal dollars to religious charities.”

“Kuo says the office was misused to rally evangelical Christians, the Republican base voters, to get GOP politicians elected. Not only that, Kuo claims Bush officials mocked evangelical leaders behind their backs, alleging that in the office of political guru Karl Rove they were called ‘the nuts.’ ‘National Christian leaders received hugs and smiles in person and then were dismissed behind their backs and described as “ridiculous”, “out of control,” and just plain “goofy,”” Kuo writes. ‘You name the important Christian leader, and I have heard them mocked by serious people in serious places,’ Kuo told ‘60 Minutes’ Sunday night. That mockery, he added, included the Rev. Pat Robertson being called ‘insane,’ the Rev. Jerry Falwell being called ‘ridiculous’ and comments that Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family ‘had to be controlled.’”

The using of religion to manipulate people while actually despising them is so offensive that one almost misses the big story here, which is forgotten in the first sentence: “Kuo says the office was misused to rally evangelical Christians, the Republican base voters, to get GOP politicians elected.” The danger of state religion is not just theoretical. It is real, and it has been realized. That is a danger we must use the Constitution to guard against. The danger of religion itself, on the other hand, is something that only education can address. State atheism would be as dangerous and destructive as state theism, maybe more so. The First Amendment got it exactly right and should be enforced and strengthened.

Theism, in my view, has a damaging influence on human thought and action. And the existence of different flavors of theism, by any account of history, provides a justification for hatred and murder. If Iraqis were all christians, millions of them would probably still be alive. The United States would probably not have done to Iraq what it has done over the past two decades. The idea that Iraqis could govern themselves if left free to do so would be far more apparent to many more Americans. The 9-11 attackers would, likewise, not have flown their planes into buildings full of muslims. The entire “global war on terror” would collapse without christianity and islam, and it is encouraged by state christianity.

I’m not agreeing with the millions of Muslims around the world who believe the primary motivation of U.S. crimes to be hatred of Islam. I think their religious identity blinds them to the tragic fact that the United States is attacking Islam because it is situated overtop of vast oil supplies. But it would be harder for the United States to attack the possessors of oil if they shared a religion or a lack thereof with Americans.

Of course, without theism, people could hate and kill others on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, and various other excuses. Atheism does not make any individual or population decent or good. Atheism doesn’t make anyone think in any particular way. But theism, by its very nature, encourages obedience to authorities, and belief that such authorities should be trusted even if their ways are mysterious. The bizarre American reaction to 9-11 in which Rudy Giuliani and George W. Bush were so comically turned into figures of authority was facilitated by religious thought. If so many people were not in the habit of turning to a lord or savior in times of fear, Hedges and all those trying to talk some sense into them would have a much easier task. If people were less like sheep in search of a shepherd, governments could not persuade them to kill each other at all.

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