

Belief Has Long Defined Our Nation

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There has never been any question before the American public . . . which did not resolve itself, soon or late, into a moral question . . . The American has remained, from the very beginning, a man genuinely interested in the eternal mysteries, and fearful of missing their correct solution.

So, some eighty years ago, wrote H. L. Mencken, coiner of the term “Bible belt” and all around free-thinking skeptic.

Mencken grudgingly acknowledged the central role of religious sentiment in American public life. He seemed to consider it inevitable and permanent.

But in fact, religion is a devalued currency in today’s marketplace of ideas. The best proof is in various heated controversies swirling around the public promotion of faith and traditional morality by Sen. Joseph Lieberman and Dr. Laura Schlessinger.

Religion in politics and broadcasting ordinarily summons visions of Christian fundamentalists. But Lieberman, the outspokenly pious vice presidential candidate, and Schlessinger, the scolding moralist of talk radio and a new, much-protested television show, both are Jewish. There’s a sort of new age ecumenism in these residents of the Torah belt being as roundly criticized by advocates of secularism and moral liberation (well, almost) as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

What’s weird—but revealing about the decline of public religion—is claims from Lieberman’s critics that his frequently saying religion should be restored to its indispensable place in American public life is somehow “contrary to the American ideal,” as the Anti-Defamation League put it.

The *Philadelphia Daily News* thundered that “religion, faith and morality are deeply private things, and should remain that way.” This shocking modern breakdown of the wall between church and state began, the paper said, with (you guessed it) Ronald Reagan.

Well, ignorance is a deeply private thing—or should be. Truth is, until very recently, explicit, Lieberman-like affirmations of America’s dependence on God’s protection and guidance were part of virtually every public utterance by every American politician.

In his famous 1948 civil-rights convention speech, Hubert Humphrey described the moral basis of racial equality this way:

We are God-fearing men and women. We place our faith in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.

John Kennedy closed his 1960 inaugural address with this:

Let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that, here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.

Such quotations could fill volumes. The real liberal objection to Lieberman's religious ideas is that they lead him to decry something that relativist freedom fighters feel obligated to defend, yet find impossible to defend directly. That would be the greed inspired cultural pollution of sex- and violence-soaked popular entertainment. So they take the easier path of defending "the separation of church and state."

But that separation has never come close to existing in America if it means religion must never be invoked to shed light on social questions.

The sensation that is Dr. Laura is even clearer evidence of the chasm that separates modern America from its past. Schlessinger's moral battle cries—disapproval of casual sex, advocacy of stay-at-home parenting, the view that homosexuality is a misfortune that ought not be celebrated—would have seemed nothing more than a stream of conventional platitudes forty years ago.

That such ideas can today be seen as the stuff of a heroic crusade in some quarters, and as shocking extremism in others, reminds us that we live under a revolutionary moral régime—intolerant of critics and backsliders, like most revolutions.

In fact, secularists may be wise, from their point of view, to pillory dissenters. Americans still show signs of being "genuinely interested in the eternal mysteries," as Mencken said, still hungry for a sense of purpose and duty in their everyday lives.

The spiritual and moral complacency of modern life is, above all, rather boring. If public figures and personalities are allowed to appeal to a higher meaning and mission—well, anything might happen. The nations' political life might even regain some vigor and balance.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed (in 1832) that America's essentially universal religious view of life helped make political freedom and ferment possible by putting boundaries around the possible social outcome. Because Americans were agreed on ultimate questions, they were free, Tocqueville said, to disagree endlessly and vehemently about public affairs.

"Religion is much more necessary in . . . democratic [nations] than in any others," he wrote.

How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity?

Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Ω