

Chapter 10 – Secular Theocracy

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Secular Theocracy

by David J. Theroux

Part 1

We live in an increasingly secularized world of massive and pervasive nation states in which traditional religion, especially Christianity, is ruled unwelcome and even a real danger on the basis of a purported history of intolerance and “religious violence.” This is found in most all “public” domains, including the institutions of education, business, government, welfare, transportation, parks and recreation, science, art, foreign affairs, economics, entertainment, and the media. A secularized public square policed by government is viewed as providing a neutral, rational, free, and safe domain that keeps the “irrational” forces of religion from creating conflict and darkness. And we are told that real progress requires expanding this domain by pushing religion ever backward into remote corners of society where it has little or no influence. In short, modern America has become a secular theocracy with a civic religion of national politics (nationalism) occupying the public realm in which government has replaced God.

For the renowned Christian scholar and writer C.S. Lewis, such a view was fatally flawed morally, intellectually, and spiritually, producing the twentieth-century rise of the total state, total war, and mega-genocides. For Lewis, Christianity provided the one true and coherent worldview that applied to *all* human aspirations and endeavors: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”*□

In his book, *The Discarded Image*, Lewis revealed that for Medieval Christians, there was no sacred/secular divide and that this unified, theo-political worldview of hope, joy, liberty, justice, and purpose from the loving grace of God enabled them to discover the objective, natural-law principles of ethics, science, and theology, producing immense human flourishing.* Lewis described the natural law as a cohesive and interconnected objective standard of right behavior:

“This thing which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among

*a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all values are rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgement of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies,' all consist of fragments from the Tao itself. Arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess. If my duty to my parents is a superstition, then so is my duty to posterity. If justice is a superstition, then so is my duty to my country or my race. If the pursuit of scientific knowledge is a real value, then so is conjugal fidelity."**

And in his recent book, *The Victory of Reason*, Rodney Stark has further shown "How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and the Success of the West."* Similarly and prior to the rise of the secular nation-state in America, Alexis de Tocqueville documented in his 1835 volume, *Democracy in America*, the remarkable flexibility, vitality and cohesion of Christian-rooted liberty in American society with business enterprises, churches and aid societies, covenants and other private institutions and communities.*

In his book, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, William Cavanaugh similarly notes that for Augustine and the ancient world, religion was not a distinct realm separate from the secular. The origin of the term "religion" (*religio*) came from Ancient Rome (*re-ligare*, to rebind or relink) as a serious obligation for a person in the natural law ("*religio* for me") not only at a shrine, but also in civic oaths and family rituals that most westerners would today consider secular. In the Middle Ages, Aquinas further viewed *religio* not as a set of private beliefs but instead a devotion toward moral excellence in all spheres.*

However in the Renaissance, religion became viewed as a "private" impulse, distinct from "secular" politics, economics, and science.* This "modern" view of religion began the decline of the church as the public, communal practice of the virtue of *religio*. And by the Enlightenment, John Locke had distinguished between the "outward force" of civil officials and the "inward persuasion" of religion. He believed that civil harmony required a strict division between the state, whose interests are "public," and the church, whose interests are "private," thereby clearing the public square for the purely secular. For Locke, the

church is a “voluntary society of men,” but obedience to the state is mandatory.*

The subsequent rise of the modern state in claiming a monopoly on violence, lawmaking, and public allegiance within a given territory depended upon either absorbing the church into the state or relegating the church to a private realm. As Cavanaugh notes:

*“Key to this move is the contention that the church’s business is religion. Religion must appear, therefore, not as what the church is left with once it has been stripped of earthly relevance, but as the timeless and essential human endeavor to which the church’s pursuits should always have been confined... In the wake of the Reformation, princes and kings tended to claim authority over the church in their realms, as in Luther’s Germany and Henry VIII’s England... The new conception of religion helped to facilitate the shift to state dominance over the church by distinguishing inward religion from the bodily disciplines of the state.”**

For Enlightenment figures like Jean-Jacques Rousseau who dismissed natural law, “civic religion” as in democratic regimes “is a new creation that confers sacred status on democratic institutions and symbols.”* And in their influential writings, Edward Gibbon and Voltaire claimed that the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were “the last gasp of medieval barbarism and fanaticism before the darkness was dispelled.”* Gibbon and Voltaire believed that after the Reformation divided Christendom along religious grounds, Protestants and Catholics began killing each other for more than a century, demonstrating the inherent danger of “public” religion. The alleged solution was the modern state, in which religious loyalties were upended and the state secured a monopoly of violence. Henceforth, religious fanaticism would be tamed, uniting all in loyalty to the secular state. However, this is an unfounded “myth of religious violence.” The link between state building and war has been well documented, as the historian Charles Tilly noted, “War made the state, and the state made war.”* In the actual period of European state building, the most serious cause of violence and the central factor in the growth of the state was the attempt to collect taxes from an unwilling populace with local elites resisting the state-building efforts of kings and emperors. The point is that the rise of the modern state was in no way the solution to the violence of religion. On the contrary, the absorption of church into state that began well before the Reformation was crucial to the rise of the state and the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Nevertheless, Voltaire distinguished between “state religion” and “theological religion” of

which “A state religion can never cause any turmoil. This is not true of theological religion; it is the source of all the follies and turmoils imaginable; it is the mother of fanaticism and civil discord; it is the enemy of mankind.”* What Rousseau proposed instead was to supplement the purely “private” religion of man with a civil or political religion intended to bind the citizen to the state: “As for that man who, having committed himself publicly to the state’s articles of faith, acts on any occasion as if he does not believe them, let his punishment be death. He has committed the greatest of all crimes: he has lied in the presence of the laws.”*

Part 2

During the Enlightenment, nationalism became the new civic religion, in which the nation state was not merely a substitute for the church, but a substitute for God, and political religion benefited from being more tangible than supernatural religion in having the physical means of violence necessary to enforce mandatory worship and funding. Nation states provided a new kind of salvation and immortality; one’s death is not in vain if it is “for the nation,” which will live on.*

This “myth of religious violence” lived on with legal theorist John Rawls who claimed that the modern problem is a theological one and the solution is political. For Rawls, since people believe in unresolvable theological doctrines over which they will kill each other, a secular state must rule.* Similarly, Stanford law professor Kathleen Sullivan, a secularist, has claimed that as a necessary condition for peace to avoid a “war of all sects against all,” religion must be banished from the public square.*

As Canavan notes, “[O]nce the state had laid claim to the holy, the state voluntarily relinquished it by banning religion from direct access to the public square... then what we have is not a separation of religion from politics but rather the substitution of the religion of the state for the religion of the church.”*

Hence, in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan stated that the function of public schools is:

*“the training of American citizens in an atmosphere in which children may assimilate a heritage common to all American groups and religions... This is a heritage neither theistic nor atheistic, but simply civic and patriotic. A patriotic and united allegiance to the United States is the cure for the divisiveness of religion in public.”**

In his dissent, Justice Potter Stewart correctly warned that the *Abington* ruling would be

seen “not as the realization of state neutrality, but rather as the establishment of a religion of secularism.”*

The reality of today’s secular theocracy is its hypocritical authoritarianism that circumvents the natural-law tradition of Christian teachings. Cavanaugh well sums up the incoherence of the secular theocrat who claims that, “*Their* violence – being tainted by religion – is uncontrolled, absolutist, fanatical, irrational, and divisive. *Our* violence – being secular – is controlled, modest, rational, beneficial, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain their violence.”* The appalling problem with the “myth of religious violence” is not that it opposes certain forms of violence, but that it not only denies moral condemnation of *secular* violence but that it considers it highly praiseworthy.*

In *Politics as Religion*, Emilio Gentile notes that the “religion of politics” is “a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity.” A religion of politics is a secular religion because it creates “an aura of sacredness around an entity belonging to this world.”* And according to Cavanaugh, “People are not allowed to kill for ‘sectarian religion’... Only the nation-state may kill... it is this power to organize killing that makes American civil religion the true religion of the U.S. social order.”*

Among most Christians in the U.S. for example, very few would agree to kill in Christ’s name, while killing and dying for the nation state in war and supporting “our troops” is taken for granted. The religious-secular split enables public loyalty by Christians to the nation state’s secular violence, including invasive wars, torture, and “collateral damage,” while avoiding direct confrontation with Christian beliefs about the supremacy of God and natural law teachings.*

Hence, the secular theocracy exalts a sovereign and powerful state that pervades all of life and compels obedience not just to its mandates but to the secular nationalism of the *Zeitgeist* itself, for which the populace is forced to conform to and fund. This worldview dominates public schools, colleges and universities, elite media, entertainment, and an ever-expanding array of government domains in law, health care, welfare, retirement, transportation, commerce, parks and recreation, etc. Not coincidentally in the modern era when nation states have displaced God, Cavanaugh notes, “it does not matter that the U.S. flag does not explicitly refer to a god. It is nevertheless a sacred – perhaps the most sacred – object in U.S. society and is thus an object of religious veneration.”* And worship in the secular theocracy in schools and at public events consists of singing the “National Anthem” and saluting the flag in “The Pledge of Allegiance,” which as described by its socialist author Francis Bellamy, “is the same with the catechism, or the Lord’s Prayer.”*

In contrast, C.S. Lewis understood that natural law applies to all human behavior including

government officials, and he clearly saw that government power was a dangerous force that needs to be strictly limited.* Contrary to secular interpretations of the Establishment Clause, the issue is not “the separation of church and state” into distinct and conflicting realms but the *reduction* of state power to micro-minute levels in order to eliminate the establishment of a state-backed church of any kind. Individuals have property rights that are sacred and need to be protected under a uniform rule of law, Christianity instructs us in the civic virtues upon which such law depends, and good ends can only be pursued using good means. The result is the recognition that compelling people into some collectivist regimentation is evil and produces immense human suffering. Lewis noted that:

*“I do not like the pretensions of Government – the grounds on which it demands my obedience – to be pitched too high. I don’t like the medicine-man’s magical pretensions nor the Bourbon’s Divine Right. This is not solely because I disbelieve in magic and in Bossuet’s Politique. I believe in God, but I detest theocracy. For every Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift; if it adds to its commands ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ it lies, and lies dangerously.”**

The point is that the natural law is rooted in the *religio* of Christianity and sets the epistemic and moral foundation and context for the existence of all people as individuals and that such laws make the cooperation, norms, and relationships of community possible. To break the natural law in the name of a secular theocracy is to simultaneously break the relational bonds of community that are the basis for the natural rights of all individuals to be free and responsible.

Moreover, the solution is to end secular theocracy by de-socializing the public square, not seek to “take over” this theocracy. This means privatizing government schools, transportation, welfare, retirement, parks and recreation, commerce, civic areas of all types, etc., and allowing covenants and other private institutions and communities to flourish.* Those who believe that such government domains are workable and should be exempt from natural law tenets are hubristically fooling themselves and end up embracing the moral relativism of utilitarianism. As Lewis further noted:

“[S]ince we have sin, we have found, as Lord Acton says, that ‘all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ The only remedy has been to take away the powers... Theocracy has been

*rightly abolished not because it is bad that priests should govern ignorant laymen, but because priests are wicked men like the rest of us.”**

* For citations, see: <http://goo.gl/AvBfE>

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