

What's a Secular Heretic to Do?

Secular and religion-based political systems can bear an uncanny resemblance. Observing their respective dogmas, catechisms, and sacraments, we might even wonder, with William Cavanaugh, whether the divide is as sharp as we commonly think. Recent events certainly call the distinction into question. We see that a secularist can be as much a fanatic who is willing to denounce heresy and impose his will through violence as any religionist. As Cavanaugh writes in *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*:

"I argue that there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion and that essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power. The question then becomes why such essentialist constructions are so common. I argue that, in what are called 'Western' societies, the attempt to create a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state. The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject. This myth can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labeled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence serves to cast nonsecular social orders ... in the role of villain. They have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. Their violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. Our violence, being secular, is rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain their violence. We find ourselves obliged to bomb them into liberal democracy...."

"In the West, revulsion toward killing and dying in the name of one's

religion is one of the principal means by which we become convinced that killing and dying in the name of the nation-state is laudable and proper....

“What is implied in the conventional wisdom is that there is an essential difference between religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, on the one hand, and secular ideologies and institutions such as nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism, on the other, and that the former are essentially more prone to violence—more absolutist, divisive, and irrational—than the latter. It is this claim that I find both unsustainable and dangerous. It is unsustainable because ideologies and institutions labeled secular can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those labeled religious. It is dangerous because it helps to marginalize, and even legitimate violence against, those forms of life that are labeled religious.” (Emphasis added.)

I submit that Cavanaugh’s point is verified by the widespread reaction to anyone who dares doubt the CIA’s narrative in the alleged Russian hacking of the Democrats’ email accounts. Woe betide anyone who would question the “intelligence community’s [sic]” infallibility or honor. More broadly, observe the treatment accorded anyone doubting that bureaucrats are selfless disinterested guardians of the public weal.

But those are not the only signs of our secular dogma. One can also detect it in the hysterical denunciation of anyone who expresses skepticism toward the scientific priesthood in the matter of climate (formerly *climate change*; formerly *global warming*). Climate denier, sinner: recant or suffer excommunication! (It’s no coincidence that the priesthood provides support for measures that would expand bureaucratic power over our lives.)

And the invective aimed at those who believe that American-flag burners ought not to be imprisoned, much less stripped of citizenship, or that people ought to be free not to stand for the national anthem or Pledge of Allegiance (to a flag!) certainly demonstrates that at least one secular democratic republic is no stranger to sacred rituals and objects, or the concepts *heresy*, *blasphemy*, and *infidel*.

These examples demonstrate that both progressives and conservatives each have their

secular dogmas, and they occasionally overlap. One cannot always predict how one side or the other will come down in any given case because shifting occurs under the pressure of politics. One who questions “American exceptionalism” is likely to be branded a heretic — but branded by whom? In the recent campaign, President Obama and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton invoked American exceptionalism, but Republican President-elect Donald Trump distanced himself from the idea. (“I don’t like the term.”) Normally Republicans are the heresy hunters on this matter, but this was not a normal year.

Recall how Ron Paul was treated when during his campaign for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination he put the 9/11 attacks in context: “They’re over here because we’re over there.” Rudy Giuliani and others demanded that Paul recant.

At any rate, as Alex Nowrasteh shows, the right indeed has its “own, nationalist version of PC, their own set of rules regulating speech, behavior and acceptable opinions. I call it ‘patriotic correctness.’ It’s a full-throated, un-nuanced, uncompromising defense of American nationalism, history and cherry-picked ideals. Central to its thesis is the belief that nothing in America can’t be fixed by more patriotism enforced by public shaming, boycotts [excommunication?] and policies to cut out foreign and non-American influences.”

Let’s look closer at the heresy that the CIA may be neither honest nor free of error. Here’s another area where Trump has shaken things up. In the past, Democrats and progressives were liable to be the ones expressing wariness about the CIA, and Republicans and conservatives were the ones to defend it. Today it is Trump who dismisses the CIA allegations against the Russians (which not all government spy agencies believe), while Democrats act appalled that anyone would doubt “our 17 intelligence agencies.” They feign incredulity that Michael Flynn (of whom I am no fan), Trump’s choice for national security adviser, would say that the CIA has been politicized. They seem to forget that their beloved President John F. Kennedy came to despise the CIA and threatened to destroy it after it misled him about the Cuban Bay of Pigs invasion. Despite Trump, however, most establishment Republicans are sticking to the old script.

The outrage against those who cast aspersions on America’s spy bureaucracy is ludicrous. Do people really forget that in 2013 Director of National Intelligence James Clapper publicly lied — there is no other word — when he flatly denied to a Senate committee that Americans were being spied on en masse? (Edward Snowden soon exposed Clapper’s shameless lie.) Do they also forget that the CIA was politicized during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq? The Bush administration wanted a reason to invade, and the agency was told to come up with evidence of WMD and of involvement with al-Qaeda. There was no evidence, but that did not matter. Counter-evidence was ignored or ridiculed. That was hardly the first instance of politicization.

Defense of the CIA in the email disclosures is a massive exercise in question-begging —

that is, in assuming what is disputed. When skeptics demand evidence, apologists (including many “news reporters”) respond by asking why the skeptics are unconcerned about a foreign power’s attempt to undermine American democracy. Some have gone so far as to accuse skeptics of being Vladimir Putin’s useful idiots, if not actual agents. McCarthyism lives.

But why would we take the CIA on faith, unless we are committed to a secular nation-state dogma that must not be questioned? As Glenn Greenwald writes, “CIA officials are professional, systematic liars; they lie constantly, by design, and with great skill, and have for many decades, as have intelligence officials in other agencies.”

Apologies for the CIA has taken another illegitimate form: identifying skepticism exclusively with Trump and his supporters. By this route apologists imply that the only people who reject the CIA’s narrative are special pleaders with a vested interest in the legitimacy of Trump’s election in the face of Russian “interference.” What about the skeptics who did not support Trump? We’re supposed to believe that no such persons exist. This is obvious nonsense. Serious critiques of the CIA’s anonymously leaked conclusions exist, and they have nothing to do with helping Trump.

The effort to sanctify the CIA requires the suspension of common sense. Judges instruct juries to take their common sense into the jury room. We should not let the technical aspects of cyber-security breaches lull us into leaving ours behind.

To hear the U.S. government tell it, Russians, under Putin’s direction, left their “fingerprints” all over the place when they hacked the email Democrats’ email accounts. (WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange and a close associate, Craig Murray, say that Russians were not the source.) But we’re also told that the Russians are as sophisticated as Americans in all things cyber. But aren’t those two claims inconsistent?

As a fan of mystery shows, I know how the great TV detectives would react to a crime scene overflowing with obvious “evidence” that a well-known professional criminal had done some devilish deed. “It just doesn’t add up,” Frank Columbo or Tom Barnaby might say. Why would Putin leave a calling card? (Andrew Cockburn asks similar questions here. Read more here, here, here, here, here, here, here, and here.) As Sam Biddle writes at *The Intercept*, “It’s very hard to buy the argument that the Democrats were hacked by one of the most sophisticated, diabolical foreign intelligence services in history, and that we know this because they screwed up over and over again.”

Doesn’t it sound as though someone framed the Russians? I have not heard this question asked on CNN, but that’s probably because the media have no interest in giving time to informed skeptics.

Another thing: in what way did the Russians — assuming for the sake of discussion that

they did it — “destabilize” or “interfere with” American democratic institutions? After all, according to the official narrative, all the Russians did was disclose some embarrassing — but hardly devastating — undisputed *facts* about the DNC and the Clinton campaign. It’s hard to believe that making it impossible for Debbie Wasserman Schultz to chair the DNC dealt a major blow to American democracy. It’s equally hard to take seriously the claim that the election was “disrupted” by revelations that Hillary Clinton holds both private and public decisions on issues or that her campaign was worried that the private email server in her basement might be a problem for voters. What might the Russians reveal next, that water is wet?

Does anyone seriously believe that such revelations changed the outcome of the election? Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of almost 3 million. Are we to believe that the revelations only did their damage in rust-belt swing states? Let’s get real. She started out her campaign widely distrusted.

Say what you will about the hacking (or perhaps leaking), but let’s not pretend that when voters learn the truth about a candidate, an election has been disrupted or that democracy has been attacked. Do the people who say these things listen to themselves?

If the Russians were serious about sowing confusion and disillusionment, why wouldn’t they have planted disinformation, as the Soviets were accused of doing? (I have not heard it alleged that “Pizzagate” was the work of the Russians. Now there’s disinformation.) Does former KGB agent Putin not know how to meddle in an election?

The whole damn story fails the laugh test. Here’s the comforting part: if Russia did it, then Putin must be the head of the gang that couldn’t shoot straight. So what are we worried about? It hardly seems worth going to war over. (See Jack Shafer’s “Who’s Afraid of a Little Russian Propaganda?”)

Finally, it is amusing to see the priests of the pundit class and political officialdom rush to the fainting couch at the thought that “a hostile foreign power” might have attempted to meddle in “our” election. They surely know that the U.S. government has been doing such things for decades, even in Russia — and worse, since the U.S. government also has helped *oust* elected leaders in, among other places, Iran, Chile, and most recently Ukraine. (See Ishaan Tharoor’s “The Long History of the U.S. with Elections Elsewhere.” For more, see Stephen Kinzer’s *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*.) *American exceptionalism* apparently means the U.S. government can do whatever it wants because it’s good, but others may not — especially Russia because it’s evil. That’s why no media discussion of Russian actions may mention the many bipartisan U.S. provocations since the Cold War ended (*if* it actually ended), such as the expansion of NATO to the Russian border, incorporating former Soviet allies and republics, in violation of President George H. W. Bush’s pledge not to do so.

President Obama now threatens to retaliate. But if Russia really committed the hack, maybe *that* was in retaliation for persistent U.S. interference in its sphere. Preferable to war would be a sit-down and a pledge by both sides to quit fooling around.

So heretics and blasphemers unite! Considering that Russia, a nuclear power, is now accused of committing an act of war, we have nothing to lose and much to gain.