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The Nation Discovers Secular Fundamentalism

Monday, November 6, 2006



Eyal Press must be a brave man. I say that because he takes American liberals to task for their secularist assumptions — and he does so in *The Nation*, America's venerable newsmagazine of the Left.

Press begins with a 2004 op-ed written by Garry Wills just after the election. The re-election of President Bush, he argued, represented “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out.” Similarly, Michael Tomasky of *The American Prospect* declared President Bush's re-election to be “a culminating event in the political retreat of modernity, a condition of

existence whose fundamental tenet was the triumph of scientific skepticism over what used to be called ‘blind’ faith.”

Press responds:

*Who exactly upheld this tenet Tomasky didn't say. Certainly not the nine in ten Americans who have said they've never doubted the existence of God. Or the eight in ten who believe the Lord works miracles. Or the same number who are certain they will be called to answer for their sins on Judgment Day. Or the tens of millions who attend church every week—more, in a typical seven-day span, than those who turn out for all sporting events combined. These figures are drawn from the 1990 book *Under God*, by Garry Wills. As Wills pointed out at the time, the idea that urbanization, scientific progress and rising living standards would gradually transform America into a secular society has long appealed to journalists and intellectuals. Talk about blind faith. In reality, noted Wills, “nothing has been more stable in our history, nothing less budgeable, than religious belief and practice.”*

Press addresses liberals with a bit of reality therapy. For one thing, he argues that liberals can find common cause with the religious Left and with African-American churches. But his main point is that America is not a secular nation — not in terms of the vast majority of its people.

More:

*There are, of course, millions of Americans who would rejoice if Roe were reversed, just as there are many who think the separation of church and state is a myth, that mandatory school prayer should be reinstated and that sex between two consenting adults of the same gender should be a punishable crime. It is perfectly fair for Americans who disagree with such views to say so—the louder the better. It is nevertheless a mistake to dismiss those who hold them either as victims of false consciousness or as fools, the way Sam Harris does in his slender, entertaining but misleadingly titled new book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which is actually addressed to people like himself who want to get a good laugh at the expense of those silly enough to believe in God. Harris's unabashed disdain for all forms of religion is in some ways bracing—he has as little patience for moderate believers as for biblical literalists. And much in his letter will likely prove amusing to atheists and agnostics fed up with hearing pastors insist that only the church are capable of viewing the world through a moral prism.*

And:

*Harris belongs to a group that Timothy Garton Ash recently described as “secular fundamentalists.” He is an engaging writer, and the popularity of his book suggests that many people think it is about time the faith community received its comeuppance. But by his standard, many African-Americans who took part in the civil rights movement were also deranged. So were others who gathered in church basements during the 1980s to stop the Reagan Administration from arming death squads in Central America (among whose victims were many nuns and priests who preached liberation theology). So was William Jennings Bryan, the populist orator and born-again Christian who for several decades served as the voice the excluded in America, supporting everything from legalizing strikes to progressive taxation, and whose passion and appeal Michael Kazin convincingly demonstrates in a new biography, *A Godly Hero*, were inextricably related to his biblical faith. So was the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, perhaps the greatest moral agitator of the nineteenth century, whose abhorrence of slavery, according to his biographer Henry Mayer, “cannot be understood*

*outside the context of the Christianity that was its inspiration.” “Nothing but extensive revivals of pure religion can save our country,” wrote Garrison in 1831, the year he began publishing *The Liberator*; a statement that might have led the secularists of his era to brand him a fanatic, which is indeed how many of his less devout contemporaries saw him. “Radical popular religion helped eradicate an evil with which socially liberal theological opinion had learned to coexist,” notes Mayer.*

He concludes by warning his fellow liberals that “confining ourselves to a small sect of like-minded believers” [in secularism] is “what fundamentalism is about.” The article by Eyal Press is significant for its argument, and for the fact that it appears in *The Nation*.

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