

# Two Concepts of Secularism

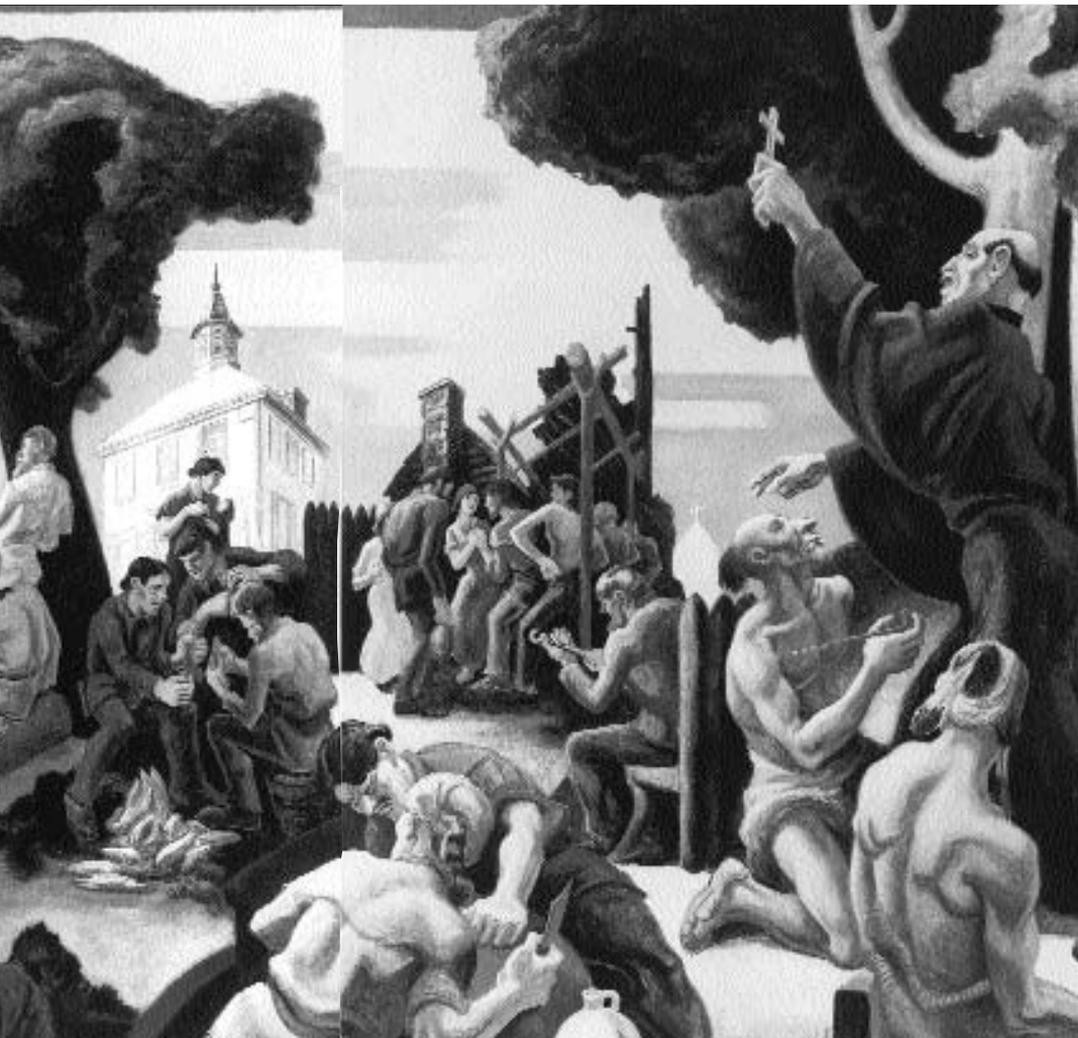
*Most Americans would likely agree that they live in a secular society. But today, two very different ideas of what it means to be secular are at war.*

*by Wilfred M. McClay*

Whenever one sets out in search of the simple and obvious in American history, one soon comes face to face with a crowd of paradoxes. And none is greater than this: that the vanguard nation of technological and social innovation is also the developed world's principal bastion of religious faith and practice. The United States has managed to sustain remarkably high levels of traditional religious belief and affiliation, even as it careens merrily down the whitewater rapids of modernity.

This was not supposed to happen. Sociologists from Max Weber to Peter Berger were convinced that secularization was one facet of the powerful monolith called "modernization," and trusted that secularization would come along bundled with a comprehensive package of modernizing forces: urbanization, rationalization, professionalization, functional differentiation, bureaucratization, and so on. If by "secularism" we mean a perspective that dismisses the possibility of a transcendent realm of being, or treats the existence (or nonexistence) of such a realm as an irrelevancy, then we should have expected religious beliefs and practices to wither away by now. To be sure, one can grant that the taboos and superstitions of the great religions transmitted a useful kernel of moral teaching. But their supernaturalism and irrationality have to be regarded, in this view,





*Cultural Progress (1933), by Thomas Hart Benton*

as vestiges of humanity's childhood. Our growing mastery of our material existence enables us to understand and manipulate this world on our own terms, through the exercise of instrumental rationality. Secularity in all its fullness should have arrived as naturally as adulthood.

Yet the world at the dawn of the 21st century remains energetically, even maniacally, religious, in ways large and small. And if the "secularization theory" long promoted by social-scientific students of religion has in fact been discredited, the unanticipated resiliency of religious faith in 20th-century America may well be the single most arresting demonstration of the theory's inadequacy.

But perhaps one should not accept this claim too quickly. Perhaps the religious efflorescence we see today is merely defensive, and fleeting. It could be argued persuasively that the United States has never been more thoroughly under the command of secular ideas than it is today. The

nation's elite culture, as it is mirrored in mass media and academe, is committed to a standard of antiseptically secular discourse, in which the ostensibly value-neutral languages of science and therapy have displaced the value-laden language of faith and morals. A steady stream of court decisions since the 1940s has severely circumscribed the public manifestation of traditional religious symbols and sentiments, helping to create what has been called "the naked public square." Perhaps the United States has lagged behind Western Europe in completing the movement toward a purer form of secularity—but it is getting there just the same. Religious expression has not been stamped out—but it has been pushed to the margins, confined to a sort of cultural red-light district, along with all the other frailties to which we are liable. The point is to confine such beliefs to the private realm and deny them public exposure. Some who hold to this view offer themselves as friends of religion. Others are skeptics, or enemies. But all are united in the belief that a "naked public square" is the price we must pay for the non-establishment and liberty embodied in the First Amendment.

**T**here is, however, another way of seeing matters. In this view, it is secularism, rather than religion, whose power is ebbing away. In this view, the claim that religious liberty can only be protected by the federal government's imposition of a naked public square has come to seem as absurd as the Vietnam-era tactic of destroying villages in order to save them. Small wonder, then, that religion has responded to the challenge of secularism with a vigorous defense of its role in public life—a role that, whatever one thinks of it, shows no sign of going away quietly.

Indeed, there is a growing sense that religion may be an indispensable force for the upholding of human dignity and moral order in a world dominated by voracious state bureaucracies and sprawling transnational corporations that are neither effectively accountable to national law nor effectively answerable to well-established codes of behavior. As the sociologist José Casanova argues, modernity runs the risk of being "devoured by the inflexible, inhuman logic of its own creations," unless it restores a "creative dialogue" with the very religious traditions it has so successfully challenged. Perhaps no event in the last quarter-century has given more credibility to this view than the profound influence of the Roman Catholic Church in promoting the downfall of communism in parts of the former Soviet empire; and no modern religious leader has been more keenly alert to the public uses of his faith than the current pope. But even in America there is plentiful evidence that publicly vigorous religious

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beliefs and practices have survived all efforts to suppress or supersede them, and are now ascendant.

One can gauge the extent of this shift not only by recourse to Gallup, Roper, and Barna polls, but by examining shifts in public discourse. Ever since the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, the taboo on public expression of religious sentiments by American political leaders seems to have been steadily eroding, to the extent that the presidential candidates in the current campaign have been publicly invoking God and Jesus Christ at a pace not seen since the days of William Jennings Bryan. The principal candidates, and President Bill Clinton himself, have warmly endorsed the efforts of what are called “faith-based” organizations for the provision of social welfare services. Clinton has repeatedly and successfully employed biblical and quasi-biblical language, particularly in his own defense. One may feel tempted to chuckle, or snarl, at these rhetorical gestures, but the fact remains that they are a form of recognition. One cannot successfully appeal to a standard, even if one does it cynically or ritualistically, if that standard is not widely acknowledged as legitimate.

The signs of desecularization are reflected, too, in a long list of developments in the realms of law and governance. The overwhelming support accorded the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, although it was later overturned by the Supreme Court, was a highly significant example of this process. So too was the landmark 1996 welfare reform legislation, which included an option for “charitable choice,” permitting the contracting out of public social-welfare services to openly religious organizations. As always, controversies over schooling have supplied a significant share of the flashpoints. Not only has there been some leveling of the playing field in the competition between religious and nonreligious schools, but there is movement toward a reassertion of religious expression in public institutions, seen, for example, in the current court cases involving the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools and the sanctioning of student-led prayer at graduation ceremonies and football games. Not all of these efforts will succeed. Not all of them ought to. But the trend seems unmistakable.

And some things have never changed, even with secularism’s impressive victories in the courts and in the halls of government and academe. Prayers are still uttered at the commencement of congressional sessions. God’s name appears on our currency and in the oaths we take in court. Chaplains are still employed by Congress and the armed services. The tax-exempt status of religious institutions remains intact. Avowed belief in God remains astonishingly pervasive, and church and synagogue attendance rates remain high, at least relative to rates in other Western countries. Whether one looks upon these phenomena with approval or disapproval, the fact is that America is still not an entirely secular country, one sanitized of any form of public sanction for religion.



*Presidential candidates continue to publicly identify themselves with religion, as Vice President Al Gore did in Houston in March.*

One could continue in this vein for some time. Yet the partisans of the secularizing view would likely not be persuaded. They might well respond that the majority's professed belief in God is thinner than skim milk. The now-dominant secularism might seem to be

conceding a good deal of ground to religion. But this concession only serves to consolidate its rule, by seeming to show flexibility on relatively small points. Such concessions serve to sugarcoat more consequential social changes, which, once they have fully taken root, will eventually empty the old moral and theological language of all meaning. The drama of President Clinton's impeachment suggests that the stern moralism once associated with American Protestantism is a thing of the distant past. It costs nothing for an American politician these days to genuflect in the direction of "religion," particularly if that "religion" is increasingly vague and morally undemanding. Such gestures, in the secularizing view, are merely the verbal tics of a civilization in transition.

**T**here is some truth in this view. But it underestimates the importance of words and gestures as markers of legitimacy. And the very fact of such genuflection, even if that is all that it is, may nevertheless indicate how precarious all the secularist advances are. No one builds pedestals to the god of scientific rationality or the Comtean religion of humanity—although there is a booming trade in crystals, pyramids, horoscopes, and the services of psychics. Even the public prestige of science has receded somewhat in our own day, as a consequence of science's growing politicization, its blizzard of inflated and conflicting claims about matters such as health and diet, and the public's fears, founded and unfounded, that scientific and technological innovation has become a juggernaut lacking any sense of moral proportionality or ultimate ends.

One thing can be said without qualification: Secularism in our day boasts no energizing vision and no revolutionary élan. Instead, it must await the excesses of the Religious Right or some similar foe to make its case, stir up its fading enthusiasm, and rally its remaining troops. Secularism sits uneasy upon its throne, a monarch that dares not speak its proper name, and dares not openly propound its agenda, if indeed it

still has one. For all its gains, it seems peculiarly on the defensive, a tenured radical that has ascended to the endowed chair of culture only to spend its days shoring up the principle of *stare decisis*.

There are no envelopes left to push. Its victory, if that is what it has enjoyed, has not come without cost. For better or worse, the élan vital has gravitated elsewhere. These days it is more fashionable to be “spiritual” than to be secular.



*Critics of governor George W. Bush's February visit to Bob Jones University focused on the school's policies, not its religious character.*

There is no more powerful indication of secularism's rule—and the precariousness of that rule—than the challenge to it being mounted by an intellectually sophisticated, and increasingly ecumenical conservative religious counterculture. First drawn together in reaction to the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* and the subsequent liberalization of abortion laws, this counterculture is made up mainly of theological and moral conservatives drawn from the full range of organized denominations: mainline and evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Such an entity, particularly as embodied in Richard John Neuhaus's influential journal *First Things*, would have been inconceivable if a powerful and entrenched secularist enemy did not exist to hold such a coalition together. In the past, it would have been precisely the most conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who would have been the *least* likely to seek out common ground. That they are now willing to do so, with growing enthusiasm and commitment, is a tribute to their secularist foe. It was once the case that to be ecumenical one had to be a liberal. But that is no longer true. Now something much larger than the historical differentia of the respective faiths is seen to be at stake. That “something” is at the bottom of what we have come to call “the culture wars.”

The reaction against secularism in recent years is by no means restricted to political or cultural conservatives. Prominent liberals such as the journalist E. J. Dionne, the law professor Stephen Carter, the theologian Harvey Cox, the psychologist Robert Coles, and the political theorist William Connolly all have written on the inadequacies of a purely secular view of the world. They may offer the most powerful evidence of all for the decoupling of secularism from modernization,

since they take the position that a “progressive” or modernizing agenda need not be a secularizing one.

In addition, an increasingly influential critique is emerging from the perspectives of academic postmodernism and postcolonialism, in which Western secularism’s claims to universal truth and impersonal rationality are decried as a form of cognitive imperialism. As a result, the claims of religion are no longer so easily bracketed as private and subjective. In the postmodern dispensation, where knowledge is understood as inseparable from the discourse of particular communities, religious assertions have as good a claim as anything else, and a better one than most, to the mantle of “truth.” Such arguments tend in practice to favor “indigenous” religion, and often leave mainstream Christianity and Judaism out of the picture, perhaps considering them too much a part of the “Western universalist hegemony” to be worthy of attention. And in any event, these arguments may have little staying power outside the hothouse of the academy. But their appearance certainly indicates a restlessness with the regime of secularism, from a position that can hardly be called “conservative” in any usual sense of the word.

So not everything we see in the challenges to secularism can be made to take the shape of a culture war. But a great deal of it does. Defenders of religion see an aggressive secularism, which controls academia, the media, and the federal courts, and thereby largely controls public discourse. Secularists and their allies see in their opponents an incipient religious reaction, a dangerous cultural regression, a “return of the repressed” that would obliterate scientific inquiry and demolish individual liberty, and take us back to the Middle Ages. There is nothing imaginary about these conflicts. But there is nothing inevitable about their being couched in such extreme terms.

As the 21st century begins, we need a way of understanding our cultural conflict that faces the facts of social division without becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of civil war. The obstacles to this are formidable. As the sociologist James Davison Hunter has pointed out, our national debates are now conducted within frameworks that tend to polarize arguments, harden lines of division, and accentuate the most extreme positions of either camp in order to mobilize both donors and troops.

**I**f the conception of “culture wars” may well further the very tendencies it describes, it also is admirably clarifying. By establishing a rough parity between the sides, the term helps us see that the struggle between modernization and its discontents is not merely the battle of light against darkness, progress against backwardness, but does indeed have many of the qualities of a confessional struggle, pitting genuine and deeply held worldviews against each other—a struggle in which there is plenty of light and darkness, virtue and vice, to go around.

Moreover, the culture war model suggests that the conflicts described are not mere illusions or anxieties to be soothed away by therapy. Rather, to speak of “culture war” is to insist that we are experi-

encing genuine conflicts over genuine issues. The effort to simply split the differences by counseling moderation and prudence, and by following the utilitarian principle that one should give the least possible displeasure to the largest possible number, may have the effect of denying what is at stake for the “hard” minorities on either side. Majorities can be wrong. And in this particular conflict, the stakes are high. The battle is being fought over nothing less than who will get to occupy the commanding heights of American life, and thereby define the nature of the culture.

To speak of “commanding heights” is to raise the question of whether the United States is, or should be, an officially secular nation. In a sense, therefore, it is also to raise the question of whether there is a *de facto* religious establishment in America. This has always been a tangled and complex subject. Officially, of course, there never has been an American religious establishment. There are, as everyone knows, two clauses expressing the First Amendment’s view of religion: a free exercise clause and a non-establishment clause. The two clauses are part of a single vision, because they complement and mutually support each other, non-establishment being a necessary precondition for free exercise, and free exercise being the surest way of ensuring the perpetuation of non-establishment.

Of the two, non-establishment is surely the harder provision to observe and perpetuate. It is not hard to understand why this should be so. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the polity seeks unifying and binding principles. There has to be a “final say” in a durable political order, and it is hard to keep a “final say” potent with nothing more than an avowedly neutral proceduralism. On the contrary: Everything we know about the functioning of a healthy political entity suggests the need for governing assumptions, legitimating myths, and foundational narratives. We have always tended to have informal establishments play that role for us. And clearly those establishments have been in flux.

Consider the situation in the American demimonde called academe. The historian George Marsden has argued that the American academy has merely exchanged one orthodoxy for another, granting today the same kind of commanding status to a strictly secular understanding of human existence that yesterday it granted to a Protestant orthodoxy. This would be remarkable, if true. Is there now a regnant secularist orthodoxy, which, while it usually rules genially and tolerantly, is ultimately intolerant of threatening deviations from its norms? There is certainly evidence of this in the academy’s suppression of explicit religious discourse and religious perspectives in scholarly discourse, not to mention hiring and promotion, and in its ferocious antagonism to the mere presentation of religious perspectives on such controversial subjects as human origins. And is this the inevitable tendency of secularism, to be as domineering and triumphalist as the religious faiths it once opposed? Is it accurate to speak of secularism as a kind of substitute religion, a reservoir of



## AMENDMENT I

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .*

ultimate beliefs about ultimate things which stands in a continuum with conventional religious faiths? Or is secularism more properly understood as something quite distinct from, and more modest than, a religion? Has the culture war dynamic of secularism versus desecularization caused us to lose sight of this distinctive quality of “the secular,” when it is rightly understood?

This question takes on an entirely different cast if one looks for a moment beyond the Western world—the West being, as Peter Berger has repeatedly pointed out, the only part of the world where secularization has been triumphant—and considers a place where the connotations of the word *secularism* are rather different. An example is provided by a *New York Times* news story dated December 6, 1999, dispatched from India. On that day, the *Times* reported, police arrested dozens of activists who had gathered in the northern Indian temple town of Ayodhya to protest against, and mark

the memory of, the demolition of a 16th-century Muslim mosque by Hindu zealots seven years earlier. That earlier event sparked massive riots throughout the country, leaving several thousand people dead, and has remained a simmering issue ever since. Both Hindu and Islamic organizations mounted demonstrations for the anniversary. Ever since the mosque’s destruction, militant Hindu groups, which

refer to December 6th as “Victory Day,” have been pushing to have a temple built on the site, which they believe to be the birthplace of the god-king Rama. Muslims, conversely, have vowed to rebuild the mosque, carrying signs that read “The *jihad* will go on.” Meanwhile, miles away in Delhi, 300 activists from an organization called Citizens for Secularism marked December 6th with a march protesting the mosque’s demolition.

This story neatly illustrates a simple point. What is meant by “secularism” will depend upon the cultural and historical context in which one uses the word. In contemporary American society, it means one thing: the demystified and disenchanting worldview of an affluent, postreligious society. But in the title of the Indian protesters’ organization, Citizens for Secularism, it means something else. Not an antireligious worldview imposed by the state, but instead, an antitheocratic understanding of a *secular* state which is fully compatible with the protection of religious liberty.

This is not what we would normally call secularism in the West. But that is precisely why I have found it valuable to insist upon using the word *secularism* in as broad a sense as possible in what follows, even if doing so has the effect of making that word even more problematic than it already is. For in preserving possibilities in words, one preserves their possibility in practice—including the possibility that there is such a thing as “secularism rightly understood.” Indeed, the Indian protesters’ understanding of secularism is regarded favorably by most thoughtful religionists in the West, as a vital instrument to refine and restrain religious commitments, and to protect religious devotees from their own all-too-human tendencies toward fanaticism and blindness—traits that their own faiths themselves predict. To be antitheocratic is by no means to oppose religion. On the contrary, one can argue—as did Tocqueville, the godfather of all “rightly understood” words—that the American antitheocratic tradition has by and large proven a great boon to religion, practically and morally, and essential to the maintenance of healthy religious commitments.

**H**ow then are we to find the right balance in these matters, preserving what is good in secularism without ceding to it more than its due? We can start by distinguishing two ways of understanding the concept, only one of which is an enemy of religion. First, the secular idea can be understood as an opponent of established belief—including a *nonreligious* establishment—and a protector of the rights of free exercise and free association. Second, it can be understood as a proponent of established *unbelief* and a protector of strictly individual expressive rights.

The former view, on the one hand, is a minimal, even “negative” understanding of secularism, as a freedom “from” establishmentarian imposition. For it, the secular idiom is merely a provisional *lingua franca* that serves to facilitate commerce among different kinds of belief,

rather than establish some new “absolute” language, an Esperanto of postreligious truth. The latter view, on the other hand, is the more robust, more assertive, more “positive” understanding of secularism with which I began—the one that affirms secularism as an ultimate faith that rightfully supersedes the tragic blindnesses and destructive irrationalities of the historical religions, at least so far as activity in public is concerned. By understanding religious liberty as a subcategory of individual expressive liberty, it confines religion to a strictly private sphere, where it can do little public harm—and little public good.

**T**he first of these two concepts of secularism, “negative” secularism, sounds almost identical to the language of the First Amendment. This in turn suggests the possibility of a nonestablished secular order, one equally respectful of religionists and nonreligionists alike. Such an order preserves the freedom of the unconcoerced individual conscience. But it has a capacious understanding of the religious needs of humanity, and therefore does not presume that the religious impulse should be understood as a merely individual matter. On the contrary, it insists that religion is a social institution, for whose flourishing the right of free association—by which we mean the right of coreligionists to form moral communities, which can include or exclude others precisely as they please—is just as important as the right of individual expression. Pluralism is a necessary concomitant of liberalism, precisely because we are social creatures, whose social existence is a prior condition to all else that we value.

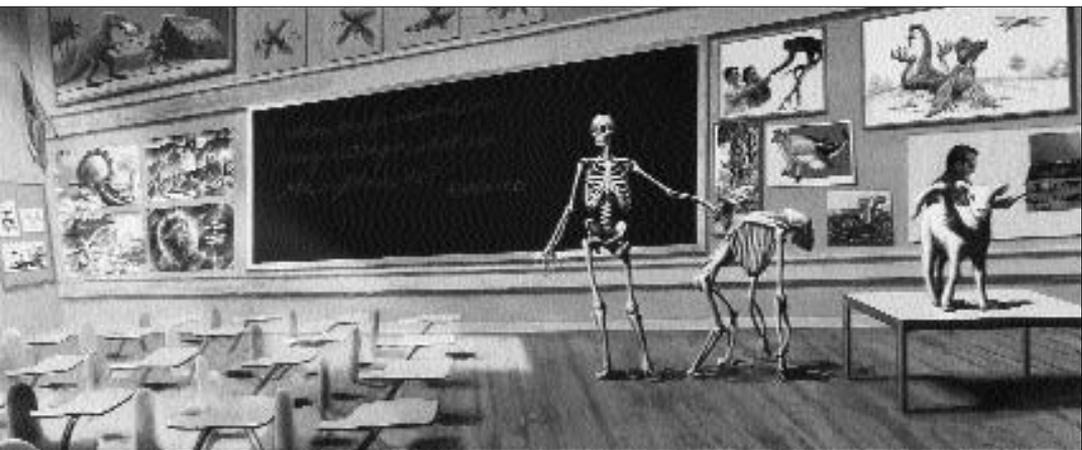
It might also be pointed out that the distinction between “negative” and “positive” understandings of secularism is neatly paralleled by competing understandings of the scope and meaning of the secular activity we call “science.” There has been a powerful tendency since the advent of modern science to see its claims as competitive with, and ultimately triumphant over, those of traditional religion. This tendency may have been just as bad for science as it was for religion, tending to inflate the claims of science into a reductive “scientism,” replete with the declaration of metaphysical and cosmological certitudes that science, as such, cannot sustain on its own terms. A more modest, “negative” understanding of science sees it as an inherently tentative and provisional form of knowledge, defined by strict adherence to procedural norms involving the formulation of hypotheses and chains of inference, and by the careful conduct of observable and replicable experiments to test those hypotheses. Science, in this view, is unable by its very nature to affirm or deny untestable claims about the nature of ultimate reality. Science is required to presume naturalism methodologically—but not ontologically. Such a carefully limited understanding gives the magnificent achievements of Western science their full measure of respect, without obliging us to construe science as a form of metaphysics, and a sworn enemy of religion.



Such distinctions have generally been lost on the more militant secularists, whom we can call the establishmentarian or “positive” secularists. Marx knew precisely what he was doing in attacking religion, but today’s positive secularists are not so clear. In many cases, they honestly cannot imagine that they are imposing anything on anyone, which is why they consistently style themselves heroic defenders of civil liberties—or, more modestly, People for the American Way. Indeed, that name, whose breathtakingly self-aggrandizing qualities surely match any parallel offenses committed by the late Moral Majority, perfectly expresses the unstated presumptions of our informal secular establishment. Its efforts have been aimed at creating and enforcing the naked public square. Under the guise of separating church and state, it seeks to exclude religious thought and discourse from any serious part in public life, and to confine religious belief and practice, as much as possible, to the realm of private predilection and individual taste.

So we return to a key question: Is secularism itself a kind of faith, our new established religion? Or is it rightly understood as something very different from religion, in the way that science as a mode of inquiry and understanding is distinct from religion? Is there a way we can enjoy the fruits of secularism without elevating it into a substitute orthodoxy, a new establishment, not of a religion, but of irreligion?

**T**he use of the modifiers “negative” and “positive” here will remind some of Isaiah Berlin’s 1958 essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” to whose title I have shamelessly alluded in my own. I have not done so merely for literary effect. The dichotomy that Berlin devised can help clarify the concept of secularism. The parallels arise almost immediately. Berlin set out in his essay to explore “the permissible limits of coercion” in political life. Our concern here is not at all dissimilar, since it deals with the appropriate limits of what I have called “establishment,” which is itself a kind of moral and intellectual boundary constraint. But Berlin’s suggestiveness does not stop there. It



*Creationist's Classroom (1998), by Alexis Rockman.*

can be traced to the very heart of the essay, and Berlin's distinction between *negative liberty*, which designates a freedom from external interference, a freedom to be left alone, and *positive liberty*, which means a freedom to be self-governing and self-directed, to be "one's own master."

Stated this way—as freedom from meddling, versus freedom to be one's own boss—the two concepts of liberty may not seem very different. But each had implications buried within it that would ultimately cause the two to diverge sharply, and arrive at very different destinations, with very different consequences. Negative liberty is freedom *from*; it involves the deflection of potential hindrances and the guarding of privacy, in the interest of creating the maximum "free area for action." Positive liberty had aims that were higher and nobler. It sought to free human beings to fulfill the most exalted elements of their nature. But it also was far more dangerous than negative liberty in Berlin's eyes, because its pursuit could so easily lead to authoritarian or totalitarian political arrangements.

The logic by which Berlin arrived at this conclusion is especially relevant. He emphasized that for human beings to become masters of themselves they had to be self-overcoming, bringing the elements of recalcitrance or false consciousness in their makeup under the control of their rational faculties and "better selves." This meant the practice of relentless self-coercion, in the name of a "higher freedom," precisely the sort of activity we would call "self-discipline." But what starts out as self-coercion may in time become hard to distinguish from external coercion, since, as Berlin observed, "we recognize that it is . . . at times justifiable to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt."

Thus, however, is the door opened to coercion, in the name of honoring the "true self" and freeing it from illusion, from being "ruled by myths," and from various forms of "heteronomy," or external domination. Positive liberty aspires to nothing short of a godlike state of autonomy and self-mastery. In so doing, it relies upon the demystifying power of modern science to dissolve the illusions that support irrationality. The greatest thinkers of the 19th century, men such as Comte and Marx, were partisans of various forms of positive liberty. They believed, Berlin wrote, that "to understand the world is to be freed," but that most people are "enslaved by despots—institutions or beliefs or neuroses—which could be removed only by being analyzed and understood." Most of us are "imprisoned by evil spirits which we have ourselves . . . created, and can exorcize them only by becoming conscious and acting appropriately." Ye shall know the truth—a scientific, secular, and naturalistic truth—and that truth shall make you free.

But the very beliefs that enable one to penetrate the fog of irrationalist obfuscation can also tempt one "to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and

on behalf, of their ‘real’ selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man . . . must be identical with his freedom—the free choice of his ‘true’, albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self.” In the end, the ideal of positive liberty seemed to Berlin too dangerous—too arrogant and presumptuous, too prone to monism and “final solutions,” too controlling and depersonalizing—to be endorsed. Hence Berlin’s preference for negative liberty, and the pluralism it engenders, as “a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery.”

Pluralism was, of course, the central political and social idea of Berlin’s entire career. There are many goods in the world, he repeatedly asserted, and they are not necessarily in harmony with one another, or compatible with one another; indeed, they may even be mutually exclusive, without thereby ceasing to be good. Liberty exists in palpable tension with other goods such as equality, justice, happiness, security, and order. Therefore, a political order that grants the greatest possible scope to the full variety of human goods is preferable to an order that insists upon only one. The consecrated life may represent a beautiful and noble ambition, perhaps the highest goal to which we can aspire as individual human beings. But not unless we feel inwardly called to it. And it makes a very bad basis for a public philosophy.

**T**wo Concepts” remains, even after nearly a half-century, a suggestive analysis, whose implications and ramifications extend far beyond the range of what Berlin himself could have possibly envisioned. His way of dividing up the concept of liberty proves to be remarkably congruent with the different strains of secularism. “Negative” secularism, the secularism of non-establishment, has many of the same virtues as negative liberty—an openness to diverse perspectives, whether religious or nonreligious, a commitment to free inquiry, free expression, and free association, and a “freedom from” the coerciveness of any “official” perspective, including that of militant secularism.

By the same token, positive secularism, the secularism of established unbelief, proves to have many of the same pitfalls as positive liberty. In affirming the secular ideal as an ultimate and alternative comprehensive faith, “positive” secularism in effect embraces the ideal of self-mastery. In so doing, it also embraces an obligation to dispel the damaging misconceptions that prey on the minds of others, and to liberate them from the spell of priests, televangelists, and other purveyors of illusion. This will allow them to discover their “true selves,” and help them along in the direction of greater and greater “autonomy.” Whether this takes the form of coercion or not, the fact remains that “positive” secularism has all the features of a crusading ideal—the sort of ideal Berlin warned against.

In the penultimate paragraph of his essay, Berlin offered the words that form the culminating stroke in his defense of pluralism, but which also well express the importance of religious faith in human existence: “In the

end, men choose between ultimate values; they choose as they do, because their life and thought are determined by fundamental moral categories and concepts that are, at any rate over large stretches of time and space, a part of their being and thought and sense of their own identity; part of what makes them human.”

Berlin could hardly have offered a more apt account of the reasons why a vibrantly pluralistic religious life is the one most compatible with the fullest possible respect for the dignity of the human person. For what is religion if not the most powerful of all expressions of ultimate values? What “positive” secularizers have regarded with fear and contempt, or as a burden from which our “better selves” need liberation, the “negative” secularizer regards as an essential element in the warp and woof of our humanity.

**T**his understanding of two secularisms may help explain the paradoxical situation at the beginning of this essay, in which secularism seems at one and the same time both victor and vanquished. In a sense, both assertions are true. Americans have by and large accepted negative secularism as an essential basis for peaceful coexistence in a religiously pluralistic society. Any large-scale religious revivalism or enthusiasm the United States is likely to see in the years to come will have accepted the prior restraint that negative secularism imposes as a precondition of its very existence. Indeed, a well-considered theological basis for respecting the “others” who lie outside one’s own tradition will be essential to any religion hoping to have a public presence. Religious activity and expression will likely continue to grow, further eroding the rule of positive secularism—but it will do so largely *within* the container of a negative-secularist understanding of “the world.” The return of religious faith is not likely to be a fearsome “return of the repressed,” at least not in the United States.

It follows, however, that religious faiths must undergo some degree of adaptation in accommodating themselves to negative secularism. To begin with, they must, as it were, learn how to behave around strangers. But there is more to it than that. The key question adherents must ask is whether such an adaptation represents a compromise of their faith, or a deepening and clarifying of it. The answer may be surprising to those who think only in terms of the “warfare of science and religion,” or the final triumph or final defeat of positive secularism, and who assume that all adaptation is mere trimming or acculturation. The problem may pose insuperable obstacles to intransigent religious outlooks, with a rigid or poorly developed understanding of “the world” and of its relationship to the ultimate. They will be quite understandably resistant to an adaptation that would concede any authority to “the world.”

But that need not be universally the case. Speaking for a moment only of the Christian faith, the effects of such adaptation would seem to be largely positive, and an important example of what theologian John Henry Newman called a “development of doctrine.” It would serve to remind Christians of something they sometimes lose sight of—that their faith



*A sign of the times? Students gather for prayer before classes at Minnesota's Brainerd High School.*

*affirms* the world. Not as an absolute good, sufficient unto itself. Not as an exclusive focus for their energies. And not as the ultimate audience before which the drama of their lives is played. But as a very great good nonetheless, a world whose goodness and order are inherent, since it is a world understood to be endowed by a Creator God with harmony, beauty, intelligibility, and commodity that have not been entirely erased by the effects of sin. Even the most unregenerate of that world's inhabitants still bear the *imago Dei*, and all are beneficiaries of what is called "common grace,"

which means that they remain fully capable of the finest acts of nobility, justice, love, and wisdom. It is not only an observable fact but a theologically sustainable truth that admirable qualities of mind and soul are not the exclusive property of one's coreligionists, and are not withheld from the nonbelieving artist, thinker, or politician.

Therefore, the quality of mind we call "humanism" should not be seen as the sinister offspring of a positive secularism, but the lively child of a negative secularism, one that takes a soberly affirmative view of the natural potential inherent in human reason and imagination. "It is vital," writes the cultural critic Ken Myers, that Christians "not regard art or science or the humanities to be evangelism carried out by other means." Nor, one might add, should complete withdrawal into gnostic otherworldliness, or any other form of extreme renunciation, be a collective goal. Instead, argues Myers, the purpose of these human pursuits, like the purpose of government and politics, is "simply to maintain fallen yet rich human life on the planet." Even Jesus' command to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" represents a real commitment by the Christian to the legitimacy of even the most unbelieving political rulers, and therefore the intrinsic worthiness and dignity, from the Christian perspective, of the worldly task of political governance.

**Y**et from this follows a final observation, which I fear may run the risk of restoring some of the knotty complexity I have tried to unravel. Given negative secularism's implicit respect for the world on its own terms, is it not necessary that we be prepared to endorse some set of normative standards inherent in nature—inherent limits and boundaries from which negative secularism derives its sense of the world's beauty, orderliness, regularities, and moral economy? And, to go to the heart of the matter, how much longer can it be meaningful to speak of the liberty of the individual person, when we are rapidly approaching the point where that liberty is taken to include the sovereign right to do whatever one wants with the human body and mind, including the comprehensive genetic or pharmacological refashioning of both? Is the very concept of individual liberty even intelligible under such circumstances, unless we can presume some measure of fixity and givenness in the person, and resistance in the medium in which he or she acts? Does the very concept of liberty evaporate when its triumph is too complete, just as a business firm becomes transformed into something different when it becomes a monopoly? Is there any reason powerful enough to persuade us not to tinker with that fixity, and thereby risk making ourselves into the first posthuman creatures—any reason, that is, other than the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human person as a *created* being whose dignity and fundamental characteristics are a divine *endowment* from that Creator? Where, in the traditions of *either* form of secularism, does one find an adequate defense against such temptation?

Such questions not only take us even further away from positive secularism. They also may force us to reconsider the necessity of

something resembling a religious establishment. They suggest the possibility that a decent and sustainable secularism cannot ever exist entirely as a nonestablished order, i.e. without the assumption of an orderly and *given* world undergirding it. This is not just a matter of the need for some kind of social and political axioms and norms. It is also a matter of having the right axioms—axioms that provide a coherent idea of what it means to be a human person. For without something like the Judeo-Christian conception of the created order superintending the works of secular society, and the notion that the individual person has an inviolable dignity simply because he or she is created by God, there may be no effective way of containing the powerful impulses that would work to undermine that order. We see the first inklings of this possibility in the ease with which unexceptionable interventions, such as cosmetic surgery or the use of drugs to treat severe psychological disorders, blur into more questionable ones, such as gender alteration, the pharmacological remaking of the self, and the melding of species, with nary a bright line in sight to be drawn, except arbitrarily. Whether its proponents know it or not, the world-affirming work of secularism has always tacitly depended upon the givenness and ultimate rightness of an orderly nature, whose scope and majesty are too great to be entirely overcome by the human will. Paradoxically, belief in the existence of considerations beyond the world's reach has served to give the world its solidity, to underwrite the possibility of human dignity, and to discipline human will. Our dignity is in overcoming—and in not overcoming. What will take these considerations' place when all that was once solid is turned into clay of infinite malleability?

**B**erlin seemed to recognize something like this later in his life, that both positive and negative liberty must somehow be confined within a certain radius. He believed those confinements could be arrived at by entirely conventional means, and continued to the end to reject emphatically any notion of universally valid norms. To have believed otherwise, he thought, would have violated his understanding of pluralism. But it may not be so easy for us. The weakest and most disappointing points in Berlin's work reliably come at those moments when he is forced to appeal to a vague traditional standard of "those principles that most people have accepted for a very long time," rather than commit the unpardonable sin of proclaiming an absolute. He perhaps could not see the extent to which his rather English reliance upon the residuum of Western cultural practice as a counterweight to liberty—and by extension, to secularism—made presumptions that we can no longer presume, and no longer rely upon. Berlin resisted monism, the tyranny of the one truth. But perhaps he needed to be more skeptical of his own skepticism, just as one needs always to be moderate in one's moderation. At the beginning of a new century, it now seems that even negative secularism may need to fall back on stronger stuff than mere convention if it is to survive and thrive. □