

Aggressive Secularism in America

Most Reverend John J. Wright

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Catholic Lawyer by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact selbyc@stjohns.edu.

AGGRESSIVE SECULARISM IN AMERICA[†]

MOST REVEREND JOHN J. WRIGHT*

THE SOLEMN GATHERING for the Red Mass, offered for the members of the bench and the bar, permits me to serve as spokesman for those who bear witness to the law of God in speaking to those who are privileged to write, interpret or apply the law of the land.

There was a time in our country when any dichotomy between the law of God and the law of the land was rarely real and never intentional. It was assuredly never as systematic as developments under the influence of aggressive secularism have sometimes made it seem.

Quite the contrary, those who bore witness to the law of God were wont to preach and to pray for enthusiastic, wholehearted obedience to the law of the land, because in so doing they were logically and loyally defending the civil corollaries of their sacred teachings.

At the same time, those whose public duties bound them to the enactment, interpretation and enforcement of the law consciously sought to promote piety and virtue, not merely to define the limits of the law's negative interest in these, and did so, convinced that thus they best served the civic common good and the rights and needs of human personality adequately considered.

Our forefathers, for reasons of prudent realism, provided in their constitutions for the separation of the organized Church and the organized State; but their idealism, even in temporal matters, was informed and inspired by the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and especially by the influence of Revelation as transmitted by the Church; and so there is reflected in the basic laws which they wrote a blend of divine faith and human wisdom, a happy medley of the hopes of earth and the will of Heaven.

[†]Sermon delivered at the Red Mass celebrated in conjunction with the 1959 convention of the American Bar Association.

*D.D. Bishop of Pittsburgh.

The United States Supreme Court, speaking by Mr. Justice Brewer, on one occasion declared in remarkably direct terms the religious, indeed, the organized Christian character of the American tradition within which the law of the land became an effort by positive human legislation to apply the broad precepts of the law of conscience and the law of God, unto the service of virtue and the perfection of personality.

The Court said:

If we pass beyond these matters to a view of American life as expressed by its laws, its business, its customs, and its society, we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth. Among other matters note the following: The form of oath universally prevailing, concluding with an appeal to the Almighty; the custom of opening sessions of all deliberative bodies with prayer; the prefatory words of all wills, "in the name of God, Amen;" the laws respecting the observance of the Sabbath, with a general cessation of secular business, and the closing of courts, legislatures, and other similar public assemblies on that day; the churches and church organizations which abound in every city, town and hamlet; the multitude of charitable organizations existing everywhere under Christian auspices . . . these and many other matters which might be noticed add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of formal utterances that this is a Christian Nation.

So far the words of the Court; nor is their import obscure. Without prejudice to the strict religious tolerance that obtains for all faiths, without disparagement of the notable influence on our national life of the devout members of other faiths, this nation was considered in its inspiration and its life a Christian nation.

The traditional habits of mind and attitudes of our people, as well as their institutions and laws, were those which have been

developed under the dominance of the Christian faith, embryonic in the promises made to Israel, born together with the Church on Pentecost 2,000 years ago, and coming to maturity with a strength so vital that it communicated itself to the cultures of those peoples who once made Europe great and America possible.

The men who most contributed to the early building of our nation feared God. They did so with a holy and a wholesome fear, and because they did, they wrote into the Preamble of the Constitution of my own native state, typical of that of many, devout words of homage to their Creator, with a recognition of their dependence on Him and an explicit prayer for His direction in the mighty task of building their Commonwealth.

They feared God, and so they did not talk glibly of a mere freedom to worship God, a freedom which they had scant intention of exercising or implementing. Rather, they wrote in the second article of their Constitution words of right, but also of duty. They said: "It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society publicly and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe. . . ."

Such men feared God! They would have found unintelligible the suggestion that there is and need be no connection between the law of God and the law of the land, between personal morality and civic public virtue.

Every American who walks in their tradition and who is in his right mind, acknowledges that morality and legality, like Church and State, have separate areas of competence, separate formalities and separate sanctions; but the legislators, justices and lawyers who fashioned our basic legal traditions would have been appalled by the con-

tion, now so often, so glibly, and so effectively advanced, that such separation means divorce of the law of the land from the law of God, and "that religious morality and civic virtue spring from totally distinct and completely separate, if not mutually antagonistic, sources."

Nothing could be further from the mind of the men who wrote the basic laws of our States, the Founding Fathers who placed the Bible, God's law, on the very rostra where they took their oath to defend the law of the land. They would have had no trouble defining blasphemous or vicious as applied to efforts to represent them as indifferent to the relation of civil obligation to moral duty, the law of the land to the rule of reason and the rule of reason to the law of God.

They would have resented as fraudulent the current kind of censorship by exclusion, "thought-control" by silent, careful editing, reflected in a paperback edition which purports to offer collegians and others the basic thought of Thomas Jefferson and yet edits out all the characteristic references to God, to virtue, to morality and to the blessings of religion which the author of the Declaration of Independence made so frequently.

Fortunately the bench and bar are not yet without men who dare—and the word "dare" is needed—to speak in the spirit and accent of the founders and fashioners of our legal heritage, as did that Protestant judge on the West Coast who recently braved the wrath of the new secularists, and incurred it, by suggesting from the bench that a Catholic boy would improve his regard for the law of the land by increasing his respect for the law of God and his consequent attendance at Sunday Mass.

The Catholic bishops of America have drawn the fire of the insurgent secularists,

and some of their own, because of their defense of the traditional American concept of the sovereignty of God over Church and States alike, the concept of the necessary relation between all ultimately valid laws and the postulates of the law of God.

Sometimes criticism of the Catholic bishops for their opposition to the spirit of secularism has come from surprising, even disappointing, quarters. But equally often, there is consoling evidence that in the appeal for the spiritual philosophy of the Founding Fathers, Protestants and Catholics can and do speak as one. Nor are they alone.

For example, when the Catholic hierarchy issued its collective pastoral on the damage of secularism in the national life, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, an executive of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, made it clear that his co-religionists, whatever their positions on other and secondary matters, would stand together with us in what he called the "common fight against the inroads of humanistic secularism and the attacks of Atheistic Communism" which would "undermine the spiritual foundations upon which our freedoms, civilization and our culture necessarily rest."

Those foundations have always included the recognition that there are not two standards of morality. There is only one. It is God's standard. That standard is the norm of rectitude, righteousness and justice. That single standard covers all man's relations to God, to himself and to the world about him.

It applies to every conceivable situation in life—in the home, in business, in the school, in the political field or in the field of entertainment. The thoughts of men are many; the will of God is one—and so by its very nature, God's standard precludes that duplicity which not only tempts man to live

his life on two levels, one of morality, the other of legality, while beguiling him into thinking that this can be done without any compromise of moral principles.

Such a two-faced way of living explains the scandalous anomaly evident at times in our national life of paying lip service to God while failing to honor His claims in daily life. Of such a way of life, the god is neither Jehovah nor Jesus Christ; it is Janus, — and we do well to pray earnestly and resolve mightily that we will always be at one in repudiating the two-faced god of the pagans.

That God's standard has disappeared more and more from our national life is due, as the Catholic bishops and the Presbyterian moderator both bear witness, to that totalitarian secularism and practical atheism which rule out all idea of the Sovereignty of God.

Against such lamentable pretensions we must bear, in season and out, uncompromising witness to God's dominion over all the work of His hands, ourselves and our societies included. We must be vigilant and prompt to affirm the sovereignty of God and His place in human affairs wherever opportunity presents. Where there is talk of the service we owe anything less than God, we must recall the principle by which St. Joan resolved every question pertaining to rival loves and loyalties: The Lord God must be first served.

The undermining of the standard of God's law in temporal affairs has been further hastened by the denial or neglect of the primacy of the spiritual, with a consequent debasing of human personality and degrading of human society. Ours is in large part a technical civilization, a "know-how" rather than a "know-why" civilization, and therefore one in which material

and mechanical values inevitably tend to dominate thought and action. Excessive emphasis on "know-how" to the exclusion of speculation on "know-why" has produced the cult of the body, the predominance of the material, the worship of the gadget, an indifference to the spiritual and a repudiation of the moral.

We may note this in professional discussions, especially those pertaining to sociology, medicine and politics. Take, for example, the question of social disease which touches on all three. It offers an obvious example of how medical treatment on the material level alone, scientific techniques of "know-how" without reference to moral considerations of "know-why," are woefully inadequate as means to the protection or the perfection of persons.

Obviously in the case of the treatment of social disease, the problem is never purely scientific — and neither can the solution be. These actions and the offenses involved are never merely legal questions; they always include moral elements that are at the heart of the matter.

And yet, in *Social Medicine*, a publication of the New York Academy of Medicine, I read this significant paragraph typical of the neo-secularist approach:

Not long ago health administrators thought that if only some excellent curative agent were available to treat venereal disease cases, the problem could be solved fairly promptly. Now penicillin is providing more satisfactory treatment than the most sanguine might have dared hope, and yet we find that instead of diminishing, the venereal disease rate is rising. Recently the venereal disease director of one of our best state health departments said that he is convinced that the problem is much broader than that of treatment alone.

There must be a concerted assault on all

aspects of the situation if effective control is to be secured. Treatment must be pushed as completely and carefully as possible. There must also be an attack by all community agencies which can help to remove conditions leading to promiscuity. Sex education must be improved and decent recreational opportunities made available. Home ties will have to be strengthened, prostitution repressed and intensive efforts made to rehabilitate socially those now engaged in prostitution and perversion.

Now what all of us, you and I, should find discouraging, what, as a matter of candid fact, we should find downright dishonest in this paragraph, as in the whole report, is the studious avoidance of the use of the word "moral." There is talk of "family relations," "prostitution," numerous other notions all involving morality, moral codes, moral judgment, moral relations, moral questions — but a careful and surely not accidental omission of the word "moral." The omission is significant and I am afraid it is symptomatic. It is also fatal; fatal not merely to morality, but in final terms, to the work, prestige and interest of medicine, sociology and law.

It exemplifies that repudiation of the

primacy of the spiritual which is the unhappy by-product of a "know-how" without "know-why" civilization, and of the effort to divorce the laws and procedures of the land from the law and the Providence of God.

It should be our common concern to give the lie to any such pretense of the independence of valid legal philosophy from moral philosophy, and divorce of valid human law from the ultimate law of God. For all human laws, whether ecclesiastical or civil, have their source in God's law; otherwise they are meaningless. All human sanctions ultimately depend for their force and their meaning on the sanction of the conscience that is sensitive to the law of God.

The appeal to that conscience must be made by both the teachers of the law of God and the practitioners of the law of the land, or all law is in peril. So intimately bound up with one another are the laws of the land and the law of God, that he who mocks the one, undermines the other — while he who serves either becomes the noble servant of both.