

arrogance to the level of oppression. Those deluded by such an aspiration are blinded by their close-mindedness to the evil they unwittingly pursue.

One of the prime values of religion—most particularly of the fundamentalist variety—to the despot who wishes to bend the religious impulse to his own ends, is this: If you can get folks to embrace a belief system that flies in the face of common sense, you can justify anything to them by telling them that their belief system approves or requires it.

Modern media have turned electoral politics into a dirty business. Representative government has become entirely about winning or losing. A fight. A horse race. An in-depth debate of substantive issues? Boring! When I was a kid, politicians were expected to debate the issues. Personal attacks were considered bad taste. Sure, lapses occurred, and inflamed rhetoric appealed more to the emotions than the mind, but ad-men's amoral propaganda techniques were not yet in the saddle. The ad-men have latched on to what the politicians have long known: pious posturing persuades. The politician who pimps piety in partisan propaganda debases and defiles both religion and democracy.

Those who try to pimp organized religion to those of us for whom the spiritual is a personal matter have the audacity to ask us to trade our hard-earned private convictions for unquestioning allegiance to a sect with which the rest of organized religion disagrees. When you'all make up your minds, I'll make up mine.

secular world. All the major religions brand themselves as religions of peace and yet end up as pretexts for violence. Why is this?

What is it that organized religions do that secular organizations don't? First, they claim possession of answers to the mysteries of life handed down from ancient divine and unimpeachable sources. Second, they require of their communicants absolute and blind faith in the veracity of these teachings, even if modern secular knowledge renders them absurd. Third, they provide a community of fellow believers who share rituals, rites of passage, a literary and artistic tradition, and a belief in their superiority to non-believers. They also provide an analgesic balm to life's unavoidable painful and tragic episodes, which the non-religious seek through less transcendental media. Thus the Marxist slogan, "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

The mind committed to religious faith is a closed mind. The problems of meaning and purpose (as well as the nature and source of true joy) that must personally be sussed out (usually at the cost of enduring the consequences of trips down blind alleys) by those with minds open to the multiple possibilities of human experience only ruffle the surface of the true believers consciousness. But their cores remain shielded from the pain and loneliness that come with confronting the raw reality of human experience. The faithful also wander down blind alleys, but they see it as the path God has chosen for them. They also suffer, but it is God's punishment for their sins. The personal work of making sense of the world is forgone, although it often takes considerable mental gymnastics (for those who care to make the effort) to make sense of the world in terms of their religion. Personal responsibility for actions counts for less than constancy of belief--the lapse from which is the one unforgivable sin.

Undeniably, many saintly people take inspiration from these ancient faiths and live their lives according to them with grace and integrity. But the more usual case finds the believer vulnerable to the sins of pride, envy, and anger. Pride at not yielding to the temptations of, gluttony, lust, sloth, and covetousness productive of feelings of superiority to those who have. Envy of those enjoying gluttony, lust, sloth, and covetousness with guilt-free abandon. And, most problematic, anger at those enjoying gluttony, lust, sloth, and covetousness, especially if they add insult to injury by expressing sinful pride in their hedonic apostasy.

What's the difference between someone who believes in "God" and the dyslexic who believes in "Dog"? Or the Muslim who believes in "Allah"? Precious little, I would say. They all share the conviction of their own superiority to each other as well as to those who believe in Mickey Mouse, Elvis, or the nihilists for whom "Nothing" is sacred. So what begins as a universal striving for virtue through transcendence of the world as it's revealed to our senses ends in bloody sectarian strife.

Absolute faith renders opaque the absolute arrogance of the evangelical proselytizer (of whatever faith). Going further by seeking to enact the tenets or ceremonies of a particular faith into universally applicable laws coercively enforced by government takes

Now let's talk about groups. Groups tend to seek order and consensus around central ideas and an elite chain of command. Otherwise you have a bunch of wackos playing bumper-cars. So we band together into ever-larger groups to defend ourselves, creating--finally--the modern nation-state. We find that order requires that the state defend ourselves against each other, as well. Logically, individual freedom requires equality among individuals--unless it's your world and the rest of us just live in it. Therefore, we see that the personal freedoms already mentioned are constrained by their effect on others. Your freedom ends when your fist touches my nose.

Also, we band together to practice spiritual devotion in a variety of ancient traditions. These organizations--churches--also seek order and consensus around central ideas nurtured by an elite chain of command. In nation-states where the population embraces only one church, some form of theocracy is the likely result. Leaving aside the question of the validity of theocracies for the moment, the existence of multiple religions in a nation-state requires people to have the freedom to band together in churches of their choice. Otherwise, their basic right to freedom of thought and expression is lost.

This creates an interesting situation. National citizenship requires the individual to obey the laws enacted by the secular elite and enforced by a chain of command that stretches all the way from the capitol to the remotest hamlet. You can only avoid belonging to this particular social group--your country--by emigrating. If you belong to another social group--say, a church--you agree to obey the dictates of church doctrine (at the very least), and in most cases, the dictates of the clergy--another elite with its own chain of command. What if these two elites send conflicting messages? "No man can serve two masters." For someone who takes both citizenship and religion seriously, this can be the mother of all double-binds. I know, "Render unto Caesar..." and all that, but historically, the dividing line between state and religious authority has been the source of contentious, and often violent, interaction.

In America, we have a tradition of an ongoing tug of war between those whose religious beliefs and traditions place inhibitions on behavior which is permitted by the secular authorities, and those who feel that only those religious beliefs that everyone shares should find expression in law. And there *is* a core of belief about which behaviors are permissible and which are not that's shared by everyone from atheists to Roman Catholics. Anyone who subscribes to the Golden Rule—all ancient religious traditions contain some version of it—must logically resist the temptation to want everyone else to conform to the particular religion-based limitations he or she embraces, unless demonstrable harm can be proved.

So what is the big problem? Protestants and Catholics kill each other in Ireland. Jews and Muslims kill each other in Palestine/Israel. Hindus and Muslims kill each other in Kashmir. On and on the list goes. In America, religious wars are confined to terrorist attacks by Christian fundamentalists against secular abortion clinics, skinhead attacks on mosques and synagogues, and Islamic fundamentalist attacks on the power centers of the

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We live in confusing times. On the one hand, America dominates all the other nations of the world, consumes more, wastes extravagantly, rides high even in the midst of the temporary blip of a recession. On the other, America is galvanized with fear and anger at having its most potent military and corporate symbols attacked, is dependant on foreign oil, is being prepared to accept endless war against the rest of the world, if need be, to protect national interests.

We are a people capable of great generosity. Our contribution to art and science is immense. Our hand shapes all aspects of the evolving global culture. At the same time, every aspect of our society is riddled with corruption. Families dissolve, routinely. Prisons are filled to overflowing. Politicians vie for office in an atmosphere of legalized graft. Corporations cook the books with their accountant's connivance. Priests molest innocent children. Official government information is crafted to persuade rather than inform. Everything, and everyone, is for sale.

Most troubling of all, America lacks a coherent, consensual, positive vision of the kind of future our power and wealth will enable.

Peace vs. War

The North American continent has the most favorable geopolitical position on earth. Imagine the logistical nightmare of mounting an invasion of the U.S. Russia could come across the Arctic, but how would it defend a 10,000-mile-plus supply line? All others would need an impracticably gargantuan naval armada. The only time America has been seriously threatened with a foreign incursion since 1812, has been during the last fifty years during the cold war during which time we faced the threat of nuclear annihilation from Soviet ICBMs. But nuclear devastation would have still left America un-occupied, indeed, unoccupiable. The only benefit to the Soviets would have been removing us as a threat--which we were, since we were the first to field nuclear missiles.

Witnessing the vast devastation of WWII that mechanized weapon technology is capable of inflicting, the U.S. determined that the number one strategic imperative was that any future wars would be fought on foreign soil. Accordingly, our military occupies military bases in--at last count--forty nations around the world.

Religion

Freedom of religion requires the separation of church and state. Why is this necessarily so? Because all freedoms are based on three basic freedoms: freedom of person, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought. Personal freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of thought. Freedom for an individual to embrace and practice a particular religion is absolutely dependent on freedom of thought (which includes feelings as well as thoughts). Religious devotion exists within the mind and heart of the devotee, or not at all.