

One Nation, Under God

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The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion, by Stephen L. Carter (New York: Basic Books, 1993) vii. 328 pages, Index.

Contra Mundum, No. 10, Winter 1994

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It's no secret that Thomas Jefferson looked upon Christianity with a jaundice eye. He did not believe in the deity of Christ, rewrote portions of the Bible, and followed that form of religion, theism, that he took with the rest of the Enlightenment hogwash he imported from France. That he worried about religion, and specifically its ability to attract followers and demand loyalty, is everywhere apparent in his writings. Jefferson worried that those who had a strong faith, a belief that mattered, could cause trouble. His was a republic for those who knew where to leave their religious sentiments: at home, in the closet, until Sunday.

One might think of his view of religion as a Jesus Bug really, one that could be kept in a jar with holes punched in the top so it would not die exactly, but be carefully watched. On Sundays it would be brought out where it could skate across varnished hearts, only to be incarcerated once again before it got out in the world and did something stupid, like cause change.

Jefferson was not the only founding Father who felt this way. If anything, Evangelicals often overstate the nature of the religious belief of our early fathers who were so influenced by the poison of the Enlightenment, a movement that did its best to shoot that dog in the manger, that they tolerated religion at best. Franklin certainly had misgivings about religion, as did Hamilton. Others, too, expressed uneasiness about religion and its place in government. This often confuses well-meaning readers who hie back to the original documents and read heartfelt, almost evangelical expressions of faith. But many of these expressions were not unlike Voltaire's: never talk atheism in front of the servants for fear of having your throat slit. While they might not have thought Christianity to be an "infamy" that had to be crushed, as did Voltaire, they would more or less have agreed with him that they wanted "... my attorney, my tailor, my servants and even my wife to believe in God [because] I shall be robbed and cuckolded less often."

Religion in general and Christianity in particular has provided an esemplastic for social behavior; it has been the glue that held society together at the seams. When we began ripping those seams about twenty-five years ago, we soon discovered we'd unleashed horrors more terrible than those from Pandora's Box. And so, down through the years, political and social thinkers have endorsed religion more or less while holding their noses. Consider John Dewey, for example, who hated Christianity with a vehemence equal to Voltaire's, yet, if anything, tried to establish Flannery O'Connor's "Church Without Christ", with his moral consciousness-raising sans God.

Enter Stephen Carter, William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale University. His *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* stirred the hearts of many conservatives. Here was a noted black law professor who said things that, if said by a white man, would have gotten him branded as racist. Liberals, who claimed Carter as one of their moderate own, were scandalized by his work. Why was he trying to torpedo Affirmative Action programs by admitting they might be exclusively racially motivated? And why tell anyone but close friends that it might not be good for minorities! Carter put in enough qualifications in *Reflections* to make it more palatable than, say, the same book written by a Walter Williams, a Thomas Sowell or even a Dinesh D'Souza. But the book, widely read by liberals and conservatives alike, put Carter in the spotlight. Perhaps he was neo-conservative, or neo-liberal. Whatever his ideology, *Reflections* was hailed with bi-partisan praise.

Professor Carter's recent sequel has conservative and liberals buzzing with wild enthusiasm. Even the rare faint praise has been laudatory, not damning. Bill Clinton, that paragon of virtue, immediately cast it as required reading for all his Cabinet.

Now even if Wild Bill had not made such demands of the book, one would, after carefully reading it, begin to have serious doubts. The book is filled with wonderfully conservative sentiments: religion is important; religious sentiment must be protected; religious persons should not have to apologize for their beliefs; they should not be made to feel ignorant or unimportant in the public square; and religious practices (the Menorah, manger scenes) should not be cluttered with rotund Santas, bathetic red-nosed reindeers and wisemen with corncob pipes and button noses. So far so good. But what disturbs is where the book leaves us: with the status quo pretty much as we left it in secular hands. It's like checking into to a hospital where the doctor tells you exactly what is wrong with you, precisely describing your symptoms. He offers sound treatment, which you follow religiously, but you end feeling the same and exhibiting identical symptoms. The doctor, however, declares you cured.

Even more troubling has been the reception of the book. George Will nearly hyperventilated over it. The *New York Times*, predictably, did hyperventilate over it. *Commentary* thought it well worth reading. And while *National Review* did worry over parts of it more than anyone else, the end result was a favorable review. That is why this unfavorable review is approached with such fear and trepidation. While I offer no disclaimers, I do willingly admit that this review sees the book as a monumental danger,

both to religion and to conservative politics.

Carter is clear about his theme:

This book is not about law, but about attitudes - the attitudes that we as a political society [i.e., man is by nature political; hence, society is state-oriented] hold toward religion. It is not a call to tear down the wall between church and state or to impose oppressive religious regimes on each other will-nilly. It is an effort to understand our instincts and our rules and our rhetoric, to figure out why it is that religion is seen as worse than other forces that mold people's minds, and to try to discover whether there might be a way to preserve the separation of church and state without trivializing faith as we do today.

Nothing could sound more enervating than for religious people to hear society belittles religious sentiment. That we have come to trivialize religion has been a charge made repeatedly by Richard John Neuhaus, William Bennett, Patrick Buchanan, William F. Buckley Jr. and many others. Moreover, Carter doesn't stop there with good sentiments about his subject, but continues with astute observations about how internecine all of this trivialization is for religion.

A television show, he explains, offered "When is church more than just a place of worship?" Carter rightly concludes that the idea behind this show was to minimize or somehow sell short the idea of "just a place of worship" as if a church being merely such a place should be ashamed. (Incidentally, it would appear Methodists, Episcopalians and Presbyterians (USA) *have* been chagrined and have gone to worshipping goddesses and removing from worship the atonement.)

Carter even calls all this a disturbing pass, "when culture teaches that religion is not to be taken seriously, even by those who profess to believe it". Had he stopped right here and called for reform of public policy, all would have been well. But about one-fourth of the way through the book, some alarms begin to sound softly.

First, Carter argues that the claim of some individuals that their faith requires exclusivity, "is the nature of *that individual's faith*, not the nature of *religion itself*." (Emphases in the original). He goes on to make clear what he means:

So Christians who insist that Jews (or Muslims or Buddhists or anyone else) cannot find salvation without accepting Jesus Christ as savior should not insist they are making only the argument that every religion demands; they should confess freely that they are making the argument that their reading of Christianity demands. (p.92)

One is hard-pressed to know what Carter means. If he is saying that not all religions make

exclusive claims, one must allow that there are some that do not. Universalism and Unitarianism come to mind. On the other hand, if he is saying that this claim of accepting Jesus Christ as savior is an *individual interpretation* (as it would appear he is) one is bewildered. “If you do not believe that I am He”, (John 8:24) comes to mind immediately. “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby ye must be saved,” (Acts 4:12;) is another. The fact that 2,000 years of Christian teaching also made this claim of its adherents is apparently a rather gargantuan case of group think.

But let's pass this off either as a slip of the pen, or one of those academic points whereby half the New Testament is discarded for various textual reasons (and those really hard parts of the New Testament are always targeted), and move on. Carter, in attempting to explain why people motivated by religious sentiments to mold public policy are misunderstood, deems them “scary”. As an example of this, he cites the 1992 Republican Convention “...which filled the air with the kind of cruel and divisive rhetoric that gives religion a bad name.” Tom Wicker's comparison of that convention to the Salem Witch trials is “apt, for the Salem trials... rested on a societal distaste for those who were different, particularly when those who were different were women.” Later, when a discussion of the Christian Right is enucleated, Carter argues that it will do no good for liberals to call them “racist” or “homophobic” because “[s]uch insults will simply send [them] rushing into the waiting arms of the next demagogue.” (p.264)

What is to be made of this? Believers who express their faith without reservation are dubbed scary and on a witch hunt. Those who fear labels like homophobic and racist probably are, and, as portrayed by the unimportant writer for the New York Times who called Christians people who could not think on their own, merely ripe for picking by any demagogue who happens by. Somehow this strikes me as not very flattering to firm believers. It also seems to distance Carter from those who believe with heart, soul, strength and mind, and establishes what may be called 'respectable believers', or believers who know faith's place.

Readers should not get the impression, however, that the book is not sympathetic to the Christian Right. It is about as sympathetic as any book dares to be in this age, that isn't also written by a member of the Christian Right. It isn't that Carter is not sympathetic—he is. Nor is it that he fails to understand the issues in the debate—he does. What troubles is that he fails to make the important distinctions he argues that he is making, a begging of the question if ever there was one.

For example, Carter will grant the religious their say, but he grants *every* “religious” group its say. In his argument, the Waco Davidians have just as much right in religious discussions as Protestants; peyote-sucking Native Americans as Christians. The Hare Krisnas as much as the Southern Baptists. He makes no attempt to draw a line between those who follow a religious practice and those who would make an idol out of a dogma, make service greater than the god. The allotheistic are equal to the theistic.

Granted, such distinctions are difficult because they must, by definition, leave someone out. Moreover, they imply a standard. But of course that is why they are important. To say that the First Amendment had the rights of the Black Sabbaths in mind as much as, say, Protestants, is insanity.

One would not want to deny anyone freedom to buy land, build a house, and drive a car. But if, as a self-proclaimed religious thinker, I argued that certain individuals in Congress should be routinely assassinated, I would hope that religious leaders everywhere would call for my imprisonment. Moreover, I would hope that I would not be invited to discussions on “Belief in Everyday Life”.

Carter does not seem to want to make these distinctions. He indicates as much when he writes about moral values. The issue may be hopeless for *whose* moral values will we follow?, he asks. But this is silly. Why *not* start with the Ten Commandments? Moreover, Carter, while recognizing the virtues of school prayer, argues that the state *must* come down on the side of no prayer in schools—not even a moment of silence—for it would violate the First Amendment. He tells a teary-eyed story of students who, when prayer was in school, must have felt tremendous burdens since they did not participate—and so, they must not. For the Christian among you, on whose foundations this country was built, cry in your pillow, please. This may be a nation with the soul of a church, but we intend to run it like a gymnasium.

In the case of *Roe vs. Wade*, Carter is careful to point out all the pitfalls of the legislation, what bad judicial reasoning it is, and yet still comes down on the side of its support. When the creation/evolution debate is rehearsed, Carter is again sympathetic. Yet he sides with the evolutionist. It is clear from his discussion, however, that he is not familiar with the flaws revealed by Michael Denton, Wendell Bird, or others. Throughout this book the result is always the same. A conservative issue is raised, it is sympathetically talked about and in some cases, overwhelmingly argued to be right. But in the end, the secular solution is virtually unequivocally supported.

In point of fact this is where the book proves its most nocent. Here is a book that grants the conservative arguments on school prayer, abortion, religious practice, and many others. But in the end, this is a book that sides with secular conclusions. Throughout all the discussion, many asides are thrown in focusing on how uneasy America is about religion, how important God is for our survival, how silly some court decisions have been in their stridency against religious practice. And yet, and yet, the conclusion remains the same: secular America must remain secular. Yes, you may practice your faith in your home and in your private, parochial schools. But take it out of the jar and try to influence public policy, and we must take the swatter after you. Oh, we hope things will improve by having this discussion. But you see, some of it simply cannot change.

The final disturbing matter about the book is this: Carter has successfully taken what were exclusive conservative issues—prayer in schools, abortion on demand, creationism, values education and others—and turned them into concerns for liberals. Never mind that

the end result is the same for Carter as for Ted Kennedy or Bill Clinton. Liberals can no longer be charged with having ignored the issues. They care. They are concerned. They are talking about them.

In one fell-swoop, conservatives have been co-opted on two counts. They are no longer those who are concerned about these issues alone and, more importantly, *they are now made to appear to be the fanatical ones*, demanding non-secular solutions. At a time in our national debate on these issues sides with conservative solutions, when *Atlantic Monthly* declares “Dan Quayle Was Right”, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan declares that deviancy has been defined down and Charles Krauthammer (in *The New Republic* no less) avers that deviancy has been defined up in certain cases, here is a liberal who brings all of these concerns into the very camp whose warriors brought us this trouble in the first place.

Carter is very well-intentioned. He appears to want to come down on the side of conservatives on most issues. But there also seems to be this business about one's liberal credentials standing in the way. With this book, he has declared his concern, thrown down the gauntlet to conservatives to be as understanding and sympathetic as he is, and lassoed the issues into another arena altogether. While his discussion was helpful and necessary, his solutions are cause for alarm. This books should be seen for what it is: neo-liberal solutions to conservative issues.