

The rise of the irreligious

Historic Judeo-Christian origin behind humanism is being dismissed

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‘Allahu akbar,” the Hamas terrorists screamed as they invaded Israel and killed hundreds of civilians in cold blood, raped women, kidnapped children, and desecrated the bodies of some of the Jews they massacred by beheading their corpses with shovels.

Whereas “God is great” is a worthy pronouncement for Jews, Muslims and Christians alike, the murderers’ extremism that masquerades as religious sentiment does little to endear them to us. Instead, shouting the phrase to invoke Allah does much violence to the religion of peace that Islam professes to be.

Many will undoubtedly chalk up the latest Israel-Hamas war to just another religious squabble, but the slaughter was about power, not religion.

In our own country, the influence of religion and especially organized religion on our own citizenry has weakened considerably in the last few decades. Some argue that we are becoming a post-Christian country. Peter Smith reported on the phenomenon in The Washington Times on Oct. 10 about the rise of the “nones,” who profess no religious affiliation and check “none” in the religion box when asked.

They are an eclectic mix, including atheists, agnostics, spiritualists, and the religiously unaffiliated. The nones are now 30% of the country. They favor Democrats over Republicans nearly 3 to 1.

Observers of American history note that religiosity in America flows in approximately 80-year cycles of great awakenings. Since colonial times, we have gone through four such cycles. They assert that we are at a low point in religious conviction that will soon self-correct.

This time, however, may be different. First, our culture has been predicated on religious freedom that coalesced over decades into a civic religion, emerging as an amalgam of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish sensibilities. It led to the addition of the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 in response to the atheism of communism.

The civic religion meant that Americans live under a Supreme Being (“Nature’s God,” as the Declaration of Independence identifies him), that we are God’s children, and that all are made in God’s image. The civic religion endorses no confessional position, nor is it particularly religious, given that these premises can substantially be inferred from natural law alone.

Yet today, the consensus of civic religion hangs in a tenuous balance, with the nones holding a substantial position. Whether the prior cultural consensus will survive remains to be seen.

Second, our law is predicated on Judeo-Christian principles. They include (a) anchoring our laws to one reality, (b) reflecting natural law, (c) equality under the law, (d) demanding personal responsibility and (e) requiring communal commitment. The principles, previously understood to be coterminous with the republic itself, can no longer be presumed to inhabit pride of place.

An emergent coalition of citizens, including an array of nones, does not place primacy on them. They offer their counter positions: (a) There is “my reality” and there is “your reality,” (b) moral relativism, (c)

equity, (d) perfectibility of society and (e) radical individualism. Whether our foundational legal principles, like our previously constructed cultural consensus, will survive is uncertain.

Most nones acknowledge their secular humanist origins and claim them as their moral anchors, dismissing the historic Judeo-Christian origin behind humanism. William Herberg cautioned about this fallacy in 1951: “The attempt made in recent decades by secularist thinkers to disengage the moral principles of Western civilization from their scripturally based religious context, in the assurance that they could live a life of their own as ‘humanistic’ ethics, has resulted in our ‘cut flower culture.’

“Cut flowers retain their original beauty and fragrance, but only as long as they retain the vitality that they have drawn from their now-severed roots; after that is exhausted, they wither and die. So with freedom, brotherhood, justice, and personal dignity — the values that form the moral foundation of our civilization. Without the life-giving power of the faith out of which they have sprung, they possess neither meaning nor vitality.”

With the rise of anti-religionism posed by the nones, we throw ourselves back to the admonition of John Adams, who served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

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