

The New Atheists and Political God Talk

The Religion and Society Debate

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Much has been made in recent months of the slew of books coming out that question or attack religion. Ronald Aronson refers to the authors as the “new atheists” (*The Nation*, 6/25/07). Anthony Gottlieb calls them “atheists with attitude” (*The New Yorker*, 5/21/07). Among the most talked-about books of this kind is *god is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. And these English-language volumes are bolstered by others from continental European atheists, such as Michel Onfray, who is bluntly challenging the revival of both Islam and Christianity in his backyard. Karen Armstrong describes the new movement as “missionary secularism” because its adherents want “to convert nonbelievers to their worldview” (Andrew Higgins, *Wall Street Journal*, 4/12/07).

While these trumpeters of atheism are trying to save society from the evils of religion, some American politicians, looking ahead to the 2008 presidential election, can’t seem to stop talking about how much god means to them. Democrats in particular, according to Ruth Marcus, are “on a mission: to make inroads into Republicans’ ability to attract and, more important, turn out religious voters” (*Washington Post*, 6/6/07).

What shall we make of all of this? Should we be encouraged by the religious vitality we see all around us, strong enough apparently to encourage politicians to fess up while putting atheists on the defensive? Or should we be discouraged by the fact that atheism now seems to be growing in popularity? Or is it perhaps the superficiality of both the god talk and the anti-god talk that is cause for dismay.

The first comment I want to offer actually comes from Charles Strohmer in his newly posted essay on the Hitchens book mentioned above—*god is Not Great* (<http://www.charlesstrohmer.com/hitchensmanoffaith.html>). Strohmer, who is working on a project with the Center for Public Justice on wisdom and foreign policy, goes to the heart of Hitchens’s attack on religion when he asks how religions could have arisen among human beings in the first place. If, as Hitchens sees it, human beings are the creators of religion and religion is such an awful thing, then Hitchens’s fundamental problem is not with religion but with humankind.

Furthermore, as Strohmer shows, Hitchens cannot avoid his own leap of faith when he appeals to secular rationality over against religion. His move to atheism also turns out

to require “a leap of faith” even though the object of his faith is different than that of traditional believers. The reason, as Strohmer points out, is that “all arguments against faith are arguments ultimately *from* faith.” To a degree, Hitchens recognizes this. During his years as a Marxist, he called his commitment a “secular faith” and said that Marxism corresponded to religion. Although Hitchens now believes his naturalistic worldview does not depend on faith, Strohmer concludes otherwise: “Atheists may not wish to call their beliefs about ultimate reality a faith, and it really doesn’t matter what they are called, because by any other name they would still function principally the same in the drama that is human life and death. There is no way to prove . . . that faith in naturalism is going to be the end of the matter when each of us is confronted with the most absolute fact of life, [namely] death.”

How shall we contrast this “missionary secularism” with the god talk we are hearing from American politicians? First of all, the American presidential candidates are not debating the existence or non-existence of god or the importance of true faith (in contrast to atheism) for the well-being of society. The candidates are, for the most part, simply speaking about their personal faiths to assure voters who take faith seriously that the candidates identify with them and thus deserve their trust and their vote.

In the second place, the candidates are not trying to convert atheists in the same way that the new atheists are trying to convert religious believers away from faith in their gods. In fact, I don’t think the atheists would be much offended by the American candidates’ personal talk about god except to the extent that they interpret such talk as an ingredient of American self-righteousness through which politicians work to assure citizens that god is on America’s side. That kind of political pandering is precisely one of the evils of religion that the atheists rail against.

However, the reason I think these “atheists with attitude” would not be horribly offended by American political god talk is that even the most personally religious candidates want to uphold America’s political secularity. The American civil religion works, in other words, as long as candidates and public officials speak only in personal terms about their private, so-called “sectarian” faiths. By contrast, references to the god of public life must be made in all-inclusive terms (“God bless America”) that embrace atheists as fully as traditional believers. No one needs to worship that god and citizens are free to ignore it/him/her, because the function of the public god is to champion America. It is America, after all, that we and America’s god celebrate.

I contend that we need something different from what we are hearing from both the new atheists and the presidential candidates. On appropriate occasions it is time for some serious *public* talk about the transcendent Creator of heaven and earth, the Judge of all nations (Acts 17:24-31). For if it is God’s mercy that is upholding the demands of justice, which make possible an open society and equal treatment of people of all faiths, then both atheists and civil religionists are missing the boat.

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