

The Evolution of Religious Freedom

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Abstract

Since the late 18th century, liberal democratic states have considered freedom of religion to be a fundamental human right, and today the principle is prevalent in law and practice in the Western world. However, faith-based religion poses one of the gravest threats to the stability and security of secular nations. Given that faith-based religious beliefs (such as those espoused by Christianity and Islam) are unquestionably delusional, and that they frequently threaten or undermine individual liberty and social justice, it is remarkable that secular democracies accord those beliefs so much respect and forbearance. Faith-based religious beliefs are not only intellectually disreputable and morally problematic, however—they also have enormous potential for death and destruction, because they frequently inspire terrorist violence and sectarian enmity. National policies concerning the exercise of religion should be based upon a forthright recognition of the irrationality, intolerance, and immorality inherent in faith-based approaches to knowledge and belief. If secular nations are to survive and flourish in the 21st century, freedom *of* religion must be replaced by the fundamental human right to freedom *from* religion.

Introduction

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the bombings in Madrid on March 11, 2004, the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 7, 2004, and the bombings in London on July 7, 2005 were all carried out by devout Muslims who believed that their actions would gratify their god and earn them lavish rewards in the afterlife. These familiar and lamentable facts should be more than sufficient to establish the proposition that faith in Islam can be an important element in the motivations for horrific violence. Nevertheless, many people in the predominantly Christian societies that have been the victims of recent Islamist attacks believe that their conflict is not with Islam *per se*, but with Muslim extremists who have purportedly perverted the authentic doctrines of the Islamic faith. The popular wisdom holds that religious tolerance and religious moderation are the appropriate antidotes to religious extremism and religious fundamentalism. The popular wisdom is naive and mistaken. The deadly threat to civilization does not come from religious extremism or religious fundamentalism, but from religious faith itself, because religious faith is intrinsically intolerant. Furthermore, Christianity has the same potential for evil and injustice as Islam, and the Western world cripples itself in its war on Islam by failing to repudiate its own favorite brand of

murderous superstition. The central doctrines of virtually all religions are fundamentally at odds with the core values of enlightened civilization (such as rational negotiation and social inclusiveness). Consequently, secular democratic nations should be less concerned with protecting freedom *of* religion and more concerned with guaranteeing freedom *from* religion.*

The Scourge of Islam

For devout Muslims who have faith in the Koran, the future to which they aspire is one in which all nonbelievers (“infidels,” in their pejorative jargon) have been converted to Islam, subjugated to a Muslim caliphate, or killed (Harris 2004:110). While some individual Muslims might be able to envision a world where other religions peacefully coexist with Islam, such broad-minded, secularly-influenced Muslims can find relatively little support in the Koran for their tolerant interpretations, nor can they offer any compelling faith-based arguments to dissuade their more literal-minded brethren from positions of intolerance. Regardless of the proportion of tolerant to intolerant Muslims in the world, two facts are clear: *Islam* is intolerant, and so are plenty of Muslims. That, as Sam Harris (2004:203) describes it in his powerful book *The End of Faith*, is the core of the problem:

“Life under the Taliban is, to a first approximation, what millions of Muslims around the world want to impose on the rest of us. They long to establish a society in which—when times are *good*—women will remain vanquished and invisible, and anyone given to spiritual, intellectual, or sexual freedom will be slaughtered before crowds of sullen, uneducated men. This, needless to say, is a vision of life worth resisting.”

Granted, some Muslims have decried the murderous violence of their terrorist co-religionists, and they have claimed that Islam is actually a religion of peace. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Islam is a religion that celebrates ignorance and absurdity. It is a

* The argument presented in this essay is one whose essential premises and conclusions I have addressed elsewhere (e.g., Lett 1990; 1991; 1997a; 1997b; 2003; 2004), but it is also an argument whose general outlines will be familiar to readers of the recent compelling books by Sam Harris (2004) and Richard Dawkins (2006).

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religion of misogyny and hatred towards homosexuals. Above all, it is a religion of violent intolerance towards non-Muslims. The evidence for these claims comes from a source that Muslims themselves affirm is absolutely authoritative: the Koran. Here, for example, is a sampling of what the Koran has to say about unbelievers (each quotation is followed by the chapter and verse citation):

“The curse of Allah is on disbelievers” (2:89). “For disbelievers is a shameful doom” (2:90). “Allah (Himself) is an enemy to the disbelievers” (2:98). “Verily we have revealed unto thee clear tokens, and only miscreants will disbelieve in them” (2:99). “And whoso disbelieveth in it, those are they who are the losers” (2:121). “As for him who disbelieveth, I [Allah] shall leave him in contentment for a while, then I shall compel him to the doom of Fire—a hapless journey’s end!” (2:126). “Those who disbelieve, and die while disbelievers; on them is the curse of Allah and of angels and of men combined” (2:161). “Lo! those who hide aught of the Scripture which Allah hath revealed and purchase a small gain therewith, they eat into their bellies nothing else than fire...Theirs will be a painful doom” (2:174). “And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship until they first attack you there, but if they attack you [there] than slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers” (2:191). “The disbelievers, they are wrongdoers” (2:254). “Pardon us, absolve us and have mercy on us, Thou, our Protector, and give us victory over the disbelieving folk” (2:286). “Say unto those who disbelieve: Ye shall be overcome and gathered unto Hell, an evil resting-place” (3:12). “Lo! those who disbelieve the revelations of Allah...promise them a painful doom” (3:21). “As for those who disbelieve I [Allah] shall chastise them with a heavy chastisement in the world and the Hereafter; and they will have no helpers” (3:26). “We shall cast terror into the hearts of those

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who disbelieve...Their habitation is the Fire, and hapless the abode of the wrong-doers” (3:151). “For disbelievers we prepare a shameful doom” (4:37). “Whoso fighteth in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward” (4:74). “Those who believe do battle for the cause of Allah; and those who disbelieve do battle for the cause of idols. So fight the minions of the devil” (4:76). “They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve...take them and kill them wherever ye find them” (4:89). “In truth the disbelievers are an open enemy to you” (4:101). “Lo! those who believe, then disbelieve and then [again] believe, then disbelieve, and then increase in disbelief, Allah will never pardon them” (4:137). “The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger...will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land. Such will be their degradation in the world, and in the Hereafter theirs will be an awful doom” (5:33). “But as for those who deny Our revelations, torment will afflict them for what they used to disobey” (6:49). “Who doeth greater wrong than he who denieth the revelations of Allah, and turneth away from them? We award unto those who turn away from Our revelations an evil doom” (6:157).

These tedious examples, numerous as they are, only scratch the surface of the small-minded intolerance that fills the sacred book of Islam. Whatever else the Koran may say about the goodness and mercy and generosity of Allah, it is abundantly clear that any Muslim who wishes to find scriptural justification for persecuting non-Muslims need not look far. Open the Koran virtually at random, and the pettiness, ignorance, and intolerance will spill off the pages. The world envisioned by Islam is a world where unbelievers are murdered, adulterers and rape victims are stoned, blasphemers and apostates are beheaded, and critics and novelists are

sentenced to death. Indeed, when it comes to compendia of evil nonsense, the Koran has only one serious rival in the modern world, and that is the Christian Bible.

The Menace of Christianity

Christian apologists maintain that Christianity is a religion of love and peace and forgiveness. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Certainly *some* Christians are loving, peaceful, and forgiving, but they possess those characteristics as the result of their own individual personalities and the moderating influence of the secular world. Christianity itself hardly guarantees any of these attitudes. There is more murderous bigotry in the Bible than there is loving charity, and the principles of morality espoused by Christian doctrine are not only hopelessly inconsistent but also thoroughly entangled in a deep thicket of irrationality and superstition.

Christianity is a religion that celebrates ignorance and absurdity. It is a religion of male supremacy and sexual anxiety. It is also a religion that is extremely and often violently intolerant of criticism. The world envisioned by Christianity is a world where women would be denied reproductive freedom and where both men and women would face unreasonable restrictions upon their sexual activity. It is a world where scientific facts would be denied or ignored and where governments would pursue foreign policies designed to bring about Armageddon. The evidence for these claims comes from a source that Christians themselves affirm is absolutely authoritative: the Bible. Here, for example, is a sampling of what the Bible has to say about the imperatives of Christian faith and the intolerance reserved for non-Christians and non-Christian behavior:

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“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). “I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Exodus 20:5). “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18). “He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed” (Exodus 22:20). “Make no mention of the name of other gods, neither let it be heard out of thy mouth” (Exodus 23:13). “Thou shalt not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do after their works; but thou shalt utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images” (Exodus 23:24). “Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods” (Exodus 23:32). “Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 31:14). “Whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 31:15). “Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them” (Leviticus 19:31). “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:13). “And if a man lie with a beast, he shall surely be put to death; and ye shall slay the beast” (Leviticus 20:15). “And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him” (Leviticus 24:16). “Thou shalt have none other gods before me” (Deuteronomy 5:7). “Ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire” (Deuteronomy 7:5). “And repayeth them that hate him [God] to their face, to destroy them; he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face” (Deuteronomy 7:10). “If there be found among you...man or woman, that...hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them...then shalt thou...stone them with stones, till they die” (Deuteronomy 17:2-5). “If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume

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you” (Joshua 24:20). “Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD” (2 Chronicles 19:2). “When mine enemies are turned back, they shall fall and perish at they presence” (Psalm 9:3). “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good” (Psalm 14:1). “Now consider this, yet that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces” (Psalm 50:22). “God shall let me see my desire upon mine enemies” (Psalm 59:10). “I will early destroy all the wicked of the land; that I may cut off all wicked doers from the city of the LORD” (Psalm 101:8). “For the nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted” (Isaiah 60:12). “But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation” (Mark 3:29).

Anyone reading this litany of hateful, petty, ignorant drivel for the first time would recognize immediately that it is all thoroughly asinine and morally repugnant (anyone, that is, who had a modicum of common sense and a shred of human decency). It is not necessary to be sensible or decent, however, in order to detect the lunacy and obscenity in Christian doctrine—Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists of every temperament recognize it immediately. Furthermore, adherents of the religions of the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Mayan civilizations would have immediately recognized that any faith in Jesus, Allah, or Yahweh was pure unadulterated superstitious nonsense, to take just three examples from among the thousands of religions that have existed in the past (not to mention the thousands of religions that exist in the present). *Everyone* knows that the doctrines of *every other* religion are preposterous and potentially dangerous. With few exceptions, the only people who embrace religious beliefs are people who have been indoctrinated since early childhood to believe that their unfounded, unsupported, and illogical faith represents the quintessence of truth and the apogee of knowledge. Those are

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dangerous conclusions derived from a dangerous way of thinking, and they often lead to dangerous behavior.

No one who is familiar with the history of the Western world over the past two millennia could imagine that the threat posed by Christian faith is purely hypothetical (it should be sufficient merely to mention the Crusades or the Inquisition), but neither could anyone familiar with events in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century imagine that the threat of Christianity belongs exclusively to the past (see, for example, Kaplan 2004). Contemporary Christian conservatives are not shy about proclaiming their desire to establish a Christian theocracy in the U.S.A. and to make everyone in the country (and, for that matter, everyone in the world) subservient to their superstition. Numerous such proclamations were compiled on a recent website devoted to “Quotes from the American Taliban,” and they included these revealing statements from Christian pundits and politicians: “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity” (political commentator Ann Coulter); “Politicians who do not use the Bible to guide their public and private lives do not belong in office” (conservative activist Beverly LaHaye); “There should be *absolutely* no ‘Separation of Church and State’ in America” (Christian activist David Barton); “Sodomy is a graver sin than murder” (Father David Trosch, Catholic priest); “Not only is homosexuality a sin, but anyone who supports fags is just as guilty as they are. You are both worthy of death” (Baptist minister Fred Phelps); “This is God’s world, not Satan’s. Christians are the lawful heirs, not non-Christians” (Christian writer Gary North); “After the Christian majority takes control, pluralism will be seen as immoral and evil and the state will not permit anybody the right to practice evil” (Christian activist Gary Potter); “I don’t know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God” (41st U.S. President George H.

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W. Bush); “God told me to strike at al Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East” (43rd U.S. President George W. Bush); “When science and the Bible differ, science has obviously misinterpreted its data” (Institute for Creation Research founder Henry Morris); “We don’t have to protect the environment, the Second Coming is at hand” (James Watt, Secretary of the Interior in the Reagan Administration); “We are to make Bible-obeying disciples of anybody that gets in our way” (Christian polemicist Jay Grimstead); “If you’re not a born-again Christian, you’re a failure as a human being” (Baptist minister Jerry Falwell); “Nobody has the right to worship on this planet any other God than Jehovah” (Presbyterian minister Joseph Morecraft); “I’m an old-fashioned woman. Men should take care of women, and if men were taking care of women today, we wouldn’t have to vote” (Kansas State Senator Kay O’Connor); “George Bush was not elected by a majority of the voters in the United States, he was appointed by God” (U.S. Army Lieutenant General William G. Boykin); “I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is *good*...our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer this country” (Christian activist Randall Terry).

In their efforts to conquer the country for their god, American Christians have been largely content to use the tyranny of the majority in an attempt to undermine the U.S. Constitution and thus impose their faith-based vision of reality on their fellow citizens. (Some U.S. Christians, of course, have been unable to resist the lure of terrorism, such as Paul Hill, the former Presbyterian minister who murdered a Florida abortion doctor in 1994.) Since January 2001, however, when the Bush Administration took office, conservative Christians have had

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many friends in high places, and the results have provided a preview of just how disastrous a faith-based Christian government would be (Wills 2006).

President George W. Bush, who identifies himself as a “born again Christian,” has sought to strengthen his standing among evangelicals and fundamentalists in the United States by calling for Constitutional amendments to outlaw abortion and ban same-sex marriage. On his first day in office, President Bush issued an executive order denying U.S. funds to international aid organizations that counseled women about abortions, even though abortion is legal in the United States. During his 2000 presidential campaign, Bush said that “the jury is still out” on the merits of the theory of evolution—a true enough statement if the jury consists of scientifically illiterate rubes, but completely untrue if the jury is comprised of reputable scientists. Bush supports the teaching of “intelligent design” in public schools; under his administration, the National Park Service authorized the sale of a book at the Grand Canyon which explained that the geological feature was formed by Noah’s flood. Soon after taking office, Bush appointed the Pentecostal Christian John Ashcroft to the position of attorney general, the highest ranking law enforcement official in the government—the same John Ashcroft who had publicly declared that “we have no king but Jesus” and who characterized the wall of separation between church and state as a “wall of religious oppression” (quoted in Wills 2006:8). In 2005, under the Bush Administration, \$170 million was spent in a school program promoting an “abstinence-only” policy, despite the fact that scientific studies had concluded that abstinence-only programs are ineffective (the Centers for Disease Control removed reference to those findings from its website). This is one example among many of the Bush administration’s assault on science—others include the Christian-motivated attacks against the so-called morning-after birth control

pill, stem cell research, scientific conclusions about global warming, and environmental conservation (Mooney 2005).

As disturbing as all of this is, it is probably true that the contemporary threat posed by Islam is more dramatic and more urgent than the one posed by Christianity, if only because contemporary Islam employs the tactic of terrorism more frequently than contemporary Christianity (see, for example, Ash 2006; Buruma 2006). Thus, despite what many of our political and religious leaders say, those of us who live in the secular democratic nations of the Western world *are* at war with Islam. We are at war with an irrational and intolerant ideology that seeks to subjugate us. It is enormously difficult to prosecute that war, however, when we are thoroughly suffused with our own irrational and intolerant ideology. Our own commitment to faith-based religion not only prevents us from recognizing the true enemy but robs us of the tactical and moral high ground that we should enjoy over that foe. The differences between Islam and Christianity are, in the final analysis, miniscule, while the similarities are myriad. Our political and religious leaders know this intuitively, and that is why they are reluctant to condemn Islam—to do so would be an implicit condemnation of Christianity as well. Yet the truth is that secular democratic nations in the Western world are at war with both Islam and Christianity at the moment, and face the threat in the future of war with countless other forms of intolerant irrationality. Civilization is at war with faith itself.

The Curse of Faith

Religious moderates will say that the passages from the Koran and the Bible quoted in the previous sections are taken out of context. Further, they will say that those various scriptural injunctions should not be interpreted literally, but should be understood instead in some symbolic

or metaphorical sense. According to the religious moderates, the problem lies not with religion itself, but with religious extremism and fanaticism. Moderates see religious fundamentalism as a perversion of genuine religion, and their solution to religious intolerance and religious violence is the application of more and better religion.

The religious moderates and their sympathizers are mistaken on all counts. There is no imaginable context that could justify God's imposition of the death sentence for such crimes as blasphemy or ignoring the sabbath. There is nothing that could possibly be said that would justify the myriad instances described in the Bible or the Koran of God's immoral and unjust behavior towards human beings. A good deal of the material that appears in the world's sacred scriptures is simply mindless ranting, and the convoluted exegesis that is required to try to make sense of it all is an insult to human intelligence.

Furthermore, the notion that these preposterous stories and injunctions should be interpreted in some way other than literally raises a number of insoluble problems. Interpreted how? By whom? According to what principles of interpretation? (Certainly not the principles of rationality, if theologians are any guide.) Which parts of the Bible or the Koran should be read literally, and which parts should be read metaphorically? How do we distinguish between the two? If we are interpreting the passages metaphorically, how do we know when we have achieved the correct interpretation?

For anyone given to even the smallest amount of critical reflection, there are still other conundrums that present themselves about interpreting the scriptures. Why would an omniscient and omnipotent author choose to convey such important messages in such an ambiguous manner? Why did he write such an inconsistent and contradictory book? Why did he fail to provide any compelling evidence to demonstrate that he was in fact the actual author of either the

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Bible or the Koran? For example, why is there not a single piece of factual information in either book that would have been a revelation to the unscientific and uninformed people of the time (and why are there so many factual errors that were characteristic of the people of the time)?

Religious fundamentalists have logic on their side when they argue, contra the religious moderates, that the Bible and the Koran should be read literally. If the Bible was written by the creator of the universe, it would be highly presumptuous of human beings to imagine that they need to clarify his thinking for him. If *any* portions of the book are accepted as accurate and infallible, how can other portions then be deemed to be incomplete or imprecise? What logically consistent basis might exist for making such discriminations? There are no instructions in the Bible indicating that some parts should be read literally and other parts metaphorically, much less any indication of which parts are which or what principles of interpretation should be employed. In fact, most of the passages in the sacred scriptures that today's religious moderates interpret as *metaphorically true* are the parts that science has shown to be *literally false*, and those same parts were interpreted as literally true by most of the religious faithful prior to the scientific revolution. For example, religious moderates perceive only metaphorical truth in the biblical claims that the universe was created 6,000 years ago, that the earth is a four-cornered flat plane, and that the stars are attached to a "firmament" (whatever that might be). As science has shown, these contentions are all literally false. While the moderates have the good sense to recognize that the earth is round, however, they continue to claim, against all reason and evidence, that Jesus walked on water and that he rose from the dead. The beliefs of the fundamentalists are not any more outlandish and absurd than the beliefs of the moderates; the only real difference is that the beliefs of the fundamentalists are more consistent than the beliefs of the moderates.

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There is another logical possibility that both the fundamentalists and the moderates ignore, however, namely the possibility that the Bible was not written by the creator of the universe, but was instead written by human beings without any supernatural assistance. The fact of the matter is that *everything* in the Bible is consistent with the premise that it was written many centuries ago by various men and women who knew virtually nothing about anthropology, astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology, meteorology, oceanography, paleontology, physics, world geography, world history, or zoology. Besides being remarkably uninformed, the authors of the Bible indulged themselves in a great deal of mystical speculation, and that is why much of what they wrote is simply incoherent nonsense. This premise would explain why the Bible is so internally inconsistent (both in style and content), and why it is so riddled with factual errors. The truth of the matter could not be more obvious: the Bible and the Koran are nothing but compilations of ancient superstitions, written by men and women who can only be characterized as inveterate ignoramuses. It is a testament to the enduring power of religious indoctrination that this readily apparent fact is so widely unrecognized, unacknowledged, or denied.

Furthermore, the moderation espoused by the religious moderates does not come from religion itself, but from the secular world. Christianity, for example, has not changed over the past two millennia. There have been no new revelations from God (at least none that a majority of Christians have accepted), and God has not seen fit to issue an updated edition of the Bible. Nevertheless, the Western world has certainly changed, and changed dramatically. Slavery is no longer considered acceptable, women are no longer regarded as property, and racism is no longer viewed as respectable. Clearly, however, these welcome developments are not the result of the moderating influence of Christianity, which once supported, justified, and even sanctioned all of these evils. Instead, these improvements in human life and social justice are the legacy of

fundamental changes in the secular world (not least among them the emergence of the scientific revolution and the enormous expansion in human knowledge that resulted).

Religious moderates have no compelling *religious* arguments in favor of moderation (after all, their god is very clear in his insistence on intolerance towards nonbelievers). The only consistent arguments the religious moderates can offer in support of tolerance are *secular* arguments, which leaves reasonable people wondering what contribution religion could possibly make to the discussion. As long as faith-based religion exists, people will be willing to die for beliefs that are impervious to reason and evidence. Thus as long as faith-based religion exists there will be a clear and present danger to civilized life. Religious moderation is not the answer, because religion lies at the heart of the problem. The problem is faith itself.

Faith claims utter certainty on the basis of blind prejudice. To believe something on faith is to be absolutely convinced of something for which you have no supporting evidence whatsoever. That is absurd, *and everyone knows it* (at least on some level). Everyone appreciates and respects the value of reliable evidence and everyone is quick to note its absence (at least in most contexts). Even people of faith are tempted by the siren song of objective evidence. People of faith demand logically-consistent and empirically-based evidence for all of their *other* beliefs in every *other* sphere of life, and people of faith eagerly welcome any putatively objective evidence that might be construed as validating their faith-based beliefs (such as mountaintop debris that they can imagine might be Noah's ark). In addition, people of faith readily reject the faith-based beliefs of competing religions, because they recognize that those competing religious beliefs are not supported by any compelling evidence.

Faith makes people unreachable. It leaves them disconnected from reality and from other people who do not share their faith. It renders them incapable of compromise with the

unfaithful—in fact, it makes them incapable of communicating with the unfaithful. With faith, *anything* can be believed, which means that the possibility of rational discussion flies out the window, along with the shared commitment to evaluating competing claims on the basis of their evidential grounding. Faith is not only intellectually indefensible, however; it is also morally reprehensible.

Faith is morally reprehensible because it can be used to justify any kind of inhumanity and immorality that humans could devise, as the injunctions in the Bible and the Koran attest (and as the history of the world amply illustrates). Furthermore, faith is inherently intolerant of competition. Faith's only option, when confronted with a competing belief or ideology, is to dismiss the competitor out of hand, because faith has no reasoned arguments or supporting evidence it can offer to demonstrate its alleged superiority. Faith can only prevail when the faithful are insistent upon fostering unquestioned allegiance and vigilant about suppressing the ideas of the unfaithful. That is why virtually all of the world's major religions admonish their followers to eschew contact and engagement with the unfaithful, and that is why they all insist on indoctrinating the very young and impressionable, who are the people least able and least likely to demand good reasons for believing what they are instructed to believe.

True, the intolerance of faith is not always explicit. It may sometimes be merely implicit, and it may occasionally even be denied by the faithful, but the irreducible core of intolerance is always present in faith-based beliefs. It cannot be otherwise, because commitment to any one religion precludes commitment to others. It would be impossible for someone to be simultaneously a Catholic, a Jew, and a Muslim, because those beliefs are mutually exclusive. It is also impossible for someone to be genuinely religious and genuinely rational at the same time. Some scientists claim that they perceive no incongruity between their religious beliefs and their

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scientific knowledge, but their claims are logically inconsistent and depend upon an arbitrary mental compartmentalization that evaluates some ideas on the basis of reason and others on the basis of faith. When the faithful evaluate competing ideas solely from the perspective of their faith, they are logically compelled to be intolerant of nonbelievers, because their faith tells them that nonbelievers are not only wrong but evil.

Religion further fosters intolerance because it greatly exacerbates the human tendency to erect divisive boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Consider that both Christianity and Islam make a very clear distinction between the divergent destinies of believers and nonbelievers. The faithful insiders in both religions are convinced that they will be rewarded with eternal paradise for their belief, and at the same time they are convinced that the faithless outsiders will be punished with everlasting torment. Thus millions of Christians and Muslims are walking around believing not only that millions of their fellow human beings are destined to suffer endless hideous torture, *but that those who are destined for perpetual agony deserve their fate*. From the point of view of the faithful, what reason is there to be tolerant of people that your god has promised to destroy as punishment for their evil ways? (The principal thing that distinguishes religious fundamentalists from religious moderates is that the fundamentalists are honest about the logical implications of their beliefs.)

Faith itself is absurd in virtually every sense imaginable—intellectually, morally, and aesthetically (it is an enormous insult to human dignity, for example)—but even more absurd is the widely held notion that faith somehow deserves respect and forbearance. There is no legitimate justification for the idea that people's political opinions or historical beliefs should be fair game for logical analysis and evidential evaluation while their faith-based religious beliefs should be immune from criticism. Muslims and Christians alike become deeply and sometimes

murderously offended when their beliefs are ridiculed, yet they bring their distress upon themselves, because their beliefs are genuinely ridiculous.

Rather than being timidly respectful of absurd superstitions, reasonable people should publicly acknowledge that the faith-based supernatural beliefs of *all* religions are *unquestionably* delusional. By their nature, supernatural beliefs are counterintuitive and quasi-propositional (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002), which means they are immune to testing and falsification. That does not mean that supernatural beliefs are merely unproven or unprovable, however—it means that they are *incoherent and factually meaningless* (Lett 1997b). Nothing could be more certain than the assertion that there is no such thing as God, Jesus, Mohammed, Jehovah, Yahweh, Zeus, Thor, or Quetzalcoatl. There is no supernatural component to the universe and there never has been, despite what people all over the world erroneously believe (for extended discussions of this conclusion and its implications, see Mencken 1946; Smith 1980; Sperber 1985; Kurtz 1986; Guthrie 1993; Sagan 1996; Lett 1997a; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Wilson 2002; Martin and Monier 2003; Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Sagan and Druyan 2006; Wolpert 2006; Stenger 2007). Richard Dawkins presumably intended the title of his recent book *The God Delusion* to be provocative and eye-catching, but a book entitled *The God Delusion* should not strike any reasonable person as any more startling than a book entitled *The Tooth Fairy Delusion* (which would be an obvious candidate for the first volume of a trilogy whose other titles would include *The Easter Bunny Delusion* and *The Santa Claus Delusion*).

The notion that the creator of a universe that has billions of galaxies strewn across billions of light years of space should want and demand praise from infinitesimal human beings about whose personal sex lives he is passionately concerned (while at the same time becoming murderously angry if his beloved pets use his name in profanity) is, to put it charitably,

monumentally absurd. Consider that the central doctrine of Christianity—atonement for original sin—supposes that the creator of the universe sentenced all human beings to an eternity of torture for a piddling crime committed by two of their ancestors, but then decided, rather than carrying out the sentence he himself had imposed, that he would accept instead the compensatory death of his son via an especially gruesome form of execution that somehow lets humans off the hook (although in order to earn this dispensation they must persuade themselves to believe what logic and evidence tells them is clearly unbelievable). What possible sense does any of this make? As Richard Dawkins (2006:251-253) says, the Christian doctrine of atonement is not only “morally obnoxious” but “barking mad.” H. L. Mencken (1946:xi) aptly characterized the tenets of Christianity as “such shocking nonsense.”

The Promise of Rationality

Granted, it is an interesting anthropological and psychological puzzle why the overwhelming majority of people all over the world accept the shocking nonsense touted by faith-based religions, but it is a puzzle that science is beginning to unravel. As Boyer (2001) describes it in his highly stimulating book *Religion Explained*, the human mind consists of a number of discrete and identifiable inference systems, each of which has emerged as an adaptive solution to particular problems of survival and reproduction faced by human beings throughout their evolutionary history. There is no particular inference system for religion per se, but religious beliefs do resonate with a number of interlocking default inferences that are generated in the course of daily experiences. As a result, religious beliefs acquire an intuitive plausibility that is powerful and compelling for most people:

“Instead of a religious mind, what we have found is a whole frustration of invisible hands. One of these guides human attention

toward some possible conceptual combinations; another enhances recall of some of these; yet another process makes concepts of agents far easier to acquire if they imply strategic agency, connections to morality, etc. The invisible hand of multiple inferential systems in the mind produces all sorts of connections between these concepts and salient occurrences in people's lives. The invisible hand of cultural selection makes it the case that the religious concepts people acquire and transmit are in general the ones most likely to seem convincing to them, given their circumstances." (Boyer 2001:330)

Boyer's metaphor of the "invisible hand" in this passage is especially apt, because one of his central points about the human mind is that our inference systems lead us repeatedly to the assumption of *agency* whenever we contemplate causality. Whenever anything happens in the world, the human mind defaults to the inference that the event must have been the result of an intentional act by a conscious entity (in other words, our minds generally imagine that other minds must be at work). Thus, as Boyer (2001:321) explains, "religion is a *likely* thing," because religious concepts employ the resources of pre-existing mental systems.

Despite their seemingly inexhaustible and constantly changing variety, all popular religions have fundamental features in common. They all posit the existence of conscious supernatural agents who are aware of earthly events and who act to bring about certain desired outcomes. H. L. Mencken's (1946:4) generalization about religion is accurate: "its single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him." The emerging scientific understanding of human nature suggests that religion may well be an ineradicable part of human life. As Scott Atran explains, religious beliefs may be uniquely well-suited to flourish in the human cognitive niche:

"Attempts to replace intentional supernatural agents with intentionless supernatural agents (Thomas Jefferson's Unitarian God, the Deity of the French Enlightenment), historical axioms (Marxism), or physical laws (natural science) that do not intervene

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directly in personal affairs and whose actions humans cannot directly influence are at a serious disadvantage in the struggle for cultural selection and survival as moral dogma. This is because no matter how passionate one's commitment to an ideology, the ideology remains, to some extent, *transparently arbitrary*. As such, it can be no more than a necessarily imperfect attempt to figure out what is right. This leaves open the possibility—indeed the eventual likelihood—that *another* ideology is truer.” (Atran 2002:145-146)

Yet there is reason to hope that science might have the potential to help humanity break free of the crippling burden of superstitious nonsense. If human beings can understand *why* they are susceptible to beliefs that are offensive to reason and morality, then perhaps they can learn *how* to avoid those pitfalls. *Some* human beings are already able to reject all supernatural beliefs, and we do not yet have a good understanding of what makes those individuals different from most other people. When science solves this particular mystery, it may discover some means of immunizing those who are more susceptible to the virus of religion. Even if the human mind may be prone to supernatural beliefs (as the evidence now strongly suggests), that same human mind has discovered principles of reasoning, along with fundamental facts about the universe, which have demonstrated that supernatural beliefs are fallacious. The fact that belief in the supernatural comes “naturally” to the human mind does not make such belief any less absurd or irrational, and we should not be reluctant to admit that our habitual way of thinking has led us to erroneous inferences about the world. Instead, we should celebrate the fact that we have discovered principles of rationality that enable us to reach reliable conclusions about reality.

Human nature may include a susceptibility to religion, but that does not mean that religion is therefore inevitable in human life, nor does it mean that religion is somehow necessary or valuable. Advocates of religious moderation frequently argue that religion has a positive role to play in human life *even if* religious beliefs are not themselves literally true, and they often cite the moral influence of religion as one of its alleged benefits. They are clearly

mistaken on that last particular point—as Steven Weinberg (2001:241) astutely observes, “on balance the moral influence of religion has been awful”—but in general the arguments for religion’s beneficial effects are at best unsubstantiated, as Daniel Dennett (2006) effectively demonstrates in his book *Breaking the Spell*. Indeed, there are provocative correlations between the *absence* of religion and the presence of social benefits. Sam Harris (2006:43) calls attention to the fact that “Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on earth,” while at the same time “they are also the healthiest, as indicated by life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate, and infant mortality.” The same pattern prevails within the United States, where rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and infant mortality are all higher in the Bible Belt of the South and Midwest and lower in the relatively secular Northeast.

It does appear to be true that human nature includes a yearning for spirituality, at least as the term is understood in its metaphorical sense. It does not follow, however, that humans need to address that longing from the point of view of ignorance and superstition (see Dawkins 1998; 2003). There is another much more attractive alternative. We can and should foster a reverential awe toward the beauty of the natural world and the immensity of the universe, just as we should gaze with worshipful adoration upon the bounty of human love, the glory of human creativity, the grandeur of human dignity, and the majesty of human justice. These are things to venerate and hold sacred, and none of them require us to reject our rationality or insult our intelligence. The tawdry gods, unseemly fears, and pathetic hopes of the world’s religions are things to ridicule, and far too many of the acts that men and women commit in the names of their religions are things to revile.

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It is not difficult to imagine a world without religion, and it is easy to imagine that an irreligious world would be far better place to live than a religious one. Consider the following selected principles endorsed by the Council for Secular Humanism, and imagine the kind of society that would be built on such a foundation:

- We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.
- We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
- We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.
- We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.
- We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.
- We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.

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- We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.
- We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity.
- We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.
- We are skeptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.
- We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.

It is (or should be) difficult to imagine that any intelligent, informed, and well-intentioned person could possibly want to live in any other kind of society, much less a society imbued with ignorance, intolerance, and injustice. Yet that is exactly what millions upon millions of religious people ultimately want, and a disturbing percentage of them are willing to use lethal

violence to achieve their reprehensible goals. Civilization must take appropriate action to defend itself against this dangerous and intransigent threat.

Conclusion

For much of the past millennium and more, Christianity has dominated the political, social, economic, and intellectual life of the Western world. Since the Enlightenment, however, the influence of religion has steadily diminished in most areas of life, to the point where today the Christian faith has been virtually removed from the public arena in the secular democratic societies of Western Europe. The corresponding increase in social justice, standard of living, and intellectual freedom is no mere coincidence. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we find ourselves in a situation where Islam would like to achieve the dominance that Christianity once enjoyed over Europe, and Christianity is attempting to re-impose its medieval hegemony, this time over the United States. Civilized societies are threatened with a return to the Dark Ages, and they are not meeting the threat effectively. Instead of staunchly defending the principles and achievements of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, secular democratic societies are aiding and abetting the enemy by protecting and preserving religious faith.

Legal protections for the exercise and expression of religion are thoroughly embedded in the political systems of most democratic states. The principle of the freedom of religion is enshrined in many statements of human rights, often in strikingly similar language. For example, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 asserts that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [or her] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in

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teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Similarly, Article 10 of The Charter of Fundamental Rights adopted by the European Union in 2000 declares that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.” Finally, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution stipulates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or preventing the free exercise thereof.”

If people have the right to manifest their religious belief in practice, then what prevents them from having the right to refuse essential medical treatment for their children? What prevents them from punishing blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy with torture, mutilation, or death, and what prevents them from punishing adultery with gang rape, stoning, or dismemberment? If the government is powerless to pass any law preventing the free exercise of religion, then how is the government able to prevent parents from subjecting their young daughters to genital mutilations? An unqualified freedom of religion is a license for countless offenses against justice and morality. Granted, every liberal democratic society qualifies the freedom of religion to some degree (no such society grants the faithful the right to execute heretics), but the line of demarcation between religious freedom and secular justice is often difficult to draw in practice, and numerous miscarriages result.

It is self-evident that secular democratic societies have a vested interest in protecting and preserving individual freedoms of thought and expression. This means that secular democratic societies must defend the right of their citizens to embrace Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, just as they must defend the right of their citizens to embrace fascism, racism, or sexism. The overriding value for freedom of thought and expression generally trumps any governmental judgment about

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the appropriateness of any particular thought or expression. However, states that single out *religious* thought for special recognition and privileges are protecting a particular kind of thought that is inherently dangerous and divisive, because they are protecting thought that is intrinsically irrational and intolerant. Fascism, racism, and sexism do not deserve special protection, because they are odious ideologies whose behavioral consequences typically include discrimination and exploitation. The same is true for virtually all religious doctrines. No liberal-minded person (which is to say any intelligent and informed person), no matter how tolerant or generous, feels any compunction to be respectful or forbearing towards the beliefs of bigots, racists, or homophobes. Why should any intelligent and informed person feel any compunction to be tolerant of the beliefs of religionists?

The idea of establishing and protecting freedom of religion is just as absurd, and just as ill-advised, as establishing and protecting freedom of racism or freedom of sexism. In a just society, it is a necessary evil that people must be free to be superstitious, intolerant, or willfully ignorant, but these freedoms do not deserve special recognition and they certainly do not deserve special dispensations. In a civil society, individuals must have the right to believe anything they choose to believe, but that does not mean that civil societies should allow individuals to conspire to abuse, injure, exploit, or murder innocent people. There is a huge irony, of course, in the fact that secular democratic societies choose to extend freedom of thought and expression to religious people, because religious people so often want to deny that freedom to others. Religious people, after all, are the ones who created the “crimes” of sacrilege, blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy, and they are the ones who would like to censure the presentation of scientific fact in public education.

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What then should secular democratic societies do to combat the threat of religious faith? It would be foolhardy to pretend that the question has an easy answer, but one general recommendation is obvious: enlightened societies must enshrine the legal principle that every citizen deserves freedom *from* religion. Every citizen must have the right to be protected from discrimination and attack motivated by irrational, intolerant, and ignorant ideologies. Given that faith-based religions represent the largest, best organized, most powerful, and most dangerous sets of irrational, intolerant, and ignorant ideologies in the world today, governments have an obligation to protect their citizens from the ill effects of those dangerous and divisive delusions. This suggests some immediate practical steps that secular democratic societies could take to begin protecting their citizens.

On a political level, Western leaders should stop pretending that they are engaged in a “war on terror” (as though it were possible to make war on a tactic), and instead recognize and admit that they are engaged in a war on Islam. Then, they should recognize and admit that they are also engaged in a war on Christianity, and further affirm that they are prepared to go to war against every other irrational, intolerant, and ignorant faith-based ideology whose adherents might be tempted to pursue the logical implications of their collective delusions. As practical measures, children should be legally barred from public houses of worship until they have reached the age of majority and are capable of making independent, mature judgments about such consequential matters without the threat of coercion. Universal public education should be compulsory for all children (no child should be allowed to opt out for faith-based home-schooling), and all children should be taught the fundamental principles of logical analysis and evidential reasoning that lie at the heart of the scientific method (no child should remain unaware of the fact that it is irrational and immoral to claim knowledge based on faith). Religious

property, whether held individually or collectively, should not be exempt from standard taxation applied to other kinds of property. It should go without saying that official state religions are anachronisms that belong in museums.

On a cultural level, the notion that people's religious beliefs automatically deserve respect should be consigned to the dustbin of history, along with the idea that it is impolite to criticize someone's faith. It should be widely admitted that the doctrines of Christianity and Islam are ludicrous at best and evil at worst, which means the only things those doctrines automatically deserve are ridicule and condemnation. When newspapers and magazines in the Western world are afraid to publish cartoons poking fun at the preposterous faith-based beliefs of Islam, then clearly the principle of free expression has been crippled (and the forces of ignorance and intolerance have won a skirmish). Theocracies revel in such restrictions of freedom, but democracies suffer mortally from them.

If we look back over the history of the Western world, we can find any number of cherished ideas that were once embraced by the overwhelming majority of people alive at the time, even though those ideas have since been decisively repudiated. Think, for example, of the notion that monarchs have a divine right to rule, or the idea that women are incapable of exercising political power, or the belief that darker skinned people are intellectually inferior, or the conviction that some groups of people deserve to be enslaved. Enlightened people in the Western world have abandoned all of these offensively erroneous ideas, and they should also abandon the notion that faith-based religious beliefs deserve respect and forbearance. Sam Harris (2004:48) observes that "it seems extraordinarily likely that our descendants will look upon many of our beliefs as both impossibly quaint and suicidally stupid," but he was not talking

about beliefs in the validity of racism or sexism. Instead, he was talking about the mainstream Christian and Islamic beliefs about God and heaven and hell that plague the modern world.

Secular democratic societies and faith-based religions are at war with one another. Only one or the other is likely to survive, and no one should be confident that secular justice will necessarily prevail (faith-based religion could indeed triumph, and a return to the Dark Ages could well ensue). Faith-based religions will always be hostile to secular democratic societies because science and religion are fundamentally incompatible (Lett 2003). A belief system that refuses to question anything cannot abide a belief system that insists upon questioning everything. The remarkable progress in scientific knowledge over the past three centuries has filled the once expansive void of human ignorance with an enormous fund of liberating knowledge, displacing many of the superstitious beliefs of religious dogma in the process. Rather than celebrate these astounding achievements of the human intellect, however, many religious people have responded with bitter resentment, and the uncompromising nature of their position leads them naturally into intemperance and injustice. As scientific knowledge continues to grow, faith-based religions will feel increasingly threatened, and the conflict will only be exacerbated.

Religious moderates may protest that they themselves have no quarrel with scientific progress, and they will insist that many people of faith are tolerant, broad-minded individuals who would never embrace the divisive tendencies implicit in their religions. True as these things undoubtedly are, they fail to ameliorate the dangers of faith. Certainly many Muslims and Christians are admirable, attractive individuals, and some of them are exceptionally intelligent and impressively well-informed (at least on the whole). Without question, there are men and women of faith whose personal intuitions would prevent them from committing unjust acts of violence, regardless of what they might read in their sacred scriptures or hear from their clerical

leaders. None of that, however, changes the fact that Islam and Christianity are inherently irrational and deeply ignorant, nor does it change the fact that irrationality and ignorance frequently lead to intolerance. Religious faith is a deep reservoir of potential injustice, because it provides an extremely powerful means of condoning and encouraging sectarian enmity.

In the second half of the 20th century, as most of the democratic states in Europe became increasingly secular, standards of living rose dramatically, individual freedoms expanded considerably, and the overall quality of life for the average citizen reached unprecedented levels. In the context of that political, economic, and cultural environment, many Europeans beguiled themselves with the illusion that religious faith was essentially benign. They came to think of religion as a quaint holdover from a bygone era whose legacies included beautiful cathedrals, colorful pageantry, and magnificent music (all of which, assuredly, are things to be appreciated). Once religion had been largely removed from the public realm, Europeans could regard it as an exclusively private affair that offered personal solace in dealing with the exigencies of life and death. Beyond that, they could hope and believe that religion had no other scope or significance and no other role to play. It was a pleasant, comforting illusion (although the history of the previous two millennia should have made Europeans more skeptical about the innocence of Christian faith, even if it was understandable that they could have been temporarily oblivious to the threat from Islam).

The age of innocence and illusion ended as the 21st century began, however. Europeans have been reawakened to the ugly nature of religious faith in the specter of Islamic terrorism, and they need only glance across the Atlantic to see their quaint Christianity turned into an angry, uncompromising, and resentful ideology whose adherents are determined to impose their intolerant superstition on others. The threat posed by faith-based religion is too real, too

imminent, and too enduring to be ignored or denied any longer. Secular democratic states must take timely steps to effectively quarantine faith-based ideologies. Individual liberty, social justice, and human dignity all demand freedom from religion.

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