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Hallowed Secularism

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### September 23, 2007: Hallowed Secularism and the Future of Religion

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Title: Hallowed Secularism and the Future of Religion

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9/23/2007--This section concerns the future of religion in a world of Hallowed Secularism. I have already said that as secularism becomes the dominant world-view—admittedly many years from now no matter what kind of secularism it is—Our Religions will not disappear. They will remain on the scene and perhaps even retain the formal attachment of a majority of the world's population. But they will not dominate the terms of life, either for societies as a whole or for local life. Of course for many people in such a world, religion will remain the dominant reality.

It is hard today even to imagine a world in which religion is no longer a dominant world-wide force. I am writing this section at a time of intense conflict between Islam and the West. Recently, a Congressman who is a foreign policy advisor to a leading Republican Party Presidential candidate—New York Representative Peter King, who advises Rudy Giuliani--was quoted as saying that America has “too many mosques”. After a furor arose over these words, King explained that he meant too many mosques that did not cooperate with law enforcement. But since King was also quoted as saying that 85% of mosques in America were controlled by extremist leadership, this was a distinction without a difference. For Peter King, though there are certainly “good” Muslims, most Muslims are the problem. Or, just to sharpen the point, Islam is the problem.

Partisan political advantage aside, I think King has stated the basic American position perfectly. He is being widely criticized, but you have to listen very carefully to the criticism to see that most politicians, even those who are doing the criticizing, actually agree with him that too many Muslims either sympathize with terrorism or refuse to condemn it. If you are either with the West or against it, Muslims are not unambiguously with us.

The world we are now living in sees this conflict as very deep. For example, Norman Podhoretz argues that in the world as a whole, few Muslim clerics condemned the attacks of 9/11. As another example, the Bush Administration was trying to create in Iraq a secular democratic State, before that effort was abandoned as totally unrealistic. When Muslims complain that the war on terror is really a war against Islam, there is a sense in which they are right. Many in the West do consider Islam to be the fundamental source of conflict in the world today.

This view of Islam is not just a consequence of 9/11. It was in 1993 that Samuel Huntington published his famous essay, *The Clash of Civilizations*, in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Huntington argued in that essay that in the coming years international life would be dominated by conflicts between civilizations, groupings that he specifically identified with religion, although he referred to such conflict as cultural. Recently, Huntington has sharpened his criticism of Islamic civilization, arguing that it is not fundamentalist Islam but Islam itself that is the source of conflict with the West.

I must add here, although not strictly necessary to my thesis about the future, that I think these criticisms of Islam to be fundamentally mistaken. There is not something fundamentally different about Islam compared to Christianity and Judaism that requires and accepts violence and conflict. In other words, the conflict today between Islam and the West is real enough, but is not grounded in theology, at least in the way people think.

Islam is not an inherently violent religion. Islam is not a violent way of life. I say this for two reasons. First, during earlier periods of world history, Islam created great civilizations that, for the world at the time, promoted much greater tolerance and cooperation than did Christianity. I am thinking of the Golden Age of Spain, before the Christian reconquest that ended with the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. And there are other examples as well.

Second, Islam is the religion of over a billion people in the world. It is simply arrogant and ridiculous for some people in the West to argue that such a world religion is fatally and fundamentally dangerous. That cannot be true or Islam would not have a billion adherents. I don't mean all religions are equal. I just mean that at this kind of scale, you have a social reality to deal with, rather than something to condemn.

It may be true that most Muslims in America will not cooperate with law enforcement officials. But what does that mean exactly? It probably does not mean that if Muslims learned of a plot to blow up a building, they would not contact the police. It probably means that Muslims will not report fundraising for groups the United States calls terrorist, like Hamas and Hezbollah, but which many Muslims regard as legitimate social and military organizations.

This supposed lack of cooperation may even mean something else. The FBI may be asking Muslims to "keep their ears open" and Muslims may be resisting such regular contact with the government. People don't want to be thought of as spies against their own community. I would feel the same way if asked by the FBI to report on even genuinely illegal activity in my synagogue.

If the conflict in the world today is not theological in the sense that Islam promotes violence, what is its source? And what does that source tell us about the future of religious conflict? The mostly unstated goal of the West in regard to Islam is to tame it in the way that Judaism and Christianity have been tamed. In the eyes of the West, Islam must become a matter of private religion and must give up its claim to be the fundamental source of public norms in a society. This is what it means to come to terms with modernity. This is what it means to share the values of the West.

This desire in the West to change Islam is not partisan. For those on the political right, Islam must be made safe for capitalism, that is, for private property ownership, lending at interest, neutral courts and so forth. For those on the political left, Islam must be made safe for personal freedom, especially in matters of gender or sex. Both sides say they want to see democracy for the Islamic world, but it must be democracy that leads to these results.

Let me state plainly that I am in some sympathy with this effort. I would not want to live in a country dominated by Islam as currently understood. But it is important that taming Islam in this sense is the real conflict. It has nothing to do with violence per se. And it is aimed at Islam in a fundamental way.

Can we say what will happen in the future in regard to this conflict? Given the basic forces of secularization that I have discussed earlier, I think the effort to change Islam will succeed. A billion people cannot be basically different from everybody else. Science is science. Trade is trade. Products are products. Muslims will want kind of life that others want.

When is this secularization supposed to happen? We should consider how long it took Christianity to come to terms with modern, liberal culture, including democracy. It took hundreds of years. But it happened. It will happen with Islam too and in less time. Once there is peace between Israel and a Palestinian State, which will eventually happen, the process will speed up.

Hallowed Secularism has a role to play here. Part of the source of conflict between Islam and the West is the sense on both sides that modernity and Islam are quite incompatible. And there is a sense in which that is absolutely true, if we mean by Islam the subjugation of women and the rejection of democracy. But partly, and for some in the West, the incompatibility lies not in particular aspects of Islam but in an incompatibility between modernity and religion itself. This is what a Christopher Hitchens would say, for example.

Hallowed Secularism rejects that view and self-consciously blurs the distinction between religion and secularism. Thus, a West engaging in Hallowed Secularism would both be perceived by religious practitioners, including Muslims, as not fundamentally hostile to religion and would actually not be as hostile as some secularists are today.

Hallowed Secularism is much more relaxed about the relation of religion and public policy than is today's version of secularism. Public policy is always based on fundamental values and world-views and these values are going to continue to be based on religious sources at least in part. Religion is not expected to be solely private in a world of Hallowed Secularism.

Because Hallowed Secularism is more sympathetic to religion and more familiar with its tone and more open to its values, it can lead to a world of greater understanding and cooperation than seems possible today.