

# HUMANISM, AMERICAN VS. SECULAR

# 2215 16 Feb 88

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 617.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

In my struggle to be publicly clear about the biblical God's current verbal status in my country, sometimes I hit upon a rhetorical torque, or what in public discourse is now being called a "spin." All "American humanists," as I'm using the term in this Thinksheet (from my yesterday's CCT letter to the editor, "Religious facts often ignored," herewith), are theists: no antheists, not even any agnostics. Of course humanists in Am. are of all three varieties, but the atheists & agnostics among them--my phrase implies--are not good Americans....The goody-goody notion that we're all good Americans is a laid-back verbal luxury Am. as a civilization can no longer afford. Nontheistic Am. huamnists can of course be patriots, as can nontheists in any other country: I'm not impugning their loyalty to their country, but only their faithfulness to their country's roots and spiritual reach. My claim that they are "not good Americans" invites them to try to prove that they are good Americans--which makes dealing with my point inescapable.

**This Thinksheet exhibits two instances of the suppression of the religious factor in American education & the ensuing blindness & hermeneutical impoverishment:**

1. The University of Chicago professor who's chair of the centennial planning committee is a secular-revisionistic historian who managed to write a nonreligious account of the university's origins, which he credits to pragmatism, the desire of certain pragmatists to create a university in their own image & likeness. Here is my response (UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MAGAZINE, Winter/88):

## A CURIOUS CONTRADICTION

Editor:

Your FALL/87 issue contains a curious contradiction. Rightly, Laurance Rockefeller is quoted as alluding to the spiritual-religious factor in the founding of the University... One must then find it indeed "curious" that Barry Karl, chairing the committee looking toward our university's centennial, does not, in his "A Curious Adventure for an Historian," allude to the religious factor.

To those of us who are more open-

minded on the subject of religion, Karl's piece tastes like "enriched" (i.e., impoverished) bread. If his secularistic revisionism dominates the preparation and celebration, count me out: I don't eat Wonder Bread.

Look what Karl leaves out:

1. All of the University's early presidents were clergy.
2. And biblical scholars.
3. And Baptists, in the Baptist radical tradition of intellectual freedom over against oppressive church and state. They were in the direct line of John Bunyan, champion of free speech, and John Milton, champion of freedom of the press, and the Virginia Baptists whom Jefferson credited with being the major factor in the Virginia bill of rights, which is in direct line with our Federal bill of rights. I hope our university's centennial does not miss the opportunity to trace the thread of the school's ethos back to the First Amendment, noting that the thread is Baptist. (No—I am not a Baptist.)

4. The generative core of the University was the Divinity School, from which Harper launched American higher education's first extensive effort in wall-less continuing education.

5. The curriculum for this wall-less program was entirely religious—indeed, entirely biblical; indeed, at first, entirely the languages of the Bible. This was an extension of what Baptist Harper was doing when Baptist Rockefeller persuaded him to start our university.

6. While our university was more creation than emergent, the prepared ground was the theological seminary Chicago Baptists began in 1866.

Distorting history, Karl substitutes pragmatism for religion as our university's taproot. It reminds me of public-school history texts that deprive our children and distort their understanding.

Willis Elliott, PhD '54  
Craigville, MA

Note that at the close, I compare what the prof. did to U. of C. origins with "public-school history texts that deprive...and distort...." The letter immediately following mine is by alumnus Alan Pfeffer, son of Leo, who in 1958 (his book CREEDS IN COMPETITION) came up with the now-famous neologism, "secular humanism" (which I use in this Thinksheet's second instance). Says Alan, my father "was using the term simply to include those unaffiliated with organized religions, not as a specifically non-theistic movement." In legal defense of an atheist, LP said that (AP's words) some religions do "not posit a personal deity," & the case was

subsequently leaned on by "two briefs submitted to the Supreme Court, ...one from the American Humanist Association and one from a coalition of Jewish and Unitarian organizations," which "elaborated on this argument and specifically identified secular humanism as another nondeistic religion. The Supreme Court combined these two sources into a footnote and so popularized the idea of a 'religion of secular humanism.'" There's the ironic history! If Buddhism's a religion, so is Comtean positivism (and "secular humanism") in its nonuse of any theistic assumptions & its replacing the authority of revelation with the authority of reason, a Western "Enlightenment" away from God as Buddhism is an Eastern "enlightenment" away from the gods of Hinduism.

2. My second illustration of this Thinksheet's point I began to explain in the intro. In the third of three CCT letters, I set up an opposition, for the purposes of creative conflict, between "secular humanism" and "American humanism," thereby implying that one can't be both a secular humanist & a good American. In the first letter (here, "What's behind Palestinians' rage," 29Jan88), "I give...one instance of how theology can be taught in our public schools without violating 'the separation of church and state.'" We Americans believe in certain God-given rights, & among them are NOT to power or to real-estate....No point to presenting to you the second letter, as it entirely missed my point, as I detail in my rejoinder (the third letter, here, "Religious facts often ignored," 15 Feb88)

## What's behind Palestinians' rage

God gave Palestine to the Palestinians, so why don't the Jews admit it and repent of the blasphemy of having set up a Jewish state on Muslim land? This is what Muslims believe, and they have their Bible, the Koran, to back it up. Once Allah's land, always Allah's land, so it's blasphemy to permit any "infidels" (for example, Jews or Christians) to set up a non-Islamic government on any land once held by Muslims.

Khomeini whipped up hatred for the shah's secular government by the use of this doctrine, the same doctrine that most deeply motivates the PLO and the radical sects that seize American hostages.

Two millennia earlier than the aforementioned gift, God gave that same real estate to the Jews. But since Israel is a secular state as well as a Jewish state, this doctrine of divine land-grant is secondary in Israeli thinking. In Islamic thinking, it cannot be secondary: The idea of a secular state is in itself anathema.

What prompts this letter is my astonishment, sadness and worry over our secular press' ignorance and false innocence and superficiality in its current responses to the Palestinian rock-throwers.

Are we going to repeat, in the

press and in the federal government, the stupidities that led us to do all the wrong things in relation to Iran when Khomeini was sitting in his Paris apartment plotting his theological revolution? Ignorance of theology does not exact only a religious cost: High also is the political price.

Why is America so dense, so stupid, about the deepest roots of human motivation, religion and theology? Because for three generations America's official schools, the public schools, have been turning out citizens religiously and theologically illiterate — citizens who interpret the world within the limits of economics and politics, just as do communists.

Can we just jettison the idea of divine right? Atheists teach so, but not so our American heritage. We Americans don't teach the divine right of kings or to real estate, but we do teach that certain rights are "unalienable" because God given.

This is in our founding documents as deeply as the divine sanction for real estate is in Islam's founding document. I give this as one instance as to how theology can be taught in our public schools without violating "the separation of church and state."

WILLIS ELLIOTT  
Craiville

## Religious facts often ignored

Secular humanism teaches that there are no God-given rights. The simple reason: There is no God to give rights, or anything else.

American humanism, by contrast, teaches that God does give certain rights and that among them are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Notice that there is no divine right to real estate, such as Palestinians and some Israelis claim.

My Jan. 27 letter on this Palestinian rage had two objectives: to point to the importance of the theological factor in understanding, and making intelligent responses to, the news; and to alert us to our danger from the fact that our public — like the public in the USSR — has been taught, in our public schools, to interpret the news within the limits of economic and political factors, neglecting the deepest factor of all.

All of the above was lost on the writer of "The Impossible Mideast Solution" (Feb. 5), who names me as taking one of the land-claim sides in the current Israeli/Palestinian troubles. The writer seems not to have read beyond my first sentence, and then goes on to provide us with an example of the theological unawareness it was the purpose of my letter to rue and abjure.

He names me, but it would be pointless to name him: His name is Legion.

WILLIS ELLIOTT  
Craiville