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Secularists As Religion's Best Friends

by Ken Briggs

NCR Today

A timely new book argues that what religious freedom needs these days is a revival of healthy secularism.

Only honest secularism provides the neutral climate required for religions to flourish, writes Georgetown Professor Jacques Berlinerblau in *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms For Religious Freedom* (Houghton Mifflin). But secularists have fallen on hard times, he says, for reasons that are both self-inflicted and imposed from the outside.

Berlinerblau is especially qualified to assess both religious and political aspects of an issue that is impinging again on our national life in presidential campaigning. He comes to the task as a Biblical scholar and a political scientist, having taught the Hebrew Bible and in Georgetown's foreign service department. He counts himself a secularist but doesn't like what he often sees these days: scorn toward religionists by secularists and depictions of secularism as the arm of Satan. Rather than ignoring religion, Berlinerblau pleads with secularists to learn the habits and beliefs that surround them and affect the political atmosphere.

Secularists, non-believers in conventional religion, are becoming more numerous according to the polls and represent the critical test case for religious freedom. Their attitudes therefore matter more than they once did.

Both militant atheism and a desire to drive all elements of religion from the public square have plagued secularism, Berlinerblau contends, with the result that the movement has become distorted and subject to misconceptions about its basic purpose. Total separation of religion and government is impossible, he states, decrying what he sees as "creche activism" which does violence to the secular cause by overreaching.

From outside, the religious right menaces secularism's vitality by attempting to inflict sectarian, moral agendas on the personal freedom afforded by secularist guarantees. This aggressive, well-heeled assault has in the author's mind threatens not only that freedom but the open space in which distinct American pluralism can continue to prosper.

Such protection allowed the original tightly controlled religious colonies to blossom into the world's largest garden of religious traditions. To cite the largest example, generations of immigrant Catholics leaned on "separation" to gain a foothold, despite opposition.

Contrary to much popular opinion that demonizes secularism, the basic concept took root as a religious conviction, becoming a central principle of the Protestant Reformation (Martin Luther championed religious liberty as a godly means of granting persons their own beliefs) and the American Constitution, thanks in large measure to the vision of Roger Williams, founder of religiously free Rhode Island.

Meanwhile, the New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have, in Berlinerblau's view, foisted an anti-Christian, anti-religious reputation on secularism, one which it must shed for the sake of restoring to secularism a quality that respects faith but rejects its claims. If that free zone shrivels up and disappears, he rightly fears, the field is open to domination and exclusion.

His hope for recovering better balance rests with what he calls the "secular religious" which includes a wide swath of U.S. Catholics. By his definition, they combine gratitude for the blessings of separation with an expression of traditional faith, unlike those who demand religious hegemony or seek religion's demise. He thinks the relatively quiet majority with a foot squarely in each camp can correct the current waywardness and misunderstanding.

Berlinerblau is a deft, engaging writer whose book summons us to reconsider the indispensability of secularism for religious freedom. But he reminds us that this interplay is in need of enhanced respect of each side toward the other and a willingness to curb excesses that can make either side hunger for total victory. As political and social shift, the challenges will appear in different guises, making the care and feeding of the vital principle a constant necessity.

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