



## A Time for Truth: The Bold Voice of Religion in Public

This past November, the American Atheists organization provoked a debate. But not without merit. As soon as the Christians began their Advent services in church and their Christmas shopping in the malls, some atheists attacked the very fact that Jesus was born. They put up a billboard on the New Jersey side of the Lincoln Tunnel that boldly declared, "You know it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason." Nearly 80% of Americans are professedly Christian. How neighborly is it to demean their faith at one of the most festive Christian holy days? Whatever happened to tolerance? Does it no longer apply to Christians? And what about civility?

No surprise that the atheists' challenge to faith was met with an immediate response. And on both sides of the Lincoln Tunnel! The Catholic League answered with its own billboard on the New York side of the tunnel. Its billboard assured readers by saying, "You Know It's Real: This Season Celebrate Jesus." The Manhattan-based Times Square Church put up their message on the very same billboard that the atheists had used on the New Jersey side of the tunnel. It simply said, "God is."

At the same time that Lincoln Tunnel commuters between New York and New Jersey were caught up in the debate over God and Christmas, so were people of Texas. The Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason posted an ad on four buses that read, "Millions of Americans are good without God." Yes, there are many agnostics and atheists who are good. The very statement hardly denies the existence of God. In fact, the contrary is true. To what does one appeal to say what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong? How does one judge what is good, if there is no objective standard?

The philosopher Kant did not try to show the reasonableness of belief in God from a cosmological or teleological argument. Rather, he turned to the experience of goodness and the sense of right that is common to all decent individuals. For example, if an elderly woman is being victimized in the parking lot of the local supermarket, most people who see this would feel the duty to help. This universal sense of justice does not prove the existence of God. Rather, it implies it. It leads one to accept as reasonable a God who is good and instills in us a sense of goodness.

Kant once said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe...the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Therefore, when atheists advertise that "Millions of Americans are good without God," they are paradoxically admitting that there is a God who determines what is good and what is not. True rational ethical judgment leads us to do good and avoid evil. It is a gift given us by the Creator who is himself all-good.

In a pluralistic society, a healthy secularism can provide a climate of tolerance and respect. Church and State are not the same. Religion and politics have their own special competency. Religion should never be forced on any one. But moral values that the great religions teach are discernible by reason and imperative on all. A society that marginalizes religion and turns God into a private hypothesis is ultimately removing the very foundation for the common good.

In our present day society, the media does give religion much attention. Often it is negative. The reporting of scandals and sins, past and present - repeated, rehearsed and headlined - serve only to muffle the voice of religion. Some even wonder whether this is deliberate. Is there an agenda to influence the average person's view of faith and religion? When religion becomes a negative, lawmakers can comfortably pass laws that single out church and religious institutions and harm them in an adverse way without applying the same standard to all. Ostensibly, proponents of such laws may act for good reasons, but ultimately their actions cripple religion's voice to speak on moral issues.

The dignity of the human person. The just distribution of this world's goods. Care for the environment. The respect due immigrants. The sanctity of life from conception to natural death. The need for sound, universal health care. The family. In the coming new year, we must face these and other serious issues. Our stance will determine whether we continue as a great civilization or are confined to the dustpan of history. Religion teaches that there is more to this world than matter. Religion upholds the spiritual values of self-sacrifice, charity, justice, tolerance and non-violence. But ridicule faith, demean religion and, in the end, morality vanishes.

In years past, America has always welcomed religion in the public forum. On the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to our country, President Bush remarked, "Here in America you'll find a nation that welcomes the role of faith in the public square. When our founders declared our nation's independence, they rested their case on an appeal to the 'laws of nature, and of nature's God.' We believe in religious liberty. We also believe that a love for freedom and a common moral law are written into every human heart and that these constitute the firm foundation on which any successful free society must be built" (April 16, 2008).

The atheists are right in this: reason makes us celebrate. With the knowledge given us through science and technology, with the sense of right and wrong impressed on us by the Creator and with the mystery of Christ among us, we can make our country great. We can make our world a true home for all, if we dare to be courageous in our faith and public in our beliefs. Now is the time for truth. The whole truth. The truth that religion can offer.

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