



Answering a Fool According to His Folly – Part 2

By Eric Holmberg

My response to an Amazon review of *The 5000 Year Leap* (see "Answering a Fool According to His Folly" in this section of the web site) generated this response from another reviewer. I then responded to him.

Chris J. Miller says:

There's a concept here you don't seem to grasp. Saying that the United States was founded by a primarily Christian population **is not** the same thing as saying that it was founded as a "Christian nation." The former statement is descriptive, the latter prescriptive. The founders of the country and framers of the Constitution were themselves a diverse group, certainly including many deists and skeptics as well as devout believers (of various stripes)... but their personal beliefs **do not** dictate how we can or should live today. Why? Because those founders were wise enough to establish a system grounded in principles that neither rely on nor privilege **anyone's** religious beliefs.

If you imagine otherwise, then you, not the reviewer, are the one who's lost touch with reality.

Eric Holmberg responds:

Chris, thanks for your response. Two thoughts – one factual, the other philosophical:

While numbers are not the most important thing – the majority after all can be wrong – your phrase "including many deists and skeptics as well as devout believers" is akin to saying that among the founders were Italians and Croats as well as men of British, Dutch and German descent. The fact is that of the men that attended the Constitutional convention, for example, there were at most three who were not orthodox Christians. And even they (Franklin in particular; note his famous "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground" call to prayer during the convention) were more Biblically informed and Christian in their worldview than the majority of church-goers today.

More important, however, is your contention that America was founded on principles that did not "rely on nor privilege anyone's religious beliefs." If by

that you mean that our founders didn't want a state church or for any Christian denomination to have preference over another in the arena of public policy, taxes, etc., or that people would be in any way coerced to believe in God or a particular church, you are absolutely right. But if you are suggesting, as it appears you are, that our founding principles did not grow out of the seedbed of Christianity and don't need a Christian consensus to sustain them, it is you who is not in touch with reality.

Our nation's most foundational principle, codified in the preamble to our primary founding document – that *all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights* – is not a principle that can be grabbed out of the air, examined under a microscope and proven scientifically. It ultimately rests on faith, religious faith in transcendent truth revealed by God and hammered out over time uniquely within the Christian milieu. I could go on and on with other examples (the abolition of slavery comes immediately to mind.) The simple fact is that all men and all human activity are inescapably religious. We all have certain presuppositions that appear to us as self-evident and upon which we then build our entire world and life view. And whatever we do, and that includes vocationally – digging ditches or passing legislation in the US Congress – will be informed and guided by that worldview. But if we backtrack and examine the foundation of our worldview – those "first principles" or presuppositions – we will find, if we're honest, that they are received by faith because at their root they can not be empirically proven.

In this sense, all of life is inescapably religious. The Christian – at least the thoughtful, epistemologically self-conscious Christian – is aware of this and wears that truth on his sleeve. Everyone can say "that guy is religious" without thought of a rebuttal because the Christian will happily own up to it. But the same honesty doesn't characterize people who profess to be more "secular" – who embrace, for example, materialism (all that exists is matter and its motion) or the more common deistic ethos (OK, there probably is a God but "he" is neither immanent or very mindful of and thus relevant to our everyday lives and so we need to figure out right and wrong and how to live and govern ourselves on our own.). Neither first principle can be proven. They are both received by faith. And they are thus both inescapably religious. (Interestingly, there have been a few people in the atheistic/materialism camp that have owned up to this fact; most recently Dr. Michael Ruse at Florida State, an ardent apologist for atheistic, Darwinian materialism.)

With this in mind, let's engage in a thought experiment. Imagine a materialist, a deist and a Christian wading into the marketplace of ideas: public policy, law, ethics, education, etc. One of them, let's say the deist, says "We need to be concerned about and work for the benefit of the less-fortunate." (The recently deceased Ted Kennedy supposedly made this his life's calling and proudly identified it as the essence of liberalism – as if conservatives are thus left only with the opposite tack, "We need to ignore the less-fortunate.") The Christian immediately agrees. His foundational

presupposition (there is a God) and its secondary implications (I must follow His ways because He is God (and I am not); He has told me that the faith without works is dead and that He is very concerned with the less-fortunate, etc.) inform his agreement. The materialist, if he is epistemologically self-conscious and has the nerve to stare unflinchingly into Nietzsche's abyss, may well ask "Why should we be concerned for the less fortunate?" From a strictly Darwinian perspective, not only is there little or no need to; it may well even be counterproductive. But he nevertheless says, "Amen" because it somehow just seems to be the right thing to do. (You also can't get elected if you don't say such things.)

So all three agree, run for office and get elected to Congress and begin to work on behalf of the less-fortunate.

Few people – and I am sure that would include you – would object to their purpose and goals at this juncture. Even the ACLU would say, "AMEN!" (Well, maybe they wouldn't use that word.) So far, so good. No one is accusing anyone of bringing their religion into the public policy arena and attempting to impose it on the rest of the culture – although clearly that is precisely what the Christian is doing. The other two, while equally religious, are less epistemologically self-aware concerning their efforts to help the less-fortunate. In fact, the materialist could well be operating in a manner that is contradictory to his first principles.

Now everything goes along reasonably well – and there are no accusations of the violation of church and state or of any "Christian Taliban." As long as the laws they pass – say, for example, a food stamp program – fall well within the moral and ethical consensus of the broader culture as well as within the deist, atheist and Christian cultural sub-sets, no one's underwear gets in a knot and everything is hunky dory. Few people really see what is being done as necessarily "religious" because they are: 1. not very philosophical/epistemologically self-conscious, and 2. a consensus exists between the Christian and the less "religious" (they are actually equally religious, as stated above – but that is the popular perception) and so "religion" seems peripheral to the issue.

But now let's introduce something that falls outside of this happy consensus. Here I will draw from our actual history. Let's say the materialist (it could just as easily be the deist) says that the less-fortunate are in part that way because they have too many children and should therefore have access to, among other things, abortion. All manner of faith-based presuppositions are behind this position: that the developing fetus is not a person, or if it is a person, abortion is a form of justifiable homicide; that children are an economic and social deficit; that there is no God who will be angered by this and in turn judge the persons responsible for the act as well as the culture who sanctions it (thus exacerbating the very problem the policy is attempting to address) etc. Their call for legalized abortion is thus a religious, faith-based action as well as an effort to impose a specific religious morality on the

rest of the culture. (The abortion advocate here will say, "Nonsense, no one is making you have an abortion if you don't want one." True, but that ignores both the fetus – who is obviously having a moral system imposed on him or her – as well as the "judgment on the wider culture" component just mentioned. The skeptic (still either ignoring or denying the rights of the fetus) will likely say that no such judgment exists; that there either is no God or if there is "he" doesn't operate in this way. They are free to believe that if they will. But such a belief again is inescapably religious, an article of faith. There is no way they can prove it.)

Now if we go back a couple of generations, the materialist's religiously informed advocacy for legal abortion fell on largely deaf-ears. Why? Because the cultural consensus of the time still leaned heavily towards Christianity. Abortion was seen as murder, pure and simple – so much so that even leaders in the feminist, contraception, and gay-rights movements saw it as a moral evil. Had the Christian congressman gotten up and called abortion wrong and then referenced the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not commit murder," almost no one – including members of the newly formed ACLU – would have called it a violation of the First Amendment.

Now fast forward 40 years to the sexual revolution and the increased unraveling of the Christian consensus. As free love was found to be not as free as promised (creating the growing need for abortion to eliminate the pesky by-products of fornication) and as the faith-based presuppositions of Christianity began to be replaced by the equally faith-based presuppositions of materialism, secular humanism, deism, Unitarianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, communism, etc. – gradually the pro-abortion position became more defensible in many people's minds.

Aldous Huxley owned up to this in his work, *Ends and Means*, when he observed that many people are concerned "to prove that there is no valid reason why (they) personally should not do as (they) want to do. For myself, as no doubt for most of my friends, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom."

A tipping point was finally reached. Abortion became legal and a "right" as more and more people embraced the religious system proffered by these alternative religious systems. And with this an interesting slight of hand took place, one that is very much with us today and is reflected in your comment. The pro-abortion position was defined – or at least perceived – as being somehow "secular", "rational", and "non-religious." And as the Christian began to decry the position, using – like everyone else – the religious presuppositions that inform his world and life view – he was suddenly derided as a "religious fundamentalist", a member of the "Christian Taliban," and any effort on his part to pass pro-life legislation as a "violation of the separation of church and state," or, to use your language, and attempt to "rely on or privilege one particular religion beliefs."

I trust that you can see how disingenuous – and even more to the point, how philosophically absurd – this is. Culture truly is “religion externalized” and any effort to hide one’s own religious presuppositions while pointing out and then decrying another’s as a violation of the First Amendment is the worst kind of hypocrisy. And abortion laws are just one manifestation of this. Gay marriage, creeping socialism, government-controlled education, progressive taxation, universal health-care, on and on, the same dynamic is being played out over and over again.

Most of our founder’s understood the danger posed by any government that was not “under God” – that was not beholden to a higher Power and the inalienable rights that this Power had granted to all men. And so while they didn’t want a state-run church or to have religious tests for candidates for federal office (interestingly most had no problem with such tests at the state level – which, of course, was where most of the power once was) they nevertheless envisioned and created a system of government grounded in principles that relied heavily on and privileged – not the Baptists or the Congregationalists or the Roman Catholics – but Christianity. Pure and simple.

And this is why founder Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration, the father of medicine in America, and the third most well-known person at time of our founding, said in 1802:

“Christianity is the only true and perfect religion, and that in proportion as mankind adopt its principles and obey its precepts, they will be wise and happy.”

That, my friend, is called bumping up against the hard, working end of real reality.