

“GODLESS COMMUNISM” AND ITS LEGACIES

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“An atheistic American is a contradiction in terms.”

—Reverend George M. Docherty, 1954

American Atheists, an organization founded in the 1960s by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, finds much to protest these days: classroom and workplace harassment of the godless, the Boy Scouts’ exclusion of atheists, government funding of faith-based organizations, President Bush’s incessant God talk, and an administration that responds to religious fanaticism by whipping up different religious fanaticism. American Atheists president Ellen Johnson borrows a phrase from the Christian right, which had borrowed it from other groups seeking rights and respect: “We want what Ralph Reed, the former director of the Christian Coalition, said that he wanted for the religious right: a ‘place at the table in the great discussion we call Democracy.’”

Atheists today have an easier time than in decades past—one of O’Hair’s 1960s allies, Charles Smith, was jailed in 1928 for distributing atheist literature—but Johnson and her allies have a point. As late as 1930 the Supreme Court referred to Americans as “a Christian people.” Seeking the presidency in 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke of our “Judeo-Christian” heritage. In his inaugural address in 2001, President Bush widened the circle further by referring to “churches, synagogues, and mosques.” In this way, as Conrad Cherry notes, civil religion increasingly manages to “embrace a plurality of values,” yet it still hasn’t made room for “agnostic or atheistic elements.”

Although atheist leaders like to cite polls showing that many millions of Americans have little to do with organized religion, the unchurched are not necessarily godless. A large poll, the American Religious Identification Survey, in 2001 estimated that a mere 0.4 percent of Americans call themselves atheists and 0.5 percent agnostics. And they tend to be skittish about voicing their beliefs, according to Alan Wolfe’s *One Nation, After All* (1998): “People who talked about their lack

of belief in God did so hesitantly, even defensively, rather than as self-proclamation.... Militant atheists—those who insist that reason and rationality constitute the only sensible guides by which to live—are very hard to find in America.”

Maybe they’ve been cowed into silence. When the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life asked Americans about their attitudes toward various groups in mid-2003, atheists ranked at the bottom, with 34 percent of respondents feeling favorable toward them and 52 percent feeling unfavorable. In the same poll, 41 percent of respondents said they would have reasons to vote against an atheist presidential candidate, a higher proportion than the survey found for a candidate who was Jewish (14 percent), Catholic (15 percent), Evangelical Christian (20 percent), or Muslim (31 percent). All in all, there’s ample evidence that, as Wendy Kaminer put it a few years ago, “Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles.”

In significant respects, I think, contemporary American attitudes toward atheists hardened during the Cold War 1950s. Get past what historian E.P. Thompson termed “the enormous condescension of posterity” and you’ll find an era much like our own: a new and terrifying form of war, one that posed a particular threat to civilians; a suspicion that enemy operatives lurked among us; the necessity of balancing national self-protection with constitutional liberties; efforts to come to grips with religious diversity; and, especially, a spasm of vague but fervent public piety.

During his years in office, President Eisenhower carried a silver coin, about the size of a half-dollar. The front bore a cross and the word *God*; on the reverse was an American flag above *freedom*. God and country, two sides of a coin. “I felt it was a strange, almost blasphemous combination of symbols,” White House aide

Frederick Fox later wrote in *Theology Today*. “But, in our national history, they seem somehow to work.”

In the 1950s, a common enemy seemed to draw God and country closer than ever. To describe communism as practiced in the Soviet Union, one might talk of the totalitarianism and terror, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the centralized economy, or the denials of civil liberties; but what Americans knew above all else, according to a 1954 poll, was that communism was “against religion.” That’s what their leaders were telling them. “You may argue from dawn to dusk about differing political, economic, and social systems,” said Representative Louis C. Rabaut of Michigan, “but the fundamental issue which is the unbridgeable gap between America and communist Russia is a belief in Almighty God.” In his Wheeling, West Virginia, speech in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy warned of an impending “final, all-out battle,” not between the Soviet Union and the United States, but between “communist atheism and Christianity.”

If Cold War communism imperiled religion, then religion needed to be part of the counterforce. So it was that the 1953 presidential inauguration featured “God’s Float,” displaying myriad scenes of worship, as well as a prayer composed and recited by the new president. In office, President Eisenhower scheduled the first National Day of Prayer for July 4th, spoke of belief in a Supreme Being as “the most basic expression of Americanism,” and was hailed by the Republican National Committee as “not only the political leader but the spiritual leader of our times.” Congress opened a prayer room in the Capitol, made “In God We Trust” the official national motto and required its inclusion on all currency, and added “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Pledge of Allegiance legislation—which now, a half-century after the fact, is getting reviewed by the Supreme Court—got a helpful push from Reverend George M. Docherty, preaching at Washington’s New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to a congregation that included President and Mrs. Eisenhower. Just change the name of the country, Docherty said, and “little Muscovites” could chant our Pledge before “their hammer-and-sickle flag.” The trouble was, “liberty and justice for all” didn’t differentiate us from Soviets; they, too, claimed to respect those ideals. What the Pledge needed, Docherty said, was the addition of that “characteristic and definitive factor in the American way of life”—God. Congress soon obliged. (This was the second time the Pledge had been amended to reduce ambiguity. The original 1890s version opened, “I pledge allegiance to my flag.” In the 1920s, when some Americans worried that an immigrant might think “my flag”

meant something other than the stars and stripes, the phrase became “the flag of the United States of America.”)

As the bonds between God and country grew tighter, so did those between godlessness and communism. Government agencies fired atheists as security risks. Striving to prove their patriotism, witnesses before the House Un-American Activities Committee boasted of their attendance at religious services. Among Judge Irving R. Kaufman’s cited reasons for sentencing Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to death was the fact that they had “devoted themselves to the Russian ideology of denial of God,” as if this constituted a capital crime. J. Edgar Hoover told parents how they could contribute to the Cold War struggle: “Since Communists are anti-God, encourage your child to be active in the church.” *Christian Century* observed in 1954 that it had become “un-American to be unreligious.”

Civil religion predated American independence, and anticommunism had existed since the birth of communism. But the linkage of the two, and the parallel linkage of atheism and communism, represented something new in American politics.

Christian clergy had been advancing religious arguments against communism for decades. In the 1920s, evangelist Billy Sunday preached that “atheism marches with communism.” In the late 1940s, the young Billy Graham condemned communism as “against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion.” Later he predicted “a battle to the death—either communism must die, or Christianity must die.”

Graham voiced a larger perspective too: “Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life—communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God.” He wasn’t alone in categorizing communism a religion. Navy Secretary James Forrestal said in the mid-1940s that “the fundamental question in respect to our relations with Russia is whether we are dealing with a nation or a religion.” Starting with the book’s title, the former communists who contributed to *The God That Failed* (1950) repeatedly likened communism to religion. Several critics made a similar point about Whittaker Chambers, who left the Communist Party and embraced the Catholic Church. Kingsley Martin, for instance, wrote: “Men of Chambers’s temperament desire a cause to which they can wholly submit themselves. Any authoritative religion, Communism or another, will serve.... Having thrown aside this evil religion, Chambers substitutes a God who has much in common with Stalin.”

The Catholic Church had long opposed communism. A series of 19th-century papal encyclicals condemned

communism and socialism as irreligious, materialistic, socially destabilizing, and violent. By the 1930s, anti-communism dominated Catholic newspapers in the United States. In 1946, Bishop (later Cardinal) Richard Cushing said that Catholicism represented “one of the greatest bulwarks against the inroads of Communism.” Anticommunism was “integrated into everyday practice and devotional life throughout the Catholic world,” Philip Jenkins writes in *The Cold War at Home* (1999). For some, it served an assimilative function, observes Donald F. Crosby, S.J., in *God, Church, and Flag* (1978): “[M]any Catholics ... discovered in anticommunism a means of identifying themselves with the greater American society.” Religious opposition to communism in the United States was considerably more vehement than communist opposition to religion. American communists launched only a handful of attacks on the faith, among them an ineffectual group called the Workers’ Anti-Religious League, occasional slams in the *Daily Worker*, and an “Anti-Christmas Circus” in Cleveland that, Martin E. Marty writes, only “showed how futile were these efforts to import and develop European styles of opposition to religion in an America which stayed friendly to faith even in the Depression.”

Before it gained prominence in politics, the phrase “godless communism” was regularly heard from the pulpit. What was evidently its first appearance in *The New York Times* came on December 7, 1933, in an article about the convention of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. President Roosevelt addressed the group, but it was Bishop John L. Nuelsen of Zurich who spoke of “godless communism”: “Whatever his mistakes, and some of them are serious, Hitler has turned the current that was sweeping Germany into the chaos of Godless communism.” The defending-Nazis context wasn’t typical, but the religious character of the speaker was. Until the late 1940s, “godless communism” popped up in major newspapers mainly in reports on sermons and other quotations from religious figures.

While clergy advanced religious arguments against communism, anticommunists in politics and the media advanced mostly secular arguments, even at the dawn of the Cold War. In his 1946 congressional campaign, Richard M. Nixon talked not of communism versus Christianity, but of “state socialism versus free enterprise.” Religion played a negligible role in the first round of Cold War films in the late 1940s, according to Michael Barson, coauthor of the book *Red Scared! The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (2001), though it was prominent in films of the 1950s. When *Look* in 1947 published a nine-item checklist for

“How to Identify an American Communist,” it included such characteristics as parroting Soviet policy, allying with the National Negro Congress, and dismissing all critics as fascists, but made no mention of religion. (In a sardonic response to such articles, according to Joseph Goulden’s 1976 book *The Best Years*, the *Daily Worker* published tips on how to recognize a capitalist: “He never comes before you and says, ‘I am a capitalist.’ He works through various front organizations: large sections of the Republican and Democratic parties; the ‘free press,’ the National Association of Manufacturers, the State Department and others.”)

Religious rhetoric against communism, largely limited to clergy in the 1940s, crossed over to the secular culture starting around 1950. Why? Part of the answer must be the rise of anticommunism as an electoral issue, especially after 1949, when communists prevailed in China and the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb. “Until 1950, candidates rarely campaigned primarily on an anti-Communist platform, and when they did, they usually lost,” writes Greg Mitchell in *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady* (1998), a study of the 1950 U.S. Senate race between Richard Nixon and Helen Gahagan Douglas. Both major parties, according to Mitchell, construed the results of the 1950 elections as a sign that the anticommunism issue changed votes. Perhaps the increasing potency of the issue made religious language inevitable, in a country where dominant political issues tend to take on a moral and ultimately a religious hue.

As communism grew more important, so did religion. When Americans were asked if they had worshipped during the past seven days, 37 percent said yes in 1940, 39 percent in 1950, 46 percent in 1954, and 49 percent in 1958—an increase of one-third in eighteen years. The results indicate something noteworthy, but, as Martin Marty points out, it’s not altogether clear precisely what: “Did the figure reflect an actual jump? Or did a change in cultural mood induce more people than before to ‘remember’ differently how they had spent the weekend? If the former, it was impressive evidence that there was practical revival; if the latter, it was similarly support for the notion that church attendance was a good thing, something respectable citizens supported, a practice one would report to pollsters and have them report to the public.”

Churchgoing amplified anticommunism and vice-versa. When pollsters in 1954 asked why religion seemed to be on the rise, Americans commonly pointed to the troubled times: the bomb, worries about another world war. At the same time, as Robert Wuthnow writes, not attending church carried a sharper stigma than formerly: “[T]he main definition of nonchurchedness now be-

came not only atheism, but atheistic communism, which was too dangerous politically for anyone to subscribe to lightly.”

Identifying the nation with God was venerable; identifying its opposition with the Christian God’s opposition, though less common, wasn’t unprecedented. A month after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt told Congress that victory over the Nazis would represent, among other things, “victory for religion,” because the world wasn’t big enough for Hitler and God. “In proof of that, Nazis have now announced their plan for enforcing their new German, pagan religion throughout the world—the plan by which the Holy Bible and the Cross of Mercy would be displaced by *Mein Kampf* and the swastika and the naked sword.” A decade later, similar rhetoric was a mainstay of anticommunism.

Such a surge of godly language in times of trouble, George McKenna observed in *The Yale Review* in 2002, is very much an American tradition. “[W]hen the chips are down, when the stakes are high, Americans go back to their imagined community of ‘visible saints,’” he writes. “They start talking about grace and consecration and sanctification, language found nowhere in the Constitution or even in the Declaration of Independence. It is biblical, prophetic language, the language of sermons and jeremiads. It reappears each time the nation needs to gird its loins, concentrate its mind, and throw itself against whatever threatens its life: a foreign foe: a domestic rebellion, a Great Depression, a conspiracy of terror. After the crisis has passed, ‘normalcy’ eventually returns, and a new generation may even wonder what the fuss was all about.”

And today? The fuss of the 1950s has crumbled into recrimination (McCarthyism) and kitsch (“duck and cover”). The Soviet Union is kaput. Communism is no longer much of an issue in our domestic politics or foreign relations. The phrase “godless communism” seems as old-fashioned as the Edsel.

Most prejudices of the 1950s have ebbed, but not all at the same rate. Between a quarter and a half of Americans in 1958 said they wouldn’t vote for a presidential candidate who was Catholic, Jewish, female, or black; these categorical refusals all are under 7 percent now. Over three-quarters of respondents in 1958 wouldn’t vote for an atheist. The knee-jerk anti-atheist vote is down to 41 percent (the 2003 Pew poll) or 48 percent (a 1999 Gallup poll, using a differently framed question)—a shift toward tolerance, but not of the same magnitude as the others.

“[O]ne of the things I’m most proud of is that people can say ‘I am an atheist’ in the United States today without being called a communist atheist or an atheist

communist,” Madalyn Murray O’Hair said in a 1989 interview. “I *separated* the two words. I think that that’s probably the best thing that I did.” Whatever O’Hair’s contribution may have been, it’s true that atheism and communism are no longer linked. Yet the antipathy toward atheists endures.

In part this it reflects the nation’s all-but-unique religiosity and, more particularly, the apparent national conviction that any religion is better than none, a viewpoint encapsulated in President Eisenhower’s oft-quoted comment that “our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious belief—and I don’t care what it is.” That attitude, it should be noted, attracted contemporary critics. “There is nothing in the Bible to support the view that religion is necessarily a good thing,” A. Roy Eckardt wrote in *Christian Century* in 1954. “Scripture has no ax to grind for religion; on the contrary, it is highly suspicious of much that passes for religion.” While faith is still, preferable to faithlessness, Americans now are even more reluctant than those of 1954 to suggest that one faith is superior to another.

Perhaps, too, the hostility against atheists is partly a residuum that has outlived its Cold War purpose. In Edith Wharton’s story “Autres Temps,” a divorced woman is shunned even after the stigma of divorce has waned. “I’m the woman who has been cut for nearly twenty years,” she says. “The older people have half-forgotten why, and the younger ones have never really known: it’s simply become a tradition to cut me. And traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy.”

The enduring prejudice likely stems in part from the assumption that atheists are antireligious. Our age of tolerance sometimes carves out an exception for those deemed intolerant of others. “An atheist goes around with a big sign on his forehead saying ‘Your religion stinks.’ That makes it very hard to accomplish anything,” Edd Doerr of the American Humanist Association told me a few years ago. Lending some support to the notion that *atheist* is an in-your-face word, Pew in 2002 found that Americans felt more warmly toward “people who are not religious” (50 percent favorable, 33 percent unfavorable—scores comparable to Muslims’) than toward atheists (34 percent favorable, 52 percent unfavorable).

This nomenclatorial antipathy helped spur the recent effort to come up with a cozier name for the godless. Former biology teacher Paul Geisert has proposed that atheists and others who reject supernaturalism be called *Brights* (he reverently capitalizes it; others don’t). Science writer Richard Dawkins has embraced the term, as have magician Penn Jillette and paranormal debunker James Randi, among others. “[W]e need a word of our

own, a word like ‘gay,’” Dawkins wrote in *The Guardian* in June 2003. “You can say ‘I am an atheist’ but at best it sounds stuffy (like ‘I am a homosexual’) and at worst it inflames prejudice (like ‘I am a homosexual’).”

Critics have faulted the chosen word as unduly self-congratulatory, with its implication that Brights are, well, brighter. “I don’t think a degree in public relations is needed to expect that many people will construe the term as smug, ridiculous, and arrogant,” mathematician John Allen Paulos wrote on the ABC News website. That problem may keep *Brights* from catch-

ing on. But to win a place at the table, America’s atheists may well need some rebranding.

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