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# ONE NATION WITHOUT GOD?

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The Battle for Christianity  
in an Age of Unbelief

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David Aikman, *One Nation without God?*  
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# Contents

1. Not a Christian Nation? The Battle for Our National Identity 9
2. Where Are the Christians in America? Withdrawal vs. Retreat 35
3. Was America Ever a Christian Nation? The Intention to Form a Christian Community 55
4. American Christianity and the Challenge of Modernity: The Rise of a Secular Intelligentsia 115
5. Countertrends: God Is Coming Back 163

Acknowledgments 191

Notes 193

# 1

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## Not a Christian Nation?

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### The Battle for Our National Identity

The first trumpet blast came from the president of the United States. It was April 6, 2009, less than three months after Barack Obama was sworn in, hand on a Bible, on the western front of the Capitol, promising to “defend the Constitution of the United States.” Now in Turkey to conclude a five-nation European tour, Obama was standing with his host, Turkish president Abdullah Gul, at a podium in Ankara’s ornate Cankaya Palace answering questions from Turkish, American, and foreign reporters. A Turkish reporter asked him what he intended to do to improve US-Turkish relations, which, the reporter said, had deteriorated under the administration of George W. Bush. Obama’s answer was that the United States and Turkey might

demonstrate a new model of cooperation. “And I’ve said before,” the president noted, “that one of the great strengths of the United States is—although as I mentioned, we have a very large Christian population—we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation; we consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.”<sup>1</sup>

### ■ NOT A CHRISTIAN NATION? ■

The blogosphere quickly hummed with these words and excited some disapproving discussion. “He has done the country a lot of harm this week, harm that I fear is going to come back and bite us just like misunderstanding our enemies bought us 9-11,” a reader named Daneen commented on the site *LonelyConservative.com*.<sup>2</sup> Another snippy response came from blogger Debbie Schlüssel: “Hmmm . . . I guess Christmas and New Year’s Day should be crossed off the federal holiday schedule.”<sup>3</sup> New Year’s Day is a federal holiday, though it is not technically part of the Christian Christmas liturgy.

Obama’s remarks in Turkey were not the first time he had made this assertion. In June 2007, while still a US senator but having already announced his bid for the presidency, he responded by email to the Christian Broadcasting Network’s senior national correspondent David Brody with the comment, “Whatever we once were, we’re no longer just a Christian nation. We are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, and a Hindu nation, and a nation of non-believers.”<sup>4</sup> This led some critics to charge that by the time he made his remarks in Turkey, Obama had, in effect, become even more radical in his rejection of America’s Christian heritage. “Note

the progression,” John Eidsmoe observed on the website of *The New American* magazine. “In 2007, he said we are no longer ‘just’ a Christian nation. Now, in 2009, he says we ‘do not consider ourselves a Christian nation’ at all.”<sup>5</sup>

Other personalities, speaking on the Fox News channel, were even more hostile. Newt Gingrich, the former GOP speaker of the house, asserted that Obama “was fundamentally misleading about the nature of America.” Fox News anchor Sean Hannity said that he was “offended” and that Obama was “out of touch with the principles that have made this country great.” Karl Rove, former senior political advisor under George W. Bush, suggested that Obama had denied the reality that America was founded on faith, though he in fact virtually echoed Obama’s own comments. “Yeah, look,” he added, “America is a nation built on faith. I mean, we can be Christian, we can be Jew, we can be Mormon, we can be, you know, any variety of things. We’re a country that prizes faith and believes that we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights; among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As for Fox News host Megyn Kelly, she wondered if Obama had “step[ped] on a political landmine.” She said, implying she agreed with the idea, that Obama “was obviously just pandering. He was in this Muslim nation saying, look, we’re not a Christian country—and by the way, this is not the first time he’s said this. He gave a speech back in June of 2006, according to our records, where he said exactly this, and then again he repeated it the following year.”<sup>6</sup>

Other internet comments were even more pointed. On the conservative website Red State, Warner Todd Huston headlined his opinion piece rhetorically by asking, “What are we if NOT a Christian nation?” He said Obama was simply “ingratiating himself with Muslim audiences.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet many commentators strongly supported President Obama's assertion, and did so skillfully. Michael Lind, a policy director at the New America Foundation, elaborated a thoughtful argument that conservative critics of Obama had conflated Christianity and natural rights liberalism. Lind argued that automatically identifying the "Creator" in the Declaration of Independence with the "personal god of the Abrahamic religions" was wrong because the ideas of natural rights and the social contract inherited by the founders had their origins in Hobbes, Gassendi, and Locke, who themselves drew on themes founded in Greek and Roman philosophy. "President Obama . . . is right," Lind argued. "The American republic, as distinct from the American population, is not post-Christian because it was never Christian."<sup>8</sup>

Randall Balmer, professor of American religious history at Barnard College, an editor for *Christianity Today* magazine, and an Episcopal priest, argued, albeit somewhat defensively, in the *Huffington Post* that "America is not a Christian nation and evangelicals are not hard right."<sup>9</sup> It is worth pointing out that just prior to Obama's election as president, one of the *New York Times* bestsellers was Jim Wallis's *God's Politics*.<sup>10</sup> Wallis is a prominent spokesman for what is sometimes called "the Christian left" and has taken a generally left-leaning political position on both domestic and international issues for three decades or so. He was a prominent opponent of Operation Desert Storm, the first Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from Iraq, and a vociferous critic of anything slightly suggestive of Christian nationalism.

## MEACHAM ON THE DECLINE OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA

The argument over President Obama's rather abrupt declaration that America was not really a Christian nation might have

gradually receded from people's minds except for one of those intriguing coincidences historians like to mull over. Within hours of Obama's comments in Turkey, a *Newsweek* cover luridly emblazoned with a cross-shaped red-on-black headline, "The Decline and Fall of Christian America," appeared on American and European newsstands. As if Americans were unaware of the spiritual issues of the day, the issue was dated April 13 and appeared the week before the Christian celebration of Easter.

Written by then managing editor Jon Meacham, the *Newsweek* piece made it clear that the headline itself was not such a bad statement. "While we remain a nation decisively shaped by religious faith," Meacham wrote, "our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago. I think this is a good thing—good for our political culture, which, as the American Founders saw, is complex and charged enough without attempting to compel or coerce religious belief or observance. It is good for Christianity, too, in that many Christians are rediscovering the virtues of a separation of church and state that protects what Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island as a haven for religious dissenters, called 'the garden of the church' from 'the wilderness of the world.'"<sup>11</sup>

To his credit, Meacham acknowledged Christian Americans who differed profoundly with him in this assessment. One of them, extensively quoted in the story, was R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Meacham quoted Mohler as agreeing that there had been a major shift in American life away from support for Christianity but not as approving of this shift. Mohler had lamented that "a remarkable culture-shift [had] taken place around us. The most basic contours of American culture have

been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture,” Meacham wrote. The “culture shift” that grieved Mohler included the near-doubling since 1990 of the number of Americans claiming “no religious affiliation,” as *Newsweek* noted, from 8 to 15 percent. Mohler told Meacham, “Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society.”<sup>12</sup>

A *Newsweek* poll accompanying Meacham’s report buttressed his argument. It showed that in 2009, the first year of Obama’s presidency, fewer people said they regarded the United States as a “Christian nation” than did so when George W. Bush was president (62 percent in 2009 versus 69 percent in 2008). Moreover, two-thirds of the public (68 percent) said they thought religion was “losing influence” in American society, while only 19 percent said they thought religion’s influence was on the rise. Perhaps even more disturbing for those troubled by Meacham’s analysis, the proportion of Americans who thought that religion could “answer all or most of today’s problems” was now at a historic low of 48 percent. During the preceding George W. Bush and Clinton years, that figure had never dropped below 58 percent, according to *Newsweek*.<sup>13</sup>

Meacham, an Episcopalian of more liberal theological and political persuasion than most evangelicals in the United States, seemed in the *Newsweek* piece eager to show that by referring to the “decline” of Christianity in America, he was referring largely to the diminishing profile of the “religious right,” that segment of America’s evangelicals who, at least since the late 1970s, had played a conspicuous role in our nation’s politics. Meacham argued that “being *less* Christian” did not necessarily



mean that America was “post-Christian.” After all, as is clear in the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) conducted by researchers at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, one-third of all Americans identified themselves as “born-again,” a term specifically expressing a personal commitment to the Christian faith. The results of their 2008 survey led the ARIS authors to note that “trends . . . suggest a movement towards more conservative beliefs and particularly to a more ‘evangelical’ outlook among Christians.”<sup>14</sup>

Meacham claimed that his assessment of the end of Christian America had derived from reflections on what he described as four decades of a “ferocious” struggle by the Christian right to undo the damage to the American Christian heritage that, in their view, had been wrought by the 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* Supreme Court decision banning government-composed prayer in public schools. In Meacham’s view, the Christian right in America longed “to engineer a return to what it believed was a Christian America of yore.”<sup>15</sup>

Mohler, for all of his evangelistic leanings, appeared to show some sympathy for Meacham’s assessment, almost nostalgically lamenting what he feared would result from Christianity’s slow erosion in American national life. Choosing his words with the precision honed by years as an administrator and teacher at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mohler told Meacham,

The moral teachings of Christianity have exerted an incalculable influence on Western civilization. As those moral teachings fade into cultural memory, a secularized morality takes their place. Once Christianity is abandoned by a significant portion of the population, the moral landscape necessarily changes. For the better part of the 20th century, the nations of Western Europe led the way in the abandonment of Christian

commitments. Christian moral reflexes and moral principles gave way to the loosening grip of a Christian memory. Now even that Christian memory is absent from the lives of millions.<sup>16</sup>

Mohler may well be correct in his assessment of the erosion of the Christian consensus in Western society, but the triumph of secularism may not be the end of the story.

### ■ CHRISTIANITY ON THE ROPES

If Christianity really was on the ropes, at least in terms of moral influence on society, as Mohler worried, what on earth had brought this about? A rich debate ensued online. For Presbyterian Darryl G. Hart, founder of the staunchly conservative Old Life Theological Society and its website, Oldlife.org, the fault lay in the eagerness of some Christians to try to use state power to promote Christianity, a temptation well documented in the book by Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might*.<sup>17</sup> To buttress his position, Hart quoted fellow Presbyterian T. David Gordon as saying,

If there is any real evidence of the decline of Christianity in the West, the evidence resides precisely in the eagerness of so many professing Christians to employ the state to advance the Christian religion. That is, if [Christian lay theologian and unconventional philosopher Jacques] Ellul's theory is right, the evidence of the decline of Christianity resides not in the presence of other religions (including secularism) in our culture, but in the emphasis by judges like Judge Roy Moore, a determined supporter of physical symbols like displays of the Ten Commandments in public places, in the hand-wringing over the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of

Allegiance, and the whining about the “war on Christmas.” If professing Christians believe our religion is advanced by the power of the state rather than by the power of the Spirit, by coercion rather than by example and moral suasion, then perhaps Christianity is indeed in decline.<sup>18</sup>

Hart’s diagnosis of Christianity’s decline in the United States was that Christians were simply far too political for their own good and for the good of Christianity in general. Hart noted, “But here is my concern: where in scripture are we told we have a ‘right’ to preach the gospel? I only see the categories of ‘command,’ as in, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.’ I don’t see things like ‘. . . and make sure the powers that be leave you unhampered to do what I command you.’” Hart went on,

We are commanded to be faithful and obedient to God to preach the gospel. “Rights” seem to imply that the preaching of the gospel is somehow for us to enjoy for our sake instead of doing it for the sake of others. If that is true, I don’t see what difference it makes if you are representing me or the ACLU, because my concern isn’t so much whether I have a right to my beliefs and practices (and that they are being protected) but rather if I am being faithful and obedient to what God has commanded.<sup>19</sup>

A similar, bracing view of the *Newsweek* analysis was conveyed by *Washington Post* writer E. J. Dionne: “Something is changing, and that change will strengthen rather than weaken the Christian church over the long run.” Dionne said he thought that for the previous twenty-five years Christianity had been

defined in a very conservative manner and “allied with a single political party.”<sup>20</sup> This prompted one blogger to comment,

On one level, Christians should be concerned about the “Decline and Fall of Christian America.” Christians always want people to embrace the Gospel and should lament the fact that fewer people identify themselves with Christian faith. Perhaps this “decline and fall” might prompt Christians to put more effort into doing the work of the Church—fulfilling the Great Commission and loving God and neighbor. On the other hand, Christians should not be scared by these demographic developments. In fact, they just might do the Church some good.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the resounding response of approval for the *Newsweek* message about Christianity in America in many quarters, some readers flatly contested its conclusions. “As Easter 2009 approaches,” wrote Douglas V. Gibbs on the website *Canada Free Press*, “the claim by the humanistic left that not only are we not a Christian nation, but never [were], becomes more and more rooted in their rabid fantasies. The reality of history is not only becoming ignored by some, but is literally being rewritten by those that hope to benefit from the death of religion, specifically Christianity, in America.”<sup>22</sup> Blogging on another website, Todd Strandberg began a post with the impish heading, “The End of Christian America? Not Really.” Christianity was in “good demographic shape,” he argued, with the number of self-identified Christians up from a 1990 figure of 151.2 million to a 2009 figure of 173.4 million. “To have *Newsweek* and CNN predicting the end of Christian America,” he said sardonically, “is like the dinosaurs telling the cockroaches that their days are numbered.” He referred untactfully—and perhaps

irrelevantly—to *Newsweek*'s decline in readers over previous years as essentially discrediting the magazine's reporting.<sup>23</sup>

As American Christians began to reflect on Meacham's assessment in *Newsweek* of the decline of Christianity, however, many who had for years kept a close eye on developments in culture and society began to express a view that seemed to reinforce Meacham's. One such person was Christian radio commentator Hank Hanegraaff, popularly known as "The Bible Answer Man," who has his own daily program answering questions from listeners about the Bible and Christian topics in general. Said Hanegraaff, "I have a very pessimistic outlook with respect to American evangelicals. I think America is going to look like Europe in the near future. I think we are going to look very much like Europe." He added, "The crux of this issue is a false dichotomy. . . . A sense of the divine is a sense of awe when we look at the universe. I think it is akin to the false dichotomy of the Enlightenment. I think we should have a reasonable truth."<sup>24</sup> The "false dichotomy" of which Hanegraaff was speaking is a view that an individual person might have a "sense of the divine" in his perceptions of the beauty of the universe but be unable to articulate that in a way that accorded with reason.

## ■ A REASONABLE TRUTH

The question is, however, who decides what is "reasonable truth"? Since about 2006, people of faith in the United States seem to have been under a general assault from the writings, debates, and lectures of people who collectively comprise a phenomenon known as "the New Atheism." Led by Oxford University ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the four bestselling authors who lead the New Atheism movement

are sometimes referred to as “The Four Horsemen” (from a passage in the biblical book of Revelation about “the four horsemen of the apocalypse”). Between them, they’ve sold more than a million books. Each of the books—published in 2006 and 2007—took an aggressively hostile attitude toward faith and toward Christian belief in particular.<sup>25</sup> One of the more prominent atheistic writers was British-born Christopher Hitchens, a pugnacious and sometimes caustically aggressive writer and television commentator who tragically died of cancer of the esophagus in 2011.

## ■ MOVING FROM THE DIMINISHED CHURCH TO THE DEFENSIVE CHURCH

Christianity in America has been under sustained attack before, of course, including about a century ago during what is sometimes called “the golden age of freethought,” between approximately 1856 and World War I. One of the most prominent orators favoring agnosticism was Robert G. Ingersoll.<sup>26</sup> Others have thought the “golden age” might have extended to the late 1920s and 1930s. At that time several skeptics took advantage of the intellectual bludgeoning suffered by American fundamentalists in the wake of the “Scopes Monkey Trial” over evolution in Dayton, Tennessee. We will deal with the Scopes trial in greater detail in chapter 4.

The difference between earlier periods of assault on faith by atheists and the recent period of American history described by the *Newsweek* article is that in the earlier periods, intellectual attacks on faith by atheists were not in general accompanied by an aggressive campaign by secularists to eliminate from public life as many public manifestations of Christian belief as possible.

According to the website of the Alliance Defense Fund, a legal alliance aimed at defending Christian religious liberty through strategy, training, funding, and litigation, “For decades, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other radical anti-Christian groups have been on a mission to eliminate public expression of our nation’s faith and heritage. By influencing the government, filing lawsuits, and spreading the myth of the so-called ‘separation of church and state,’ the opposition has been successful at forcing its leftist agenda on Americans.”<sup>27</sup>

The ACLU was founded in 1920 by Roger Nash Baldwin, Walter Nelles, and others as an outgrowth of an earlier organization that campaigned against United States participation in World War I and defended conscientious objectors. On its website, the organization asserts that it is “our nation’s guardian of liberty” and that among the rights of Americans it fights to defend are First Amendment rights, including “freedom of religion.”<sup>28</sup> The website further asserts, “The goal of the ACLU’s work on freedom of religion and belief is to guarantee that all are free to follow and practice their faith—or no faith at all—without governmental influence or interference.”<sup>29</sup> But within many Christian circles there is a belief that the ACLU is intent on removing public expressions of Christian belief that may be offensive to atheists or agnostics.

In fact, the ACLU has repeatedly found itself in litigation against organizations like the Alliance Defense Fund over the issue of the right of individuals or groups to express religious convictions in settings where some people might disagree with them. The ACLU has frequently found itself in alliance with another organization whose purpose is quite specifically to propagandize Americans against any religious influence, whether guaranteed by the First Amendment or not. That particular

group is the Freedom from Religion Foundation, based in Madison, Wisconsin. The FFRF, as it is sometimes referred to, was founded in 1976 by a mother and daughter team, Anne Nicol Gaylor and Annie Laurie Gaylor. The organization is currently cochaired by the daughter and her husband, Dan Barker, a former Pentecostal minister.

The website is interesting in its somewhat self-congratulatory description of the group (“the largest freethought association in North America”) and its determination to discourage as many people as possible from having any sort of religious faith, Christian or otherwise. It touts an “out of the closet” campaign, featuring photographs of private citizens who wish to be identified publicly as atheists. These photographs are then blown up to a size large enough to decorate sizeable chunks of city buses in different parts of the United States. Not surprisingly, a very large number of them identify themselves as coming from Madison, where FFRF is based. “I have faith in people, not in a god. I don’t need a god to be happy,” says the statement next to Melanie, who describes herself as “a recovering Catholic, living for the moment.” It is interesting that on the FFRF website—and presumably in most, if not all, of their literature—“god” is deliberately written in lowercase. As small-minded as this orthographic practice might seem today, it was prominently employed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks soon after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 as one of the first reforms intended to change the ways of thinking of ordinary Russians. In the Bolshevik case, what might have been considered at the outset a case of orthographic pettiness evolved into one of the most vicious antireligious movements in history.

Katie, twenty-three, also from Madison, is photographed in a T-shirt with the words “godless goddess” on the front of it and



holding a plate of cookies. “I like biking, baking, and sleeping in on Sundays,” she says. Bob Hinds, a middle-aged male also from Madison, is quoted as saying, “Being kind with an open mind is my religion.” The FFRF has actually paid for its own monument at Lake Hypatia, Alabama, to “atheists in foxholes,” a sort of tongue-in-cheek riposte to the frequently cited adage “There are no atheists in foxholes.” The monument reads, “In memory of ATHEISTS IN FOXHOLES and the countless FREETHINKERS who have served this country with honor and distinction.”

In fact, the FFRF spends a great deal of its time—and no doubt much of its money—fighting lawsuits to drive religion, and especially Christianity, out of the American public space. Matt Staver, director of the Liberty Counsel, an organization that fights in court to defend Christian religious expression from attack by secularist groups, says that the FFRF “strategizes on how to attack Christian viewpoints and Christian expression. They take Christian expressions and mimic them with different words. They put out bumper stickers. They are not a separation of church and state operation.”<sup>30</sup>

Many of the suits might seem absurd to the average American. The FFRF, for example, prevented a city hall in Green Bay, Wisconsin, from displaying a crèche in its entrance and also successfully prevented the Cherry Creek School District in Denver, Colorado, from, to use FFRF’s own words, “illegally urging that children spend an hour a week at a religious institution.” The program encouraged parents to promote “40 development assets” as a way to ensuring that their children’s lives enrich their “family, school and community.” Families were told that asset-rich children were likely to be successful in their lives. But asset 19 was “Religious Community—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.” The

FFRF argued, successfully, that “adoption, promotion, endorsement, approval and publicizing of Development Asset 19” by the school district “constituted an establishment of religion in violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution,” as well as violating the prohibition against teaching sectarian tenets or doctrines found in the Colorado Constitution.<sup>31</sup>

Other victories celebrated by the FFRF include the fencing-off of a statue of Jesus in a Wisconsin public park with “Christ, Guide Us on Our Way” at the base of the statue. Atheists and agnostics had argued that they were offended by the idea that the statue was on public property. The city of Marshfield was ordered to erect a conspicuous sign on the surrounding fence that read, “PRIVATE PARK. This enclosed property is not owned or maintained by the city of Marshfield, nor does the city endorse the religious expression thereon.” Well, the good citizens of Wisconsin are reliably informed that the state and city authorities don’t want anyone to be under the illusion that they might have a sympathetic attitude towards religion.

But the FFRF lost a case that could have had national repercussions had the decision gone the other way. A First Circuit Court judge rejected an FFRF attempt to have the phrase “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance in New Hampshire schools. Judge Sandra Lea Lynch said, “In reciting the Pledge, students promise fidelity to our flag and nation, not to any particular God, faith, or church.”<sup>32</sup>

## **PUSHING BACK**

The faith community in the United States is well defended in these court cases by several Christian legal organizations, such as the Alliance Defense Fund, the Rutherford Institute, the

Liberty Counsel, the American Center for Law and Justice, and Wallbuilders, a Texas-based organization dedicated to protecting Americans' awareness of their historical connections with devout Christians throughout the nation's story. On the website of the Alliance Defense Fund is a statement that reads, "The ACLU's attacks on religious freedom are more serious and widespread than you may realize. In courtrooms and schoolrooms, offices and shops, public buildings and even churches . . . those who believe in God are increasingly threatened, punished, and silenced."<sup>33</sup> The ADF says in another location on its website,

For more than 50 years, the ACLU and other radical activist groups have attempted to eliminate public expression of our nation's faith and heritage. They have done this through fear, intimidation, disinformation, and the filing of lawsuits (or threats of lawsuits) that would:

- Eliminate Christian and historic faith symbols from government documents, buildings, and monuments
- Ban public prayer in schools and at school functions
- Deny Christians the right to use public facilities that are open to other groups
- Prevent Christians from expressing their faith in the workplace

Through attacks like these, the ACLU and its allies have sought to limit the spread and influence of the Gospel in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Actually, the ADF and allied legal groups have won more cases than they have lost, but they are certainly kept busy. Among the horror stories brought out by the ADF is that of a woman in Houston threatened with arrest by the local police for handing out gospel tracts to children who knocked on her front door

during Halloween. The policemen told her—erroneously—that this activity was illegal. The ADF worked to force the University of California, Los Angeles to permit a graduating student to thank Jesus Christ during her graduation ceremony. Too numerous to mention are the past court cases (invariably won by the ADF) that force schools to permit Christian clubs to operate on campus, outside of school hours, with the same rights and privileges as non-Christian clubs.

More worrying for the ADF and all concerned about freedom-of-conscience issues have been decisions by educational institutions to force enrolled students to accept, and even to endorse, homosexual behavior. The ADF brought a case against Augusta State University in Georgia for essentially forcing a Christian student, Jen Keeton, then twenty-four, either to abandon her Christian beliefs and to attend compulsory “sensitivity training” or to face expulsion from the school. Keeton said that her Christian beliefs defined her attitude toward homosexual behavior. Keeton had asserted, both inside and outside the classroom, that she considered homosexual behavior (not orientation as such) a matter of “behavioral choice,” not a state of being. The college authorities, until challenged in court, insisted that Keeton attend a “remediation” program, a sort of thought reform program similar to those concocted during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, in which she would be forced to attend “sensitivity training” on homosexuality and to be an observer of—and then report on—a “gay pride” event. The Keeton case is currently pending in federal district court. The school’s argument was unconsciously ironic. It expelled Keeton, then argued that the case was moot because she was no longer a student.

In a similar case, a student at Eastern Michigan State University, Julea Ward, was expelled from the counseling program

at the college on March 12, 2009, for refusing to change her religious convictions and endorse homosexual behavior. Since the college is a publicly funded institution, many state legislators were understandably alarmed that a public educational institution would impose what many people regarded as a religious test for students. David French, senior counsel for the ADF, commented, “When a public university has a prerequisite of affirming homosexual behavior as morally good in order to obtain a degree, the school is stepping over the legal line.” Ward was also told that the only way she could avoid expulsion was a “remediation” program—in other words, thought reform. The case is pending an appeal. Interestingly, the Michigan State Attorney General, the highest legal official in the state, filed an amicus (i.e., supporting) brief on the side of Ward’s defenders, the Alliance Defense Fund.

Jay Sekulow is president of the American Center for Law and Justice, which litigates frequently over issues of religious freedom. Commenting on the number of cases he sees that require aggressive litigation to preserve First Amendment rights of “free exercise” of religion, Sekulow was pessimistic about social trends. He said, “You have a confluence of two things—a secularist agenda and militant political convictions—that has brought together in a mutual alliance militant secularists and even Islamists.” The opponents of Christianity, Sekulow argued, had “not had much success in the courtroom. But they have had great success in the court of public opinion.”<sup>35</sup>

## **PUBLIC OPINION**

People disagree, of course, on what “the court of public opinion” means, but it surely includes the world of Hollywood and

entertainment, reporting by many news organizations, and the academic world. We have already seen how the academic world is increasingly hostile toward orthodox Christian positions. Hollywood in recent years has been as averse to portraying Christians sympathetically as college campuses often have been to treating Christian ideas with fairness. Many elite media publications, particularly on both coasts, have also been hostile to Christian positions.

The movie industry's hostility to traditional American religious views was first well reported in 1993 in Michael Medved's book *Hollywood vs. America*, in which Medved argued, among other things, that much of Hollywood's vendetta against Christianity is driven by ideology, not profits.<sup>36</sup> Other critics have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that movies with strong anti-Christian themes consistently do less well at the box office than movies with upbeat content and with a generally favorable view of Christianity. The research staff of Dr. Ted Baehr, founder and chairman of Christian Film and Television, watched and analyzed 750 movies between 2002 and 2004. Movies with "strong moral messages" (not necessarily Christian) earned about four to seven times as much money, on average, as movies with content blatantly in opposition to traditional Christian morality.<sup>37</sup> In short, the financial bottom line in Hollywood seems to carry less weight than the ideological position of the power brokers in Hollywood.

"There is no doubt that the fissure is growing much, much deeper," says Rev. Jim Garlow, senior pastor of San Diego's Skyline Church. "If we don't have a revival we are in for persecution." Garlow's church has sometimes required police protection because of Garlow's role in supporting California's Proposition 8 (the California ballot proposition and state constitutional

amendment declaring that only marriages between a man and a woman should be legally recognized by the state, which was passed by 52.4 percent of California voters but then overturned in federal district court). Garlow says that opponents of Christianity, especially within the gay community and on liberal-leaning television networks like MSNBC, have been vitriolic in their opposition. The federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recently upheld the ruling that found Proposition 8 unconstitutional, and the case is expected to end up before the US Supreme Court.

“I definitely think we have sunk to a new level,” Garlow says. “Look at [the Old Testament book of] Isaiah 5:20. They call ‘good,’ ‘bad’ and ‘bad,’ ‘good.’ I think we are seeing a sign. The left doesn’t even stop to care whether we are transgressing the First Amendment. Civil discourse is almost impossible. The radical left is incapable of civil discourse. [Television anchors like] Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann are just vitriolic.”<sup>38</sup> Jay Sekulow agrees. “The media bias issue is increasingly becoming a central one,” he says. “The left is much more vicious, making fun of people. What is said about Christians could not be said about Muslims.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, people on the right can be vindictive too, but aside from Fox News, there is much less visible presence of conservatives in the general American news media.

The appearance that Christianity in America has been under direct attack from parts of the judiciary, from the academic community, from Hollywood, and from the media has prompted a number of people to write books that raise the cultural alarm. David Limbaugh’s *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging a War Against Christianity* was a bestseller in 2006. A more recent volume is *America’s War on Christianity* by Brad O’Leary.<sup>40</sup> Limbaugh’s contention that the culture of the United States

is moving decisively against the public expression of Christian belief is backed up by a variety of legal, academic, and journalistic incidents that he cites.

Almost more shocking than anything cited on the websites of the Alliance Defense Fund or Sekulow's American Center for Law and Justice is an occasion in May 1995 when Judge Samuel B. Kent, United States judge for the Southern District of Texas, declared from the bench that anyone uttering the word "Jesus" during a high school graduation ceremony would be arrested and incarcerated for six months. For good measure, the judge added, "Anyone who violates these orders, no kidding, is going to wish that he or she had died as a child when this court gets through with it." Mindful of the need to be equally repressive to all religions, the judge added that any prayer offered "must not refer to a specific deity by name, whether it be Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, the Great God Sheba or anyone else."<sup>41</sup> In reality, it might have been Judge Kent who wished that he had experienced a different childhood. Imprisoned on charges of sexual harassment of female co-workers, he was indicted, went to jail, and then was impeached in 2009 by the United States House of Representatives and stripped of all his retirement benefits.

Kent's intemperate haranguing of graduating high school students was matched by what could be judged as one of the more egregious journalistic lapses of recent decades. When Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris massacred twelve classmates and one teacher at Columbine High School in Colorado before taking their own lives in April 1999, one of the most horrifying aspects of the shootings was their apparent deliberate targeting of outspoken Christians among the students. Though the Christian martyrdom aspect of the deaths of Cassie Bernall and



Rachel Scott were well publicized (Klebold and Harris reportedly specifically asked whether their victims were Christians before shooting them) at the time of the incident, *Time* magazine devoted twenty pages to a cover story on the shootings without once mentioning videos made before the shootings in which Klebold and Harris revealed the depth of their hatred, specifically, of Christians. In one of them, Klebold faces the camera and asks, “What would Jesus do? What would I do?” He points an imaginary gun at the camera and says, “Boosh!” In the background Harris is heard saying, “Yeah, I love Jesus. I love Jesus. Shut the f--- up. Go Romans. Thank God they crucified that a--hole.”<sup>42</sup>

*Time*'s lapse in the Columbine report may have had a variety of explanations. Harder to brush aside, however, are examples of the media's sometimes downright hostility in their attitude toward America's Christians. When *Washington Post* reporter Michael Weisskopf was writing about Christian conservative supporters of the Christian Coalition in 1993, he casually opined that Christians were “largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command.” The comment was a public relations disaster for the *Washington Post*, which for a time required full-time staffers just to handle the faxed bank statements, photocopies of college degrees, and other paraphernalia that flowed into the paper as proof of how wrong Weisskopf had been. In fairness to Weisskopf, whom I knew personally as a talented and courageous reporting colleague a few years earlier in China, there was almost certainly no malice in the statement. Weisskopf simply reflected an ignorance of and indifference to America's Christians that is all too typical of many American reporters.

Brad O'Leary's book focuses not only on cases of journalistic malfeasance but also on additional instances of legal overreach

in suppressing Christianity in public. He draws attention to the need for America's Christian legacy to be assessed accurately and the need to fight against what he considers a whitewashing of America's history books.

Other worriers about cultural decline, however, have noted positive statements about Christianity's role in society from members of the judiciary who otherwise have had a reputation for seeming always to prefer the liberal (and usually anti-Christian) side of legal opinions. In Limbaugh's book, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas is cited as the author of an important Supreme Court ruling back in 1952, which held that schools may hold Bible study during the school day, providing no public funds are used, teachers in the Bible study program are not state-approved, and there is no coercion. Justice Douglas wrote,

We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. . . . When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities by adjusting the schedule of public events to sectarian needs, it then follows the best of our traditions. For it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public services to their spiritual needs. To hold that it may not be to find in the Constitution a requirement that the government show a callous indifference to religious groups. That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe. . . . But we find no constitutional requirement that makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence. But it can close its doors or suspend its operations as those who want to repair to their religious sanctuary for worship of instruction. No more than that is undertaken here.<sup>43</sup>

Neither Limbaugh nor O'Leary, however, addresses a question that is perhaps just as important as the historical issue of the role of Christianity in American life. That question is this: Is there an actual falling away from traditional Christian belief among churchgoers and their offspring? If so, how significant is it in an overall examination of the role of Christianity in America?