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Weigel & Secularism

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

George Weigel decries the influences and the effects of secularism in his latest column. Secularism worries me too. But, what I find ironic is that Mr. Weigel, as much as any contemporary Catholic writer, has been complicit in the march of secularism. How so?

Weigel invokes Charles Taylor's observation about "exclusivist secularism" once thought to be a strictly European affair, the consequence of fights between conservative Catholics pining for the return of the ancient regime and those who associated that regime with the Church and, consequently, saw in the Church an enemy. In America, Weigel warns, the threat of secularism may be less direct but it is no less lethal.

Anyone who is familiar with the history of the First and Third Republics in France will see that the threats to the Church present different faces at different times. The First Republic was unsubtle in its attacks and its principal instrument was the guillotine. The Third Republic tried to minimize the role of the Church in the public life of the nation, laicizing the schools, closing the monasteries, denying exemptions from military service to seminarians. The great Catholic convert, Ferdinand Brunetiere, editor of *La Revue des deux Mondes*, warned in the early years of the twentieth century about the political dangers of such a marginalization program. He foresaw the need for intermediate social groups like the Church and unions and social clubs to protect the individual from being subsumed by the demands of the State.

Weigel is right to insist that the Church should have the "space to be itself" in our society. It is on this ground that many of us have been opposed to the HHS mandate. If the government decides it is really vital to provide free access to contraception, which is at least debatable, then it should do so, but it should leave the Church out of its instrumentality in achieving that objective. If there are groups of people who fret that the closest medical center is a Catholic one, and that they might not be able to procure the

services they want, they should build their own hospitals, not tell us how to run ours.

But, then Weigel conflates that right with a different issue. "Moreover, the Church asks, and if necessary demands, that the state respect the sanctuary of conscience, so that the Church's people are not required by law to do things the Church teaches are immoral," he writes. Here is the Taco Bell issue, the idea that individual employers should be able, because they are Catholics, to seek an exemption from the law regarding the insurance coverage of their employees. I would prefer a system, a single payer system, that got all employers out of the business of providing insurance. But, while we are stuck with an employer-based system, I do not see that Taco Bell has the same right to claim an exemption as a Catholic institution. A Catholic university that teaches contraception is morally wrong if forced to contradict that teaching in its actions when it is forced to provide such contraception. Teaching the faith is not the primary obligation of Taco Bell. Perhaps there was a footnote in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* about Taco Bell that I missed, but I think I would remember that.

Mr. Weigel was, if memory serves, less concerned about the "sanctuary of conscience" when the Republicans held the White House. I do not remember him objecting to the fact that Catholics were forced to pay for a war in Iraq that our Holy Father thought was immoral. I do not remember Mr. Weigel objecting to Mr. Romney's health care plan in Massachusetts which explicitly provides for taxpayer-funded abortions. Mr. Weigel is a bit selective in perceiving threats to conscience. It is telling indeed that in this latest epistle, he confines his concerns about secularization to the past four years and neglects to mention, for example, Justice Scalia's opinion in *Employment Division v. Smith* which is as obvious an example of secularization as I can think of. Weigel also, so far as I know, failed to ever mention the threat to religious liberty contained in the anti-immigrant laws that his Republican friends have passed.

But, my real concern with Weigel is deeper than his evident partisanship. He is guilty of aiding the very thing he abhors, secularization, because he has made a career out of reducing religion to ethics. Consider this paragraph from his essay:

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The Church also asks any society to consider the possibility of its need for redemption. The "world" sometimes doesn't take kindly to this suggestion, as the history of the martyrs reminds us. But overt persecution isn't the only way the "world" resists the Church's proposal. Societies can affect a bland indifference to the truths taught by biblical religion. Cultures can mock the moral truths taught by God's revelation to the people of Israel and God's self-revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ. Educational systems can inculcate an ethos of nihilism and hedonism, teaching that the only moral absolute is that there are no moral absolutes.

I agree that our faith calls us to enter into the world proclaiming the good news of redemption. The proclamation of that redemption finds its most forceful voice in the Gospel of Luke, in the words of the Magnificat that we pray each night: "He has mercy on those who fear him/ in every generation; He has shown the strength of his arm/ he has scattered the proud in their conceit; He has cast down the mighty from their thrones/ and has lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things/ and the rich he has sent away empty." The call to justice at the heart of the Gospel is non-negotiable, but that call rarely finds expression in Weigel's columns. The "moral truths" that interest Weigel are of the more personal variety.

The problem is deeper still. As I have written before, some on the Catholic Left tend to reduce the Church's role in the world to its social justice teachings. Some on the Catholic Right tend to reduce the Church's role in the world to its teachings on sexual morality. But, the real problem is the reduction of religion to ethics, a reduction that is in perfect conformity with this bizarre worship of the founding

fathers one sees in far too many Catholic pulpits these days. Our Catholic faith is reduced to a prop for Americanism. The first four presidents of the United States were none of them orthodox Christians, and all saw, with different emphases, the role of religion as providing support for the moral fiber of a self-governing people. I am all for moral support, but Jesus did not die to make America great.

I am waiting for Mr. Weigel to bestir himself some day to question the ethos of contemporary capitalism. Surely, he has seen the ads here in Maryland - they are unavoidable - from both sides debating whether or not Maryland should build a new casino. The issue is on the ballot in November. There is also a referendum on same-sex marriage this year and another on the DREAM Act, but I have not seen any ads. Why? Because in America today, we human beings do not define ourselves as the "imago Dei." We are consumers first and last. We do not stay away from stores that engage in unfair labor practices. We patronize companies built on sweatshop labor from abroad. But, hey, there is a sale, so why ask questions? Consequently, the airwaves fill with ads about the ballot initiative on casinos and not a word on the other issues.

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It is long since time that we recognize how this marginalization of the Church in the life of society became thinkable. Religion has been allowed ? since the founding, really since the Reformation ? to enter the public square only on terms set by the State. In America, religion is permitted into the public square as an ethical authority, but this already entails an abandonment of the Church?s self-identity, it is already a conniving at the marginalization of the Church, it is already a big step towards the secularization Weigel abhors. He just does not realize that so far from making a secular culture unthinkable, he has been paving the road for years.

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