

A Reply to Reno

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 21, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

There is much in [R.R. Reno's recent essay in America](#) [1] that is beyond reproach. Reno attempts to provide cultural analysis, with a primary focus on law, to explain why he believes we are heading into an era that will be more hostile to religion than any that went before.

His analysis of our culture's understanding of the First Amendment's religion clauses, morphing from a pro-religion but strongly anti-establishmentarian view in the early federal period to a kind of vague, Protestant cultural hegemony in the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, finally giving way to a "neutrality" position that tends to sideline religion from the public square, this is all well argued. But, it is less obvious to me that it was the cultural hostility to religion per se, found in writers like H.L. Mencken, that led to those change in legal culture. Surely, the rise of religious pluralism had a lot to do with it and Catholics were only too happy to see the Protestant hegemony flee the public square.

Reno turns to a recent report from the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture to bolster his case that religion is in for a rough time. Again, much of what he says is beyond reproach. The "engaged progressives" the report identifies are hostile to religion, and they have become a mainstay of the Democratic Party, and they are especially influential in institutions that lead the culture such as universities and the media, and they are more than a little intolerant about their insistence on tolerance. They, Reno claims, are the ones responsible for the increasing inhospitable public culture where religion is concerned.

But, the picture is not so neat. The seeds of secularism are many. Reno writes:

Institutions of cultural authority tell us what is good and respectable?and what is bad and shameful. It is now crushingly obvious that this machinery, which can include museums, universities, foundations or mainstream media, reflects many of the values of the nones and engaged progressives. From their point of view, traditional Christianity is quaint when confined to exotic liturgies or remote Amish communities, but it most certainly should not influence the future of American culture and politics.

See what's missing in the list? The market. Consumerism. The politicization of religion. The sex abuse crisis. I do not believe for a second that Mencken had any greater cultural influence in his day, than Voltaire has in his. If an increasing number of Americans are secular, surely it has something to do with the fact that people came to identify themselves by the cars they drive rather than the churches they attend, or because at a very early age they were taught that Christmas was about being greedy not being holy, or because they were, understandably, revolted by the Moral Majority, or because their religious leaders proved themselves to be criminal or nearly criminal in their handling of child rape by clerics. And it is the market, the all powerful market, that has brought the forgetfulness of God to the masses.

According to the 2012 American Religious Identification Survey, there were measurable declines in Catholic identification among what is known as "Generation X", those 35 million people born in the US between 1965 and 1972. "Born in the wake of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the "Gen X-ers" constituted the most Catholic generational cohort in American history, with fully one-third of them identifying as Catholics in 1990,?"

the report stated. ?But two decades later, approximately one out of five had fallen away from the faith. It was only thanks to the addition of approximately one million Latino Catholics their own age that the proportion of ?Gen X? Catholics decreased to only 26 per cent of the cohort.? What happened between 1990 and 2010? It wasn't Mencken or merely his progeny.

Reno then turns his attention to how this changing culture is affecting our legal understanding of religious liberty and, again, the situation is dire in his eyes. He laments the analogy drawn by gay rights activists between their efforts to secure equal protection under the law and the earlier efforts of black Americans to do the same, what he terms the ?Selma analogy.? And, he frets about two New Mexico photographers who were cited by that state?s human rights commission because they refused to photograph a same sex marriage ceremony. He writes:

The civil rights laws adopted in the 1960s were designed to bulldoze racism out of American public life, and the Selma analogy prepares the way for a narrowing of religious freedom by equating dissent from progressive values with discrimination. Proponents of gay rights, for example, believe the freedom of religious individuals and institutions should be limited if they do not conform to the new consensus about sexual morality.

Surely, Reno is aware that the bulldozing of racism by the civil rights laws stopped at the doors of Christian churches but not Christian businesses. Surely, too, he knows that many white Christians could cite line and verse of the Good Book to justify their religious commitment to segregation. Does he think the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an infringement on religious liberty? I have not been shy about my problems with the gay rights movement, but I am not going to shed tears for businesses that discriminate for any reason. Why is Reno? And, maybe one of the reasons there are more young people who decline to identify with religion is precisely because they see it as intolerant and religion?s champions as excuse-makers for bigots.

I like Reno and think he is less willing to indulge agitprop than some of his fellow religious conservatives. But, then I come across a paragraph like this and wince:

To be blunt: Religious people who hold traditional values are in the way of what many powerful people want. We are in the way of widespread acceptance of abortion, unrestricted embryonic stem cell research and experimentation with fetal tissue. We are in the way of doctor-assisted suicide, euthanasia and the mercy-killing of genetically defective infants. We are in the way of new reproductive technologies, which will become more important as our society makes sex more sterile. We are in the way of gay rights and the redefinition of marriage. We are in the way of the nones and the engaged progressives and their larger goal of deconstructing traditional moral limits so that they can be reconstructed in accord with their vision of the future.

I agree with what he writes, but the unwillingness to recognize that, in this culture, the most powerful people are the people with money, and what they want is more money, and that Christians should be standing in their way too, well, this is an absence that speaks more loudly than even the good points Reno makes. This is a criticism I could have easily expected to be leveling this time last year. One year into the pontificate of Papa Francesco, I am a bit surprised. Mr Reno: Get out of the office and away from your fellow conservatives for a bit. Mencken and the ?nones? and the ?engaged progressives? have met their match and his name is Francis.

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[1] <http://americamagazine.org/issue/our-secular-future>