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2007 Presidential Address: The Folly of Secularism

Jeffrey Stout

MANY PEOPLE WHO care about democratic practices and institutions are worried by the power of the religious right in the United States and the rise of militant Islam elsewhere. They fear that democracy will give way to theocracy if these forces triumph, and they want to know how to prevent this from happening. One increasingly popular answer to this question is secularist. It says that striving to minimize the influence of religion on politics is essential to the defense of democracy. My purpose in this essay is to raise doubts about the wisdom of this answer.

The ideal of a democratic republic holds that political power is to be shared by the entire citizenry and that no one is to be denied citizenship simply because of his or her religious beliefs or lack thereof. Theocracy holds that God's representatives on earth should rule everyone else. Democracy and theocracy are therefore at odds. Wherever theocracy catches on, even among a sizable minority, democracy is in trouble. Sooner or later, theocracy disintegrates into conflict over who God's earthly representatives really are. Each band of theocrats takes itself to be God's elect, claims for itself the right to hold earthly power over others, and declares its opponents deluded by sin.

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E-mail: stout@princeton.edu. I dedicate these remarks to Richard Rorty and Mary Douglas—two dear friends who died within a few weeks of each other when I was writing this address, friends from whom I have learned much and with whom I continue to argue. I had hoped to bring Mary Douglas to San Diego for a plenary address, but it was not to be. My remarks aim to combine Rorty's love of democracy with Douglas's suspicion of secularism.

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American theocrats appear to have grown in numbers since the 1970s, and they probably played a significant role in the election of George W. Bush. The long-term objective most of them harbor is a Christian America. They seek to use democratic means to achieve an anti-democratic end. What they ultimately seek is the dominance of non-Christians by Christians. Everyone who is committed to democracy has a stake in opposing the new theocrats, however many or few of them there might be.

But not all religious people are theocrats. Why, then, should we take religion *as such* to pose a threat to democracy?

Secularism comes in many forms, but what they all have in common is the aim of minimizing the influence of religion *as such*. Secularism comes into focus only when we notice that it takes *religion*, rather than some particular religion or type of religion, to be the problem. If, however, some forms of religion are in fact committed to democracy and have evidently promoted democracy in the past, why oppose *them*? Why substitute whole for part and then oppose the whole?

Lenin and Mao were unrestricted secularists; they sought to minimize the influence of religion on all aspects of human life. They considered religion essentially irrational and politically regressive, so they sought to eradicate it. Their antipathy for religion went hand in hand with their reluctance to trust the masses with political power. Democracy will become justifiable, according to Lenin and Mao, only when religious false consciousness and similarly retrograde tendencies have been overcome. Until then, the revolutionary avant-garde must exercise political authority on the people's behalf.

Richard Rorty, in contrast, was a *democratic* secularist. He saw democracy not as a distant possibility to be achieved in a future classless society, but rather as an existing heritage of reform and social criticism in danger of being lost. This heritage rests, he thought, on "the Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious" (Rorty 1999: 169). Religion will be tolerated, according to this compromise, only insofar as it steers clear of politics. Mark Lilla refers to the outcome of this compromise as the Enlightenment's "Great Separation" of religion from politics (Lilla 2007: 55–103). The trouble, as Rorty and Lilla see it, is that the Great Separation is fragile and under assault. Its emergence was contingent, not inevitable, and it will pass away if citizens stop honoring the compromise on which it is based. Without it, however, there can be no democracy.

When Rorty spoke of the need to "enforce" the Jeffersonian compromise by keeping religion "private," he was not simply referring to legal enforcement of the First Amendment's establishment clause. Rorty

85 was right to think that the government has no business giving tax
dollars to religious groups, let alone adopting a religion on behalf of the
people. I agree with him, moreover, that any religious organization
should lose its tax-exempt status if it explicitly endorses a political candi-
90 date or party. But the U.S. Constitution does not say that religion
must be a wholly private matter, and I see no evidence that most reli-
gious citizens ever agreed, even tacitly, to treat religion as if it were.

Rorty's secularism is a practical proposal, a claim about how democ-
racy can best be safeguarded, a claim that goes well beyond taking a
stand on the jurisprudence of the First Amendment. Many other intel-
95 lectuals are nowadays endorsing roughly what Rorty proposed. Like
other practical proposals, this one needs to be evaluated pragmatically,
in terms of the acceptability of its ends, means, and likely consequences.
If the end is to safeguard democracy, we had better determine what
means are being recommended in pursuit of that end and what the
100 likely consequences of adopting those means will be.

In Rorty's address at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American
Academy of Religion in Atlanta, he said that atheists make better citi-
zens than theists. This explains why many of his writings project a
utopia in which theists not only keep their religious convictions private,
105 but eventually pass from the scene altogether. The Jeffersonian compro-
mise turns out to be a stop-gap measure. Democracy will not be truly
safe until theism gives up the ghost. It should be noted that this posi-
tion mirrors that of the new theocrats almost perfectly. Neither the
secularist nor the theocrat will be content until everyone agrees with
110 their basic convictions.

Arguments against belief in God have been in circulation for a long
time. Many people are unmoved by those arguments, and are unlikely
to be moved by them in the future. If the eventual eradication of theism
is part of the secularist program for saving democracy, it would seem
115 that something more than rational persuasion will be required. But
what might that be? While Rorty was fond of quoting Voltaire's dream
of the day when the last king would be strangled with the entrails of
the last priest, I doubt that he was actually recommending strangling
George Bush with the entrails of Pat Robertson.

120 If privatizing religion is essential to safeguarding democracy now,
and eradicating belief in God is essential to achieving the utopian
democracy of the future, then these goals will have to be accomplished
somehow: if not by rational persuasion alone, then by some other
means. If secularism confines itself to rational persuasion while granting
125 that this means is unlikely to succeed, the strategy boils down to a mere
ought expressing the secular intellectual's alienation from a disturbingly

religious present. It thus implicitly concedes its futility as a politics, as a strategy for achieving some desirable public end.

130 Rorty's argument up to this point raises three questions: (1) If part of the long-term objective is the *eradication* of theism, how is this to be accomplished, assuming that most theists are not about to change their minds? (2) If the stop-gap measure is to keep theists from *acting on* the apparent political implications of their religious beliefs, how is *that* to be accomplished? (3) If the Jeffersonian compromise is to be *enforced*,
135 what are the means of enforcement going to be and how are they supposed to be squared with such democratic ideals as freedom of religion and freedom of conscience?

Rorty offered no answers to these questions, and seems to have been reluctant to advance his cause by using force. Democratic secularists
140 need to do their best, he thought, to narrate the history of the Great Separation in a way that makes the benefits of privatizing religion both salient and attractive. They should project a secularist utopia in which all good citizens have overcome the desire for the consolations that theism provides. They should strengthen their hold on the institutions
145 of higher learning and convert as many young people to democratic secularism as possible. But in the end they will have to admit that these discursive means of advancing the secularist cause are likely to fail.

Democracy appears, from Rorty's point of view, to be slipping through our fingers. Theocrats and plutocrats are jointly bringing about
150 democracy's demise. Rorty's realization that there may not be much that democratic secularists can do to prevent this unfortunate outcome accounts for the wistful tone of his later writings on religion and politics.

Sam Harris is a secularist who seems less inclined to confine himself to mere suasion as a means to his ends. He shares Rorty's hope that
155 theism will someday wither away, but doubts that it can in the meantime be privatized. In a book called *The End of Faith* Harris claims that religious faith is inherently intolerant (Harris 2005). He is aware that religious faith comes in "moderate" forms, as well as in the "extreme" forms that are overtly intolerant of everyone who differs from them religiously.
160 But a central thesis of his book is that moderates are actually undermining democratic society by protecting extremists from the criticism they deserve.

"While all faiths have been touched, here and there, by the spirit of ecumenicalism," Harris writes, "the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed" (2005:
165 13). Religious moderates disguise this fact, often from themselves as well as from others. They fail to realize that their own moderation is

170 actually derived from sources alien to their faith. They pretend that their scriptures do not contain and sanction horrors. Their calls for toleration of religious faith actually provide cover for their extremist brethren. In a world where religious extremists already exercise considerable political influence and move closer every day to acquiring nuclear weapons, such toleration becomes an unaffordable luxury.

175 Belief, Harris says, is never a merely private affair. Generally speaking, to believe a proposition is to be disposed to *act* on the supposition that the proposition is true. Theistic belief, being inherently intolerant, tends by nature to express itself in overtly intolerant behavior unless commitments arrived at independently of theistic premises complicate the process of reasoning. For extremists, there are no such complications. For moderates, the complications lead not to a benign form of tolerance but a misplaced tolerance of extremists. It is only to be expected that much of the resulting behavior on the part of both extremists and moderates has implications for public life. Therefore, privatizing faith is not the answer, even as a stop-gap measure.

185 The nuclear age, in other words, has rendered the Jeffersonian compromise unworkable. The problem we face, Harris says, “is not merely religious extremism: rather it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed” (2005: 45). Harris provides no evidence for his claims about how religious moderates behave and what effects their actions have. One wonders what his grounds for believing these claims might be.

190 On the next page Harris asks, “Should Muslims really be *free* to believe that the Creator of the universe is concerned about hemlines?” (2005: 46, italics added) Two pages later he affirms a more general conclusion: “We have simply lost the *right* to our myths, and to our mythic identities” (2005: 48, italics added). What is Harris hinting at here? If theists, be they extremists or not, have no *right* to their convictions, it seems that people who know better, people like Harris, will be within *their* rights if they use the coercive power of the state to suppress theism.

200 What, then, should secularists *do* to acquire the power they need to save civilization? And once they have that power, what exactly does Harris want *done* to theists? He does not answer these questions. As in Rorty’s case, at the crucial point in the argument everything becomes vague. There is no strategy being articulated here at all.

210 Harris is aware that most of his fellow American citizens are theists. The very thought of them brings him to the brink of despair. If they are

as irrational as he claims them to be, they are not going to be persuaded by his appeals to reason. Rational persuasion, for all the value he places on it, must therefore not be the only thing his strategy involves. Secularists are rational but vastly outnumbered. They constitute a small island of sanity in a vast sea of unreason. What are they to do?

Harris' proposal to his fellow non-believers is to stop tolerating the faithful. The pragmatic effect of this proposal in the contemporary American context is clear: there will be no political alliance between non-believers and moderate theists. By undermining such an alliance, however, secularism deprives itself of the only available *democratic* means for delaying or preventing the triumph of theocracy in the United States. It also deprives itself of democratic means for achieving other important democratic objectives, such as preventing the triumph of plutocracy.

Harris makes clear that he wants to prevent the triumph of theocracy. As we have seen, one of the things he dislikes about even the non-theocratic forms of theistic faith is their alleged proclivity to tolerate the intolerant. But the upshot of his argument is that secularists should be less tolerant. It is not clear in the end that democracy is Harris' preferred alternative to theocracy under present circumstances. His hints about the need to stop granting rights to theists brings him at least into the vicinity of Lenin's view that until the day when faith gives way to reason, an enlightened avant garde must rule on the people's behalf.

Harris might protest that I am reading too much into his vague hints. It is not my purpose, however, to prove that he actually has anti-democratic ends and means in mind. I am trying to show that sincerely *democratic* secularists face a dilemma. Either (a) they are merely *warning* us about the dangers of allowing religion into politics, in which case, by their own account, their arguments are likely to fall on deaf ears and therefore fail to achieve the desired objective; or (b) they are proposing some more *aggressive* strategy for curtailing the influence of religion on politics, in which case they owe us a concrete explanation of what that might be and how it is to be made consistent with democracy.

Option (a) is obviously futile. The people being warned are highly unlikely to heed the warning. But what about option (b)? If we're supposed to get tough on the believers and this involves something more than distancing ourselves from them symbolically, shaming them with words, and refusing to enter into coalitions with them, what restrictions are being proposed and how are those restrictions going to be adopted and enforced? Again, an American secularist must face the fact that most U.S. citizens believe in God. A largely theistic majority is hardly about to

elect representatives who openly promise to rescind the constitutional rights of believers to believe and to act on their beliefs as they see fit.

255 When Rorty said that atheists are better citizens than theists, he must have had particular people in mind, but what he uttered was a generalization. When challenged for evidence, he said that for every Martin Luther King Jr. there are a thousand Jerry Falwells. It is true, of course, that no other Christian leader's speeches and deeds have caught
260 the nation's imagination and instructed the nation's conscience to the extent that King's did. In that sense, there was only one King, whereas there probably are a thousand somewhat influential preachers who will use their pulpits and television studios tomorrow morning to dismantle some portion of King's democratic legacy.

265 But what does democratic secularism do to thwart the influence of the most hateful among those preachers? As far as I can tell, they are among the last people on earth who are going to privatize their religious commitments, let alone drop those commitments altogether, as a result of the arguments put forward by secularist intellectuals. They will continue believing what they believe and acting on the apparent political
270 implications of their beliefs regardless of whatever liberal advice they hear to change their ways. If, by some miracle, laws were passed to constrain the hateful preachers whom secularists love to hate, and judges were installed to uphold those laws, what would become of those preachers? The most courageous of them would go proudly to jail as martyr-patriots, clutching a Bible in one hand and a copy of the Bill of Rights in
275 the other. A day later, their churches would contain multitudes.

So far I have been arguing that democratic secularists are unlikely to achieve their objectives by democratic means. Now I want to ask what
280 *unintended* consequences are likely to flow from pursuing secularist objectives. The first of these unintended consequences is to strengthen the hand of the preachers who hope to undo King's legacy. The social context of their conservatism is anxiety over immigration, rapidly changing relationships among the races and the sexes, poor economic prospects for the middle class, the demise of the union neighborhood and the family farm, the dislocations caused when people move away from home to get work or a university education, uneasiness about the content of popular entertainment, and the realization that isolated individuals have little chance of influencing or contesting the decisions of
285 bureaucratic elites. Secularist resentment fuels that anxiety rather than raising it to self-consciousness. It presents the hateful preacher with a fattened scapegoat, primed for rhetorical sacrifice.

290 As Mary Douglas would hasten to point out, secularists too have a social location. They are employed mainly in segments of the economy

295 devoted to information, education, entertainment, and government.
They live mainly in places where organizations devoted to these func-
tions are concentrated, which is to say in the counties colored blue on
the electoral maps of 2000 and 2004—the same places where one finds
300 most of the people who describe themselves to pollsters as “spiritual but
not religious.”

Now imagine yourself as a relatively *moderate* red-county preacher
considering what sort of sermon to preach on Sunday morning. You
were raised to love your neighbor, but not to tolerate attacks on faith
and virtue. What are you going to make of the claim that atheists make
305 better citizens than theists, or the fantasy of strangling the last king
with the entrails of the last priest, or the notion that believers are *essen-*
tially irrational and intolerant, or the idea that the purpose of a liberal
education is to produce as many democratic secularists as possible, or
the dream of a day when faith has passed from the face of the earth, or
310 the advice that you should, in all fairness, keep *your* religious convictions
behind the church door while secularists pursue *their* long-term
objectives?

It seems to me that you will treat such dicta as evidence that secu-
larists are your avowed enemies, that they are plotting the eradication of
315 your way of life, that they are less than wholeheartedly committed to
democratic practices and the Bill of Rights. You will quote the textual
evidence to your congregation and draw the conclusions that follow
from it: that secularists cannot be trusted to hold political office, to
educate the children of believers, or to give citizens the news. You will
320 wonder out loud whether it makes sense anymore to be a moderate.

Secularist resentment is grist for the hateful preacher’s mill, and it
pushes religious moderates into the arms of their extremist brethren. It
further polarizes a political community in which polarization is a primary
impediment to democratic action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.
325 If the most important threat to democracy in our time is not theocracy but
plutocracy—not rule by God’s self-anointed representatives on earth, but
rule by the economically lucky—then non-believers won’t be able to
combat that threat without help from religious moderates.

Theocracy will triumph in places like the U.S., where the population
330 is both religiously diverse and for the most part committed to theism,
only if the religious moderates are forced to move rightward to find
allies. Theocracy will triumph in the Islamic world only if democracy
continues to be indistinguishable there from imperial domination,
unconstrained capitalism, and secularism. A potential Muslim theocrat
335 can be defined as someone who opposes those forces and is looking for
a movement to join.

At this point, the religious right in the U.S. is not predominantly theocratic. Its theocratic strand is miniscule but vocal. The new theocrats have clout only because of the arithmetic of swing votes in close elections. Their numbers are unlikely to grow unless believers who remain committed to democracy decide that they have to choose between theocracy and secularism. Secularist rhetoric gives them reason to think that they face that choice. It has the ironic effect of making theocracy more attractive to religious moderates.

If I am right in holding plutocracy to be the most significant contemporary threat to democracy, the pressing question is how to build a coalition to combat that threat. The answer, I submit, is *not* to exclude religious moderates from the anti-plutocratic coalition by telling them that they are essentially incapable of excellent citizenship and declaring them inherently intolerant. If a new coalition is going to succeed in breaking the hold of billionaires and bosses on our political institutions, it will have to include millions of theistic moderates, as well as a lot of people more like me, who consider themselves atheists, agnostics, or “spiritual but not religious.”

The failure to build such a coalition in the years since 1970 has tilted our society dangerously toward plutocracy and militarism. Many children of the religious right sense this. They suspect that their parents were duped by the neo-liberals and neo-cons who lured them into the conservative alliance. People who sincerely wanted conservatism to be compassionate and American foreign policy to be just and humble are wondering who their true friends might be in the age of Katrina and Guantánamo Bay. They were shocked by the realization that their leaders were dividers, that the prosperity which was supposed to be trickling down to the poor was actually getting sucked upward by the richest of the rich, and that the official reasons given for invading Iraq were neither wholly true nor motivated by a desire to track the truth.

As a result of these disappointments, some sort of realignment is underway. It is too early to know what it will look like. But it is *not* too early to ask what it *should* look like. Nor is it too late to influence its formation.

The only form of democracy worthy of our allegiance consists of a tradition of reform in which the responsibilities and rights of political and civil society were expanded to include people who used to count for little or nothing—such people as slaves, women, factory laborers, new immigrants, migrant farm hands, the unemployed, the working poor, blacks, Catholics, and Jews. The aspirations and ideals articulated in the great democratic reform movements of the past add up to something that can be distinguished from the characteristic ills of the

380 modern era. Those movements accomplished something. One shudders to think what our society would be like if they had failed. How, then, were they set in motion, and how did they attain their central aims?

385 Abolitionism was born in the revival tents of the Second Great Awakening. A coalition formed that included secular intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson, religious moderates like Theodore Parker, and people labeled religious extremists like David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison. Lincoln admitted that he belonged to no church, but the evangelicals of his day made him their candidate anyway. Why? Because they considered slavery a horrendous evil, a violation of sacred value, and they understood that Lincoln did too. There were millions of religious people on both sides of the slavery question. Many of them considered their religious convictions relevant to their political conclusions, and behaved accordingly. This should surprise no one.

390 The struggle for women's suffrage was another product of the Second Great Awakening. The labor movement was rooted in the Social Gospel. 395 During the civil rights movement, there was only one Martin Luther King Jr., but there were thousands of ministers mobilizing their churches in support of civil rights. Black Muslims played a role, and so did liberal Jews. Countless churches ran citizenship classes. Secular organizers like Ella Baker went door to door—without holding their noses in the presence of believers. James Baldwin was our Emerson. Baker and Baldwin 400 were secular, not secularist.

One wonders what the Great Separation comes to in light of this history. There is not a word about such movements in Lilla's *The Stillborn God*, which focuses only on the likes of Hobbes, Hume, Kant, 405 Hegel, Rosenzweig, and Barth. Lilla eloquently describes the emergence of "a new approach to politics focused exclusively on human nature and human needs." This approach, he says, "remains the most distinctive feature of the modern West today" (2007: 58). But the story he tells turns out to be all about intellectuals, not about the societies on which 410 those intellectuals were reflecting.

Perhaps a Great Separation of religion and politics did occur in the minds of the northern European intelligensia. No doubt secularist political theory has had an influence on the political life of some societies, including our own. Yet I see little evidence of its influence in the history of democratic reform in the United States since the middle-third of the nineteenth century. As for Harris' claims about the reluctance of religious moderates and their secular allies to criticize religious extremists, I wonder what he might make of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, or hundreds of lesser known works expressing similar sentiments. 420

It is daunting but inspiring to contemplate the degree of cooperation among religious and secular individuals and groups that made possible each of the great American reform movements. I do not mean to suggest, however, that American democratic striving is unique. The South African triumph over apartheid had much the same structure. Would Nelson Mandela have been well-advised to adopt a secularist stance? Doing so would have cost him the support of the South African Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, whose spokespersons were Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, respectively.

The Polish triumph over Soviet oppression was founded on a similarly inclusive coalition. One of its principal architects was a secular intellectual named Adam Michnik, who read King as a young man, was a key figure in the Worker's Defense Committee, and in 1979 published *The Church and the Left*, which criticized secularism as a dead end for Poland (Michnik 1993).

What these examples suggest, it seems to me, is that democratic reform may indeed be achievable by democratic means in places where the majority of the citizens are religiously active *if* citizens are prepared to build coalitions of the right sort. If major reform is going to happen again in the United States, it will probably happen in roughly the same way that it has happened before. It will not happen *because* of secularism, but *in spite* of it. And it had better happen, because if it does not, our political life will cease to be democratic in anything but name.

Does democratic reform remain possible in our day? In a plenary address delivered at the 2007 Annual Meeting of our Academy in San Diego, Nicholas Wolterstorff reflected on how justice came to be a central theme of his academic work. (This piece is included in this issue of the *JAAR*.) Wolterstorff is a theologically conservative philosopher of religion; he practices our trade. He was also one of Boesak's American allies in the struggle against apartheid and thus part of a vast international network of activists who jointly increased the cost of maintaining the institutions of white supremacy in South Africa in the 1980s. It was not long ago that South Africa seemed headed toward a bloody revolution, but in fact apartheid was overcome there largely by non-violent means. Today, of course, South Africa faces the woes of a new era, including the ravages of AIDS and the devastation caused by the economic policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Those woes are depressing, not only because of the number of people and degree of suffering the woes involve, but also because of the patterns of complicity that come into view when we reflect on the uses of American power abroad. But this only shows that there are new

forms of injustice to oppose. It does not show that new democratic coalitions, if we manage to build them, will fail to make a difference.

Two other plenary sessions at the 2007 Annual Meeting are equally relevant to the question of whether democratic reform remains possible. In one of them, the journalist Tavis Smiley reflected on the Covenant with Black America. Cornel West, Eddie Glaude, and Emilie Townes responded. In the other session, Ernesto Cortés, the most successful broad-based organizer in the United States, described his work with churches, synagogues, labor unions, and schools throughout the southwestern United States. Smiley and Cortés are both engaged in constructing nonpartisan democratic coalitions and in reviving practices of accountability. They have had much success in encouraging religious citizens to take responsibility for the condition of the poor in their midst. In the work of such figures, it seems to me, one can discern some grounds for hope that democratic reform remains possible *here*. Cortés, in particular, can point to many concrete victories, many examples of ordinary people achieving democratic ends by democratic means against great odds.

Only time will tell whether these efforts will eventually produce changes as fundamental as the abolition of slavery or the enfranchisement of women. No such change seems likely in advance. That is why hope is a central political virtue.

It should be clear by now that I do not share the theological convictions of a Wolterstorff, a Smiley, or a Cortés. But who among us surpasses *them* in the excellences of citizenship? Not I. Far be it from me to advise them to keep their religious convictions to themselves. Far be it from me to dream of a future in which they and others like them have passed from the scene.

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