

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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America: The Secular, Postmodern, Post-Christian Triumph

Genuine, biblical Christianity is colliding with an increasingly militant secularism in western civilization. In fact, western secularism is uncomfortable with religious convictions of any kind. Christianity has always been an integral part of western civilization—but no longer. Hence, secularists tend to lump together Christianity, Islam (in all its varieties), Judaism—indeed all faiths that claim something absolute. Several bizarre developments illustrate this trend toward militant secularism, which dismisses all religious convictions:

- One of the most phenomenally successful books of the last few years is Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*, the story of Louis Zamperini. Zamperini's story is compelling: His B-24 Liberator bomber crashed into the Pacific in 1943, which led to him drifting for 47 days on a life raft. Captured then by the Japanese, he spent two unimaginable years in a Japanese prison camp. The bitterness and hatred he felt are well-documented in Hillenbrand's book. His life after the war was characterized by nightmares, alcoholism and severe psychological problems. He obsessed with getting even with the Japanese; indeed, a desire for revenge overwhelmed every aspect of his life. In 1949, his wife talked him into attending revival meetings led by Billy Graham in Los Angeles. The second night of the crusade, Zamperini placed his trust in Jesus Christ. In the words of historian Grant Wacker, "He tossed out booze and cigarettes and embraced a lifetime of self-less Christian service, including a trip to Japan to forgive his [Japanese] tormentors. Though Ms. Hillenbrand recounts Zamperini's conversion, she doesn't say much about how it influenced the rest of his life. In the movie 'Unbroken,' Billy Graham goes unmentioned, and Zamperini's redemption narrative is largely reduced to a few cards flashed before the closing credits. Yet Zamperini himself believed that the religious event was the pivotal moment of his long journey." Zamperini stated in many different forums that Graham's "message . . . caused me to turn my life around." Why did Angelina Jolie's film adaptation of Hillenbrand's book mysteriously omit coverage of this decisive, life-changing moment in Zamperini's life? It was the pivotal divide that explained the radical transformation of Louis Zamperini from a man plagued with bitterness and anger to a liberated life of service, freedom from addictive substances and mental stability. It is intellectually dishonest to avoid such a decisive part of Zamperini's story. I do not know Angelina Jolie's motives in doing so, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it betrays an anti-faith bias that permeates our Postmodern, post-Christian, autonomous culture.

- Second, Mary Eberstadt, senior fellow with the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., has recently written on “the question of secularization—or how it is that societies that were once markedly religious become less so, particularly the societies of what’s known as Western Civilization—has been much studied in modern times. Urbanization, rationalism, higher education, industrialization, and feminism: these are just some of the possible causal agents debated by sociologists when they try to figure out why some people stop going to church.” Eberstadt gives singular focus to one profound cause of the growth of secularization—“the new intolerance” on campuses across the Western world. She writes: “‘The new intolerance’ is shorthand for the chilled public atmosphere in which religious believers operate. Many people of faith face unique burdens that would have been unthinkable even a couple of decades ago; burdens of ostracism, of losing the good opinion of their neighbors, of being trash-talked in the public square. Some even face the loss of livelihood or the constant threat and reality of litigation.” The typical campus today in the West is ground zero for the “new intolerance.” Eberstadt cites several examples: (1) A November 2014 scheduled debate at Christ Church College, Oxford, on whether the “abortion culture” hurts Great Britain was canceled because of last-minute “concerns” on the part of the college. A feminist campus group threatened disruptive protests vehement enough to frighten the authorities. (2) This past spring of 2014, a number of prominent commencement addresses were rescinded or the speakers backed down because of protests over them speaking (e.g., Condoleezza Rice). Eberstadt argues that “the same forces that are intimidating the intellectual expression of students can also be expected to intimidate their religious expression.” She concludes that “It’s time to air the idea that college students do not stay out of church or synagogue because their education leads them to enlightened conclusions about the big questions. No, the more likely dynamic is that thanks to the new intolerance, the social and other costs of being a known believer in the public square mount by the year—and students take note. Hence intimidation on the quad, multiplied over many years and campus, is an unseen engine of secularization.”
- Third are the fall 2014 actions of Houston’s mayor, Annise Parker. Mayor Parker proposed a change in Houston’s Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), which was to include a rule that “no business open to the public could deny a transgender person entry to the restroom consistent with his or her gender identity.” Initially, she sought copies of all sermons from local pastors who opposed this change in the HERO. Specifically, the subpoena read: “. . . all speeches, presentations, or sermons related to HERO, the Petition, Mayor Annise Parker, homosexuality, or gender identity prepared by, delivered by, revised by, or approved by you or in your possession . . .” That such a subpoena is draconian is self-evident! That it is a violation of religious liberty is also clear. One would expect something like this in secular Europe or even the old USSR or present-day Communist China. But the United States!? The secular, Postmodern, post-Christian, autonomous culture in which we live is producing such subpoenas because the “new intolerance” is winning the battle; at least for now. Thankfully, the subpoenas were

revised and then basically dropped. But, if the first openly gay mayor of a major city—Houston—can attempt such thuggery, it will not be the last.

The seeming triumph of secularism in this Postmodern culture is actually a catastrophe. In terms of ethical standards, secularism is firmly anchored in mid-air. Because the secular, Postmodern, post-Christian, autonomous worldview rejects all outside sources of moral authority, secularism must construct its own moral authority. The result is often, “every man doing what is right in his own eyes.” It becomes moral/ethical anarchy, which results in a “new intolerance” that becomes increasingly antagonistic to those who argue for an absolute framework for ethical authority. This is what is now occurring in American culture. One final thought: The foundation of this Postmodern, post-Christian, autonomous worldview is the 18th century Enlightenment. One of the foundational arguments of the Enlightenment was that autonomous, rational individuals could reason his/her way to virtue. Anyone who still believes that proposition is being intellectually dishonest. The 20th century—with two World Wars, the Holocaust and the butchery of atheistic communism—proved that rationalism alone cannot produce virtue.

But genuine, biblical Christianity does produce virtue. The vital center of the transformed life in Christianity is *agape* love: a self-sacrificing, other-centered love for human beings. The last 2,000 years evidence the immense virtuous good that followers of Jesus Christ have produced—hospitals, educational institutions, medical clinics, translation work, day-care centers, prenatal care clinics, etc.

The secular, Postmodern, post-Christian, autonomous worldview is bankrupt! It is producing a civilization bent on self-destruction. John R. W. Stott, writing in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, characterized the 1st century church at Corinth (which was very similar to our present-day culture) as flowers growing out of the cesspool’s mud of Greco-Roman civilization. May that characterize those of us who today represent Jesus.

See Grant Wacker in an op ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* (2 January 2015); Mary Eberstadt in the *Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 2015), pp. 16-19; Mike Morris on the Houston mayor subpoena in <http://www.chron.com/news> (October 2014); and David Brooks editorial in the *New York Times* (3 February 2015).