

The Established Religious Philosophy of America

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DOES NOT HAVE AN ESTABLISHED church, but it does have (and always has had) an established religion, or at least a dominant religious philosophy, an established way of thinking about religion. For our purposes here, religion may be defined as a way of thinking about ultimate questions. A person's religion answers questions such as how and why we (and everything else) came into existence, whether the purpose of life has been established by a Creator or is up to us to decide, and how we can have reliable knowledge about the world and about ourselves. The officially recognized answers to these questions make up a society's established religious philosophy, its culturally dominant way of thinking about religious topics.

There is nothing sinister or inherently unconstitutional about the existence of a de facto established public philosophy on religious questions. The philosophy is *established* not in the sense that

it is formally enacted or that dissenters are subject to legal punishment, but in the sense that it provides a philosophical basis for lawmaking and public education. The content of the established philosophy may often be controversial and may change over time, but something of the kind must necessarily exist or government will become incoherent and even chaotic. For example, one culture may endeavor to encourage its schoolgirls to look forward to lives as mothers and homemakers, while another may encourage them to reject traditional gender stereotypes and pursue formerly masculine careers. To encourage either choice reflects a dominant public philosophy about human nature and gender roles. Similarly, any community that operates a public school system must have a policy of some kind concerning sexual morality, even if the policy is merely to encourage adolescents to choose for themselves. Relativism itself is a policy choice, and it rests on assumptions about reality.

A Shift in Religious Philosophy

During the second half of the twentieth century, the United States' established religious philosophy changed drastically from what it had been previously. In the nineteenth century, Americans overwhelmingly assumed that the Protestant version of the Christian religion was true, at least in a general way. Soldiers marched to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"—a song that would probably be banned from most public schools today—and judges unabashedly referred to Christianity and the Bible as the foundation of the legal order. When Utah joined the Union, the Mormons did not have to change their theology, but they did have to give up polygamy, because a Christian nation would not tolerate the practice. A great deal of whatever schooling ordinary citizens had was provided by churches, or by public schools that were on very friendly terms with Protestant Christianity.

The degree to which this Protestant-dominated culture was

tolerant of groups like Catholics and Jews varied greatly depending on place and time, but on basic moral questions there was little dispute, because Protestants, Catholics and Jews agreed upon a common tradition stemming from the Bible. There were differing doctrines on divorce, for example, but there was an overwhelming consensus that divorce was a great evil that should be legally and socially discouraged. There was plenty of room for argument over specific questions, but there was nearly universal agreement that the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition furnished the materials on the basis of which the argument would be conducted.

Today things are very different. Many people would say that we have progressed from a de facto religious establishment to a position of neutrality toward religion, but, as I have said, that would be a superficial and misleading way of describing the contemporary situation. What has really happened is that a new established religious philosophy has replaced the old one. Like the old philosophy, the new one is tolerant only up to a point, specifically the point where its own right to rule the public square is threatened.

When I want a long and fully descriptive name for it, I call the established religious philosophy of late-twentieth-century America "scientific naturalism and liberal rationalism." When I just want a convenient label, I shorten this cumbersome term and call the ruling philosophy simply "naturalism" or "modernism." Modernism as an intellectual condition begins when people realize that God is really dead and that humankind is therefore on its own.

Naturalism is a metaphysical doctrine, which means simply that it states a particular view of what is ultimately real and unreal. According to naturalism, what is ultimately real is nature, which consists of the fundamental particles that make up what we call matter and energy, together with the natural laws that govern how

those particles behave.* Nature itself is ultimately all there is, at least as far as we are concerned. To put it another way, nature is a permanently closed system of material causes and effects that can never be influenced by anything outside of itself—by God, for example. To speak of something as “supernatural” is therefore to imply that it is imaginary, and belief in powerful imaginary entities is known as superstition.

Naturalism gives priority to natural science as a way of describing reality, because everything we know about nature, other than by direct observation, is the product of scientific investigation. Science may not be able to answer all questions, at least for the time being, but some of the most visionary scientists already speak of a “theory of everything,” or “final theory,” which will in principle explain all of nature and hence all of reality. Because (in this view) science is by far our most reliable source of knowledge, whatever conflicts with scientific knowledge is effectively false, and whatever is in principle closed to scientific investigation is effectively unreal. We might say that any supernatural reality or nonscientific knowledge is “immaterial,” meaning both that it is not based on matter and that it is of no concern to us.

Scientific naturalism, as I have just described it, provides modernist culture with its picture of reality. Liberal rationalism, the other half of the equation, provides its ethical and social viewpoint. Everyone agrees that government policy in such matters as lawmaking and education should be based on reason. Reason im-

*“Naturalism” is similar to “materialism,” the doctrine that all reality has a material base. I prefer the former term because it avoids any confusion caused by the ordinary language distinction between matter and energy (both are ultimately made up of the somewhat ghostly subatomic entities studied by particle physicists). Moreover, particle physicists sometimes write and speak as if what is ultimately real is not the particles themselves but the grand unified theory that explains the movements and interactions of the particles. The essential point is that nature is understood by both naturalists and materialists to be “all there is” and to be fundamentally mindless and purposeless. This distinguishes naturalism from both pantheism (God is all there is, and God is identified with nature) and theism (God created the natural world for a purpose).

plies more than logic, however, because logic is merely a way of getting from premises to conclusions. Logic works from metaphysical assumptions, or pictures of reality, and it leads in very different directions depending on the starting point.

For much of Western history, lawmakers assumed that authoritative moral guidance was available to them in the Bible and in the religious traditions based on the Bible. From a naturalistic standpoint, however, the Creator God of the Bible is every bit as unreal as the gods of Olympus, and the commands of an unreal deity are in reality only the commands of an ancient priesthood. Such human commands derived from the conditions and problems of primitive societies can hardly furnish authoritative guidance to lawmakers and educators of modern societies, who, having the benefit of modern scientific knowledge, are presumably much better informed than their remote ancestors.

This does not mean that supposedly God-given rules like the Ten Commandments are necessarily irrational—some of them may have a sound basis in human experience. But it does mean that premodern standards need to be evaluated by the standards of naturalistic reason. Thus modernist culture retains the prohibition of theft and murder, retains the sabbath merely as a secular day of recreation, discards the admonition to have “no other gods before me” as meaningless, and regards ambivalently the prohibition of adultery and the command to honor parents. Adultery, for example, may be damaging to human relationships and a breach of contract. In that case an individual should avoid it for secular reasons, but to condemn adultery merely because God forbids it would be, in modernist terms, irrational.

Naturalistic rationalism provides modernist societies with either a socialistic or a liberal morality. The former starts with the needs of the society or the government; the latter starts with the needs of the individual. Because socialist ideologies are currently undergoing hard times, and because my main concern is with the indi-

vidualistic culture of late-twentieth-century America, the liberal alternative is more important for present purposes.

The term *liberal* itself is unavoidably confusing, however, because in America it is often used in a partisan sense. Thus to defend large government spending on social programs is said to be “liberal,” whereas to urge greater reliance on the free market is said to be “conservative”—even when the so-called conservatives are the ones advocating radical change and the liberals are defending the existing structures of government.

Liberal Rationalism

In the philosophical sense in which I employ the term, *liberalism* refers not to a position about the level of government spending or to the desirability of change, but to the secular legacy of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. Its essence lies in a respect for the autonomy of the individual. Because liberalism starts with the individual, the most characteristic liberal political doctrines are the social contract as the foundation of legitimate government and individual rights as the basis of liberty. Contemporary liberals will speak enthusiastically of natural rights, but they tend to reject the concept of natural laws, in the sense of obligations that are superior to those created by governments. Obligations in contemporary liberalism come not from nature, and certainly not from God, but from society, and they are clearly legitimate only to the extent that individuals have in some sense consented to be bound by them. Rights, on the other hand, are founded directly on our assumed status as autonomous beings.

Although the initial founders of liberalism were theists, the dominant contemporary form of liberal rationalism incorporates the naturalistic doctrine that God is unreal, a product of the human imagination. The famous “death of God” is simply the modernist certainty that naturalism is true and that human beings must

therefore create their own standards rather than take them from some divine revelation. We cannot look to anything higher than ourselves, because there is nothing higher, at least until we encounter superior beings from other planets. That means we have to start with human society (socialism) or with the individual (liberalism) as the unit that is fundamentally real. Of course the two units will tend to be mixed in practice, because any enduring governmental system must take into account both the needs of society and the needs of the individual. For example, John F. Kennedy's famous exhortation "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" appears to be a thoroughly socialistic utterance. It was directed by a liberal president to an overwhelmingly individualistic nation, however, as a corrective to the selfishness that rampant individualism tends to spawn.

Because liberalism starts with individual rights and autonomy, its morality tends to become progressively more relativistic and even permissive. The exercise of individual freedom is limited primarily by the rights of others, and to a lesser extent by abstract social policies, which are usually debatable. We may all agree that a man's freedom to swing his fist ends at his neighbor's nose, but it is much less obvious that he has violated any liberal norm if he opens a pornographic movie theater or divorces his children's mother to marry someone more attractive.

The current battle over the morality of abortion exemplifies the liberal approach to moral issues. Nearly everyone agrees that the deliberate killing of a newborn infant is murder, but there is intense disagreement about the morality of early, middle and late abortions. In the face of such disagreement the liberal rationalist position is "prochoice," as it presumably will be if one day a substantial body of opinion—especially articulate and well-educated opinion—develops in favor of infanticide. How could it be otherwise, if morality rests ultimately on human decisions rather than external authority?

So far I have given a brief description of the nature of scientific naturalism and liberal rationalism, which I will henceforth designate by the less cumbersome term *modernism*. When I say that this religious philosophy is “established,” of course I do not mean that people are literally compelled to believe it, any more than people were compelled to believe in Protestant Christianity when Alexis de Tocqueville described that creed as the de facto established religion of America in the early nineteenth century. A religious establishment is consistent with a large degree of tolerance, but there is a very important difference between being tolerated and being allowed to govern. The established religious philosophy is the creed of the people who do the governing, or most of them. They are the ones who decide how much tolerance will be extended to others.

The Supreme Court cases discussed in the preceding chapter provide an illustration of the limits of tolerance. A naturalistic establishment may think it the wiser course to allow a Christian film to be shown in a rented public schoolroom in the evening, because to engage openly in viewpoint discrimination would be inconsistent with liberal rationalist principles, which ostensibly reject the idea of an officially established orthodoxy and protect freedom of expression for all viewpoints. The prospect of allowing creationists to challenge the naturalistic account of biological creation in science classes, on the other hand, was sufficiently alarming to inspire determined efforts from the major organizations of the scientific, educational and legal elites to repel the challenge. Providing an ideological faction a platform in public education gives a disfavored creed a kind of official certification of legitimacy and also supplies it with public resources for recruitment (this explains why multiculturalists, feminists and gay liberationists have placed so much importance on gaining such a platform at all levels of education). Allowing a James Dobson film to be shown by a “fringe group” in the evening once in a while is thus relatively

harmless; adopting the same film officially in the high-school curriculum of New York State would signal a cultural revolution—even if the curriculum also included other films expressing a different viewpoint.

The establishment of a particular religious philosophy does not imply that competing philosophies are outlawed, but rather that they are relegated to a marginal position in private life. The marginalization is most effective when formal government actions are supplemented by a variety of intimidating acts by nongovernmental institutions such as the news media. The media uproar surrounding the “creationist” policies of the locally elected Vista District school board in San Diego County, California, provides a good example.

Before 1989, the California State Board of Education’s official policy simply forbade the “dogmatic” teaching of any scientific theory, a stance that in context discouraged textbook publishers from giving as much emphasis to evolution as many science educators thought appropriate. In 1989 the science educators persuaded the state board to adopt a new policy statement on the teaching of science. Without explicitly mentioning evolution, this policy encouraged textbook publishers and teachers to give much greater emphasis to accepted scientific doctrines and to relegate any consideration of nonscientific subjects such as divine creation, ultimate purposes and the ultimate cause of the physical universe to literature and social studies classes.

When a majority of conservative Christians won election to the Vista District school board, they took language directly from the 1989 state policy statement and employed it in their own local policy, which provided that “discussions of divine creation, ultimate purposes, or ultimate causes [the ‘why’] shall be included at appropriate times in the history-social sciences and/or English-language arts curricula” (but not in science classes). The new local policy mandated “exploration and dialogue” of “scientific evi-

dence that challenges any theory in science” and stated that “no student shall be compelled to believe or accept any theory presented in the curriculum.”

The Vista policy seemed on its face to comply with the state guidelines, and a representative of the state board acknowledged that there would be a conflict only if the local policy in practice was used to promote Christianity instead of giving equal treatment to all religious viewpoints. In fact, the board faced so much hostility from the teachers’ unions that the policy had little effect. Nonetheless, press, radio and television accounts of the controversy continually portrayed the Vista policy as defying the state guidelines and as a covert attempt to evade constitutional standards by introducing biblical creationism (which was not mentioned in the local policy) “through the back door.”

The basis for this portrayal was that the local board members were known to be sympathetic to the creationist viewpoint and hence must have been motivated by a desire to get that viewpoint taken seriously. The prospect that they might succeed was so alarming to the defenders of modernism that national and even international media took an intense interest in this local controversy. The influential *Los Angeles Times* mounted a campaign in its editorial and news columns, and vigorous editorial denunciations of the Vista board came from as far away as London. As the historian Ronald Numbers put it in his book *The Creationists*, the attitude of the educational elites toward creationism can be summed up as “We’ve got to stop these bastards!” In this case the campaign succeeded, and the offending school board members were defeated at the next election.

The elite attitude examined by Numbers is a clear sign that modernist culture finds creationism—as distinguished from, say, the New Age mysticism of a Shirley MacLaine—genuinely threatening. The problem is not with the detailed Genesis literalism of the fundamentalists, which is relatively easy to marginalize, but

with the broader doctrine that, one way or another, God brought about our existence for a purpose and cares about what we do. The vast majority of Americans at least say that they believe in such a God, and if that belief were to emerge as a serious contender at the intellectual level, there could be important consequences. If God is more than a myth or a figure of speech, then modernist culture is ignoring something really important, and its ruling philosophy may be in serious trouble.

On the other hand, defenders of modernism cannot openly ban the advocacy of theism without contradicting their own commitment to freedom of expression and unfettered intellectual inquiry. Modernist discourse accordingly incorporates semantic devices—such as the labeling of theism as “religion” and naturalism as “science”—that work to prevent a dangerous debate over fundamental assumptions from breaking out in the open. As the preceding chapter showed, however, these devices become transparent under the close inspection that an open debate tends to encourage. The best defense for modernist naturalism is to make sure the debate does not occur.

It would be inadequate and misleading, however, to account for modernist rule as if it were a kind of plot by agnostics to rule the United States by employing deceptive techniques. Modernism is not a conspiracy, but a way of thinking that is taken for granted not only by agnostics but also by millions of people who consider themselves theists but have to some extent adopted modernist ways of thinking about theism. In fact, the authority of modernism rests largely on theists' tacit acceptance of modernist premises. It is possible to make so strong a case for modernism that it may seem futile and self-destructive for theists to challenge modernism as a public philosophy.

The Advantages of Modernism

I believe that the case for modernism can be answered convincingly

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ly, but the case that has to be answered is a powerful one, and it will not do to underestimate the difficulty of the task. There are at least five reasons that advocates of modernist naturalism can (and do) give to justify their right to rule, and I will state them as persuasively as I can.

1. Modernism's metaphysical foundation rests firmly on scientific naturalism, which is "the way things really are." Through science we now know that nature, of which we are a recently evolved part, really *is* a closed system of material causes and effects, whether we like it or not. Any other system—particularly one based on the supposed commandments of a supernatural being—would therefore be founded on illusion rather than reality. God is a product of the human imagination, not the Creator of us all. Once science has established the facts, we have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge and there is no going back to pre-scientific beliefs, however great a sense of loss some of us may feel.

2. Modernist naturalism is equivalent to rationality because it excludes consideration of miracles, defined as arbitrary breaks in the chain of material causes and effects. This argument is particularly important to scientists, who see the success of science as inextricably linked to the presumption that no supernatural mind or spirit ever interferes with the orderly (but purposeless) course of natural events. Most modernists' identification of naturalism with rationality is so complete that they do not think of naturalism as a distinct and controversial metaphysical doctrine, but simply assume it as part of the definition of *reason*.

3. Modernist naturalism is liberating, especially in the area of gender roles and sexual behavior, because it frees people from the illusion that outdated cultural norms have permanent validity as commands of God. Persons who attack scientific naturalism or the theory of evolution probably do so as part of a disguised agenda to reestablish a stifling patriarchal code of sexual behavior. I have found that any discussion with modernists about the weakness of

the theory of evolution quickly turns into a discussion of politics, particularly sexual politics. Modernists typically fear that any discrediting of naturalistic evolution will end in women being sent to the kitchen, gays to the closet and abortionists to jail. That kind of consideration explains why any perceived attempt to undermine the teaching of evolution as fact in the schools is met with such fierce opposition; much more than a scientific theory is deemed to be at stake.

4. Modernist naturalism supplies the philosophical basis for democratic liberty, because it relies only on knowledge that is in principle available to every citizen. Modernists characterize persons who wish to make public policy on the basis of some divine revelation as inherently undemocratic, because they assert authority on the basis of a knowledge that has been revealed only to them and hence is not available to others. In contrast, the observations and methods of reasoning employed by science are universally accessible in principle, although in reality the special study (and funding) required to practice science limits citizens' ability to judge scientific questions for themselves. If public debate is carried out only on the basis of knowledge derived from sensory experience and scientific investigation, then in principle everyone can participate on equal terms. Modernists think debates between competing supernaturalistic ideologies can be settled only by force, whereas debate on naturalistic principles is open to reason and hence to peaceful solution.

5. Finally, modernist government is acceptable even to many religious people, including Christian theists of relatively high intellectual standing. Modernism is not inherently antireligious or even antitheist, provided that "belief in God" is relegated to its proper place in private life. Under liberal rationalist principles of tolerance, believers may have their own churches and may even send their children to private religious schools if they can afford to do so—provided that they do not attempt to force their beliefs

on other people by seeking, for example, to advocate them in the public schools. Modernists think that this is as much authority as believers with a proper respect for the autonomy of nonbelievers should want. The restriction of religion to private life therefore does not threaten the vital interests of the majority religion, and it positively protects minority religions from the tyranny of the majority.

The tacit understanding that religion has to do with subjective feelings rather than objective facts allows scientific naturalists to exempt religion from all-out scientific scrutiny; thus modernism compassionately protects the cherished illusions of religious believers. Modernists warn Christian theists who want to dispute naturalism in the public arena that they are making a big mistake and are inviting a conflict with science that they cannot win. As the example of creationism illustrates, modernist tolerance stops at the point where the religious people start demanding that public institutions treat their subjective beliefs as if they might possibly be objectively true.

Theistic Realism

That is a formidable list of advantages and justifications, but in the end everything depends on the first argument: the God of Christian theism and of the Bible is unreal, the product of a pre-scientific human imagination. Grant that premise, and everything else follows. But reject that premise, and everything on the list becomes doubtful.

WHY? → Of course a social order should be founded on reality and not unreality, but if God exists, a naturalistic order is founded on unreality and naturalistic rationalism is an illusion.

Of course science likes to assume that the cosmos is rationally understandable and not arbitrary, but how better to guarantee a rational cosmos than to recognize that it was created by a rational mind? If such a Creator really does exist, then science itself is

ignoring the most important aspect of reality.

Of course people should be freed from arbitrary restrictions, but if the supposedly arbitrary restrictions are in reality necessary to restrain our irrational passions, we can expect to get something other than freedom when we abolish them. We should also expect something other than rational government when the governors break their connection to the source of reason.

Finally, if God is real, then those theists who meekly accept their assigned place in the naturalistic order of things may be like sailors who choose not to disturb the captain by informing him that the ship is about to sink. It may be rational to argue about whether God is real or unreal, but it is clearly irrational to assume that a God who is real can safely be ignored.

I am not a modernist; a modernist would call me a "religious believer," but I call myself a *theistic realist*. The term signifies that I am convinced that God is objectively real, not merely a concept or fantasy in my own mind. This is a shocking proposition to many people, including many churchgoers and professional clergy. I have been told by many modernists that to assert the reality of God as Creator is dogmatic and arrogant, since it is to imply that I have knowledge that is unavailable to scientific naturalists. Modernists do not think it arrogant to declare that "evolution is a fact," although the statement seems to imply that creationists are wrong. That is because in their metaphysics, naturalistic evolution falls in the category of scientific knowledge, whereas creation is a matter of religious faith. It is not arrogant or dogmatic to insist that things be placed in their proper categories.

Arrogant or not, I think that the Creator is real and naturalism is untrue. The strongest argument against my position is that science is based on naturalism, and the success of science has proved that naturalism is, if not absolutely true, at least the most reliable way of thinking available to us. Scientific naturalists do not claim to have proved that God does not exist, but they do

claim to have demonstrated that God as Creator is superfluous, because purely natural forces were capable of doing and actually did do all the work of creation. This is not a case of a purposeful Creator's making use of secondary causes, as an artist uses brushes and paints, but of the material causes acting on their own without intelligent guidance. If the brushes and paints can draw the picture without assistance, then it does not seem that any hypothetical artist would ever have had anything important to do.

Whether a purely naturalistic account of creation is consistent with "religious belief" or not, the general assumption that science has actually provided such an account clearly has a great deal to do with the fact that naturalism has become so widely identified with reason. But let us take a good look at exactly how successful science has been in its attempt to give a complete naturalistic account of creation.