

The Value of a Secular Society

Clay Nelson © 17 February 2008

I want to thank you for the invitation to be with you this afternoon. It's nice to be amongst friends. That might seem a strange thing for an Anglican priest to say at the Rationalist House but I probably have more friends or at least kindred spirits amongst Unitarians, Sea of Faith members, Rationalists and Humanists than I probably do amongst my Christian colleagues.

I understand their problems with me and don't judge them harshly for it. That I am a non-theist makes me incomprehensible when I also claim to be a Christian. What kind of Christian doesn't believe in an external father-figure God, rejects creedal claims about the divinity of Jesus and has a love-hate relationship with the Church that pays his stipend? My answer, this kind.

Many, if not most Christians, understand their faith to be about subscribing to historically agreed upon creedal statements. There is a much smaller subset of Christians, of which I am one, that believes faith is about ethical living rooted in finding our better selves and higher purpose. We are more interested in questions than answers. Our faith thrives in its uncertainties. We reject the notion that faith is about believing impossible things. I'm with Alice when she told the Queen of Hearts, "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

The Queen responds much like the church has over two millennia, "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Certainly, one of the most difficult problems many of my faith have with me is the fact that I don't see secularism as the enemy of faith and my strong belief that in human affairs it is important to keep the church and the state separate.

To many people of faith "secular" is a dirty word. I suppose we have Plato to thank for that. His dualistic view, described best in his parable of the cave, would have us believe that the world known to our senses is a mere corruptible shadow of the true eternal ideal. The church would eventually appropriate this view and make that ideal heaven and declare the church heaven on earth, carefully blocking our view of the corruptible world around us with its stained glass windows.

Claiming to have the keys to heaven and eternal life, the secular was denounced as a place of corruption, sin and death. If heaven is good, as represented by the church, then it follows that the secular is bad. I would argue that it is a false dichotomy. Every aspect of our culture is of human creation. That culture, including its institutions, is as good and bad, earthly and transcendent, sacred and profane, as we are.

That said, human society has probably always been divided between the sacred and secular and it has been experienced as an on-going power

struggle. I could give you countless examples from all the great religions, but I will stick to what I know best.

The Christian story began as a subversive, non-violent force against the oppression of the Roman Empire. It was the religion of the weakest in society. Since there were lots of oppressed poor people, it grew at a fantastic pace. It became so great in numbers the secular powers felt a need to co-opt it. When Constantine made it the official religion of Rome in 313, Christianity developed a fondness for power.

Once meeting in secret in catacombs, after 313 it moved above ground, building basilicas modelled after the emperor's palaces. Once mocking power by giving the emperor's titles to the peasant Jewish preacher they worshipped, the Church took on the trappings of the royal court. It isn't an accident that bishops wear purple—Caesar's colour of choice. Once the victims of persecution, they persecuted and exiled those that disagreed with them. It went downhill from there.

For a millennium it paid off. After the fall of Rome the church was ideally positioned to fill the power vacuum—the sacred and secular worlds essentially became one and the same. We called it Christendom. While there were many holy and good people amongst its numbers who harkened back to what Jesus had been about, the institution solidified its power as the number one secular power. But there were other forces at work in the world. Galileo and Copernicus were both good Christian faithful but their discoveries were a threat to power. They proved it was impossible to believe before or after breakfast the accepted dogma that the earth was the centre of the universe.

While the church did what it could to silence them, the cat was out the bag and its influence beyond its stained glass windows began to diminish. The church revamped its theology and said if the earth was not the centre of the universe, humankind was at the centre of creation. A few centuries later Darwin made a hash of that position claiming that too was impossible to believe, further diminishing the church's influence.

Again the church scurried to find a new position, saying if humankind was not the purpose of creation then surely the human soul was. When Freud came along with his theories of the id, ego and superego that too was trashed. Those scientific views along with the divisive Reformation, the blood-letting of religious wars, the Inquisition, the corruption within the church itself, and most importantly, the Enlightenment formed the perfect storm that knocked the church out of secular power—maybe for good. I say maybe, because power is addictive. Those that have had it rarely accept its loss without a good fight, even here in predominantly secular New Zealand.

I have only been in New Zealand for two and a half years, and already I have entered into three conflicts about keeping church and state separate, all of which have gotten some media attention.

The first instance centred on a situation in a public school where a parent objected to having prayer in school assemblies. The parent was a Christian, but was married to a Chinese Buddhist. They were raising their mixed-cultured children to appreciate both faiths and objected in a letter to the editor to only Christian prayer being said in a public-supported institution. I was appalled and wrote a letter to the editor in support of the parents. If I had any letters in support of my position they were not published, but some very harsh ones critical of my views were. I later met with the parent to look for ways to challenge this common occurrence in New Zealand's state-supported schools. I learned that her young daughter suffered harassment from other students and teachers. The parent was treated rudely by teachers and administrators and the school dealt with her objections by saying the child could leave any assembly where a prayer would be said and go to a study hall for such dissidents, leaving her open to more scorn. Eventually the school dealt with it by dismissing school before assemblies where prayer was said, and then reopening school afterwards. The end result? The parents moved her to a religious school that was respectful of her beliefs. The irony aside, I was and remain appalled, especially since many Kiwis I discussed this with, including some of power and influence, thought it was the parent who was creating the problem or at best was fomenting a tempest in a tea cup. Prayer in schools was culturally acceptable in a country where the most dominant religion was Christian. The majority and tradition clearly trumped human rights.

The next instance was a call from TVNZ asking about my position on Easter trading laws. Did I support the law requiring businesses to close for Easter? Before I could think of a more diplomatic response, I blurted out, "Hell, no!" The next thing I knew they were at the church with cameras for an interview. My position is that the state should not be in the business of enforcing religious holidays unless it enforces all of them. Until they close commerce on Yom Kippur, for the month of Ramadan and Einstein's birthday, I believe it to be unchristian to do it only for our holidays. If I thought I got a hostile response to my letter to the editor, I soon learned differently. Those responses were mild to what I got from my two minutes of fame on national TV. This time I got hostile phone calls as well.

Being a slow learner, when Brian Tamaki started pushing for New Zealand to be declared a Christian nation in response to efforts to have a national statement respecting religious diversity, I couldn't hold myself back. I wrote a perspective piece for the Herald saying I'd rather be sent to New Zealand's version of the Tower than live in a Christian nation. I'd been there, done that, having come here to escape a Christian-right theocracy in the United States. While this time the atheists and humanists came out of hiding to support me in print, emails and in the blogosphere, I was still inundated with hostile letters, email and phone calls from my Christian brothers and sisters.

My recent history might suggest I'm a typical, brash American arrogantly challenging the values of the country that has so graciously received me. I hope not. Being this outspoken is new behaviour for me. In America I never wrote a letter to editor, I was never interviewed on TV and I had never put my views out for public pummelling on the op-ed side of a newspaper.

What might account for my odd behaviour? I think it had to do with my assumptions in choosing New Zealand as my new home. My research told me New Zealand took civil liberties seriously and honoured human rights. This was borne out until the incident about prayer in public schools. That Kiwis weren't up in arms about this obvious breach in the wall separating church and state left me flummoxed. I began to wonder if my visceral reaction was because of my experience as an American, where the wall separating church and state was first built. I wondered if concern for keeping the two institutions of church and state, with their capacity to do great harm and great good, separate just wasn't part of New Zealander's cultural DNA? After all, New Zealand wasn't populated by people escaping religious persecution which was the case in the US. Perhaps that fact and her strong ties to the Mother England and its established Church of England made it a non-issue?

In exploring these questions I learned that religious and political power knew each other intimately almost from the moment Europeans set foot in Aotearoa New Zealand. It was missionaries who pushed for the creation of the Confederation of the United Tribes and eventually for our founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. Anglican, Wesleyan and Roman Catholics clergy were all part of the negotiations, and Anglican and Wesleyan missionaries, trusted by the Maori, convinced most chiefs to eventually sign it.

In spite of missionary involvement in a political act, the Treaty does not mention God or Nga Atua or religion in either the English or Maori versions. However, Pompallier, the Roman Catholic bishop, did delay the signing of the treaty to ask for religious toleration. Henry Williams and William Colenso from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) composed a response for Governor Hobson's signature, "The Governor says the several faiths of England, of the Wesleyans, of Rome, and also the Maori customs, shall be protected." [1] This has been referred to as the fourth article of the Treaty. [2]

While clearly separation of church and state existed from the beginning and religious toleration by the state was the first act of its new governor, the desire for freedom from someone else's religion was at least a day older than the Treaty. On February 5, 1840, all the major players were gathered outside James Busby's home at Waitangi, however CMS missionaries decided not to enter because the Catholics were in the same room. When the Catholics followed in procession after Hobson the missionaries dropped out not wanting to "follow Rome." [3] Clearly the State must be tolerant, but that doesn't mean the Church has to be.

When the first Anglican bishop George Selwyn arrived, he expressed a desire to avoid the problems the Church of England had being an established church. When the New Zealand Church Ordinance of 1842 made provision for financial assistance from the government for the building of churches and chapels and contributions to stipends, Selwyn refused. [4]

Voluntary support was an innovation for Anglican settlers and not always popular, so in 1844 the Governor moved that £200 be added to Selwyn's

stipend, as well as to those of other Christian faiths. Not only did Selwyn object, so did the Roman Catholics stating that true religion did not need the aid of people who might be heretics or infidels, nor was it right to contribute money to the tax man which might support religions you might consider false. [5]

Following this incident, Selwyn wrote I "am perfectly satisfied with the position ... the State has been pleased to place the Church and myself: knowing that the State here has nothing to give the Church; and being able to take care that it takes nothing from us." [6] Thanks to Selwyn and other religious leaders, by 1854, the Colonial Legislature was refusing support of churches on the grounds of maintaining "perfect civil equality of all the religious denominations." [7]

Clearly, thanks in large part to the church, freedom of religion and separation of church and state are part of New Zealand's DNA. If there was any doubt the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act of 1990 confirms it: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, including the right to adopt and hold opinions without interference." [10]

Government guidelines for implementing the act include this admonition: "[These sections] may be interpreted to include freedom from religion, that is, the Government cannot be seen to take sides in matters of religion or belief or opinion." [11]

Government support for public education would clearly seem to prohibit sponsored prayer (as opposed to religious studies) in a public school as to do so would violate everyone's right to freedom from religion.

Clearly separation of church and state and the desire for freedom of and from religion are integral to New Zealand DNA. So why is there no concern when the law is violated, even in what may seem an inconsequential matter?

The only conclusion I can reach is that to date such violations have not had a significant impact on New Zealand society. As the Human Rights Commission rightly notes, "By world standards, New Zealand is very tolerant of religious diversity within the context of a secular State." [12]

However, the Commission also notes an area we could do better: "The use of only Christian prayers in public or State ceremonial occasions raises the question of offence to or exclusion of people of other beliefs or no religious beliefs." Historically that offence was not serious, as the population was relatively homogeneous. While predominantly Christian, it appears not to be deeply religious.

Since the consequences of these breaches have so far have been minor, it is an issue that understandably does not generate much passion or concern.

On the contrary, my own passion is rooted in my coming to New Zealand to escape a theocracy of the Christian Right that is now in place in all but name.

Ironically, that country's founding document established the world's first secular government. Yet in my lifetime I have witnessed "Under God" placed into our Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. The next year "In God We Trust" was stamped on our money and mandated as our motto the following year. These violations of the Constitution were excused because America was in a Cold War against Godless Communism. In the last 30 years I've watched the Christian Right build on these "minor breaches" of separation of church and state to successfully rewrite history in an attempt to put God in the Constitution. I say successfully, because two-thirds of Americans now believe the word "God" is found in the Constitution or that the founders implied it. It is not. They did not.

I say successfully, because the Supreme Court was the last branch of government defending American freedom of and from religion. That is no longer true. In 2005 Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia stated in a minority opinion concerning a display of the Ten Commandments in a courthouse that the Constitution permits this because of its "disregard of polytheists and believers in unconcerned deities, just as it permits the disregard of devout atheists." [13] The Constitution permits no such thing.

I say successfully because in a similar case decided the same day, Justice Stephen Breyer switched his vote against displaying the Ten Commandments in the first case to for displaying them in the second. His reason? They had been there 40 years instead of only six. He accepted the common argument that custom, rather than law, excuses breaching the wall of between church and state. An argument used similarly in New Zealand.

I say successfully because of the appointment John Roberts as Chief Justice. He argued, while Solicitor General before the Supreme Court, that it should recognize the nation's "religious heritage" in church-state cases. Brian Tamaki and he would make good mates.

I say successfully because the last appointee to the Supreme Court, Samuel Alito, gives a majority on the court to those hostile to the secular state the Constitution established.

To make matters worse, this majority believes in a strong executive branch. When that executive is George W. Bush, a conservative Christian who stated God told him to invade Iraq, one can only conclude that the Christian Right is now in charge. The US is officially a theocracy.

This is why I left. I came to New Zealand seeking freedom from a religion that empowers a government that sees God's will in making perpetual war, unashamedly condones torture, justifies illegal wiretapping on its citizens without embarrassment, arrogantly abrogates international treaties, denies basic human rights and civil liberties as if the Magna Carta and U.S. Bill of Rights were merely suggestions, disenfranchises its opponents with callous premeditation, and ravages the environment with impunity. I came here to escape a religion that thinks such a government is worthy of support and that 'intelligent design' is worthy of a science class and that nature's calamities are

God's judgment against non-Christians or Christians not of their persuasion. I came here to escape a religion that believes God only blesses America.

My Christian faith is not their faith. Nor was it the faith of the framers of the Constitution. John Adams in 1817 once observed about such as the Christian Right, "What a mercy it is that these People cannot whip and crop, and pillory and roast, as yet in the US! If they could they would." [14] How prescient! They now can and do or support those who do.

There are signs in this political season that Americans have had enough of the Christian Right. Thankfully, their influence seems to be on the wane. While there is some comfort in this, those on the Supreme Court will still be there long after a new president and a more progressive Congress are elected.

Religion will remain a potent force in American politics, even if Americans don't choose Mike Huckabee, a Baptist preacher who doesn't believe in Evolution. America may elect its first black or woman president in November, but I seriously doubt because of the role of religion in politics it will ever elect an atheist president.

In America faith has always been at the heart of politics, be the faith progressive or conservative. Huckabee clearly is going after those holding Evangelical beliefs. Hillary, a mainstream Methodist, makes sure everyone can see her faith credentials on her sleeve—a Democrat can't win the general election without them. Obama, a member of the most progressive Christian denominations, speaks in secular language of his Christian belief in the hope that people and nations can be better. McCain, the least religious of the final four, knows he must pander to the values of the Christian Right if he is to have any chance of being elected. On the other hand, Helen Clark, as remarkable as she is, as an atheist would never get past the Iowa primary.

Which brings me to my last point. While a secular state is essential to respecting individual faith and belief in our increasingly diverse society, it is also necessary because faith and politics are and will be forever intertwined. They are so enmeshed they could never be separated. Wishing it were otherwise will not change it.

Politics is the action arm of faith and belief. Politics at its best is a marketplace of competing ideas. Those ideas are inextricably tied to the beliefs of the one arguing for a particular action, be that person Richard Dawkins or Osama Bin Laden. For those of us unhappy with the ideas conservatives and fundamentalists promote, progressive Christians, humanists and rationalists must continue to argue and argue forcefully for the values we hold in common.

You might be surprised to know that progressive Christians hold more in common with rationalists and humanists than they do with their co-religionists.

If we have a difference it might be over the rationalist's requirement for evidence to support belief.

While you might reject any value or belief that can't be supported by evidence, how many of our commonly held values are supported by evidence. On what evidence do we base our adherence to the values of empathy, fairness, justice, and equality? What evidence supports our faith in our ability to make a better world?

We have other commonly held views. We both affirm the positive possibilities of life -- without evidence. We both hold certain things -- like the natural world -- sacred. We share the conviction that some things are greater than the individual, whether it's a higher being or a sense of awe and connection with the world and the beings in it.

Granted, faith does, can and has led to intolerance and much worse. But is faith to blame, or the triumph of the baser instincts within individuals? Certainly secular powers have also committed their share of atrocities, but again is secularism to blame? I don't think so.

American Rationalist, Bruce Budner outlines that it is not impossible for progressives of any faith to find unity with humanists and rationalists for a greater good in the marketplace of politics:

"Faith has been the primary inspiration for some of our greatest leaders. Mahatma Gandhi's religious faith was central to his political and social philosophy. In fact, Gandhi credited his faith for his political courage: 'Only he can take great resolves who has indomitable faith in God and has fear in God.' His faith extended beyond God: 'Non-violence requires a double faith, faith in God and also faith in man.' One might ask which of these faiths required a greater suspension of evidence-based thinking.

"The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew inspiration from Gandhi. Like Gandhi, he understood his mission in religious terms. The values that propelled him to the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement were inseparable from his faith. In his famous 1963 "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," in which he responded to critics of his campaign of non-violent resistance, he said:

'I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.'

"Five years later, on the very eve of his assassination, he said in an eerily prescient speech:

'Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'

"Progressives are bound together by values. You and I believe in acting empathetically and with responsibility. We value cooperation and community. We model nurturance. We promote inclusion over exclusivity. We exalt the attitude of 'we are in this together' over 'look out for number one.' Like Gandhi and King, we keep the faith that we can make the world a better place. If some of those who share our values and beliefs happen to tie them to their religious faith, why should other progressives look askance? Why shouldn't secular progressives embrace the countless thousands of religious progressives in this country? Who are we to say that secular teachings represent the only legitimate path to progressive attitudes? And ultimately, doesn't turning our backs to people of faith amount to the very intolerance that we decry?"

"If I were to convene a progressive caucus," he concludes, "and if King and Gandhi were still alive, they would be at the top of my invitation list, along with the Dalai Lama... and I would ask none of them to check their faith at the door." [15]

When I read words like these I think even Alice could believe it is possible for us to work together to protect and strengthen the wall that separates the Church and State and to promote the value of a secular society.

Endnotes:

1 W. Colenso, *The Authentic and Genuine History of the Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi*, New Zealand, February 5 and 6. 1840, Wellington, Government Printer, 1899, p.14

2 Allan Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa: The History of Church and Society in New Zealand*, Wellington, Education for Ministry, 1991, pp. 24-25

3 *Ibid*, p. 24

4 *Ibid*, p. 30

5 J. Dickson, *History of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand*, Dunedin, J. Wilie, 1899, p. 40

6 H.W. Tucker, *Memoir of the Life and Episcopate of George August Selwyn*, London, Gardner, 1879, vol.1, p.163

7 Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa*, p. 30

8 *Ibid*, p. 30

9 *Ibid*, p. 31

10 NZ Bill of Rights Act of 1990, Section 13 [Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion]

11 Guidelines on the NZ BofRs Act of 1990,
<http://www.justice.govt.nz/pubs/reports/2004/bill-of-rights-guidelines/section12-15.html>

12 Human Rights in New Zealand Today - Nga Tika Tangata O Te Motu,
<http://www.hrc.co.nz/report/summary/summary09.html#tr>

13 Susan Jacoby, "Original Intent," Mother Jones, December, 2005, p. 30

14 Ibid, p. 74

15 <http://www.buzzflash.com/articles/rockridge/015>