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## Two Rival Religions?

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Machen's argument became one of the issues of controversy in the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversies of the 1920s and beyond. By any measure, Machen was absolutely right—the movement that styled itself as liberal Christianity was eviscerating the central doctrines of the Christian faith while continuing to claim Christianity as "a way of life" and a system of meaning.

"The chief modern rival of Christianity is 'liberalism,'" Machen asserted. "Modern liberalism, then, has lost sight of the two great presuppositions of the Christian message—the living God and the fact of sin," he argued. "The liberal doctrine of God and the liberal doctrine of man are both diametrically opposite to the Christian view. But the divergence concerns not only the presuppositions of the message, but also the message itself."

Howard P. Kainz, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Marquette University, offers a similar argument—warning that it is now modern secular liberalism which poses as the great rival to orthodox Christianity.

Observing the basic divide in the American culture, Kainz notes: "Most of the heat of battle occurs where traditional religious believers clash with certain liberals who are religiously committed to secular liberalism."

Kainz offers a crucial insight here, suggesting that one of the most important factors in the nation's cultural divide is that persons on both sides are deeply committed to their own creeds and worldviews—even if on one side those creeds are secular.

"This explains why talking about abortion or same-sex 'marriage,' for example, with certain liberals is usually futile. It is like trying to persuade a committed Muslim to accept Christ. Because his religion forbids it, he can only do so by *converting* from Islam to Christianity; he cannot accept Christ as long as he remains firmly committed to Islam. So it is with firmly committed liberals: Their 'religion' forbids any concessions to the 'conservative' agenda, and as long as they remain committed to their secular ideology, it is futile to hope for such concessions from them."

Kainz's argument bears similarities not only to J. Gresham Machen's observations about the theological scene, but also to Thomas Sowell's understanding of the larger culture. As Sowell argued in *A Conflict of Visions*, the basic ideological divide of our times is between those who hold a "constrained vision" over those who hold an "unconstrained vision." Both worldviews are, in the actual operations of life, reduced to certain "gut feelings" that operate much like religious convictions.

Kainz concedes that some will resist his designation of secularism as a religion. "Religion in the most common and usual sense connotes dedication to a supreme being or beings," he acknowledges. Nevertheless, "especially in the last few centuries, 'religion' has taken on the additional connotations of dedication to abstract principles or ideals rather than a personal being," he insists. Kainz dates the rise of this secular religion to the French Enlightenment and its idolatrous

worship of Reason.

Looking back over the last century, Kainz argues that Marxism and ideological Liberalism have functioned as religious systems for millions of individuals. Looking specifically at Marxism, Kainz argues that the Marxist religion had dogmas, canonical scriptures, priests, theologians, ritualistic observances, parochial congregations, heresies, hagiography, and even an eschatology. Marxism's dogmas were its core teachings, including economic determinism and the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Its canonical scriptures included the writings of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Tse Tung. Its priests were those guardians of Marxist purity who functioned as the ideological theorists of the movement. Its ritualistic observances included actions ranging from workers' strikes to mass rallies. The eschatology of Marxism was to be realized in the appearance of "Communist man" and the new age of Marxist utopia.

Similarly, Kainz argues that modern secular liberalism includes its own dogmas. Among these are the beliefs "that mankind must overcome religious superstition by means of Reason; that empirical science can and will eventually answer all the questions about the world and human values that were formerly referred to traditional religion or theology; and that the human race, by constantly invalidating and disregarding hampering traditions, can and will achieve perfectibility."

Kainz also argues that contemporary liberalism has borrowed selectively from the New Testament, turning Jesus' admonition to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," as a foundation for "absolute secularism," enshrined in the language of a wall separating church and state. Thus, "religion [is] reduced to something purely private."

Secular liberalism also identifies certain sins such as "homophobia" and sexism. As Kainz sees it, the secular scriptures fall into two broad categories: "Darwinist and scientific writings championing materialist and naturalistic explanations for everything, including morals; and feminist writings exposing the 'evil' of patriarchy and tracing male exploitation of females throughout history up to the present."

The priests and priestesses of secular liberalism constitute its "sacerdotal elite" and tend to be intellectuals who can present liberal values in the public square. Congregations where secular liberals gather include organizations such as Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, the National Organization of Women, and similar bodies. These groups "help supply a sense of affiliation and commonality for the religiously liberal."

The rites and rituals of secular liberalism include "gay pride" parades and pro-abortion rallies. Interestingly, the eschatology of this movement is, Kainz argues, the distillation of pragmatism. "In the estimation of the religiously liberal," Kainz asserts, "all lifestyles and all moralities can approximate this goal, as long as the proscribed illiberal 'sins' are avoided."

Kainz readily admits that not all liberals are committed to this religious vision of liberalism. As he sees it, "There are many people working for social justice, human rights, international solidarity, and other causes commonly regarded as liberal without a deep ideological commitment." His point is that conservatives may find common cause and common ground with these non-religiously committed liberals.

"For many 'moderate' liberals, liberalism is a political perspective, not a core ideology," he observes. "In the culture war it is important for Christians to distinguish between the religiously committed liberal and the moderate liberal. For one thing, Christians should not be surprised when they find no common ground with the former. They may form occasional, even if temporary, alliances with the latter."

Kainz's article "Liberalism as Religion: The Culture War Is Between Religious Believer on Both Sides," appears in the May 2006 edition of *Touchstone* magazine. His analysis is genuinely helpful in understanding the clash of positions, policies, convictions, and visions that mark our contemporary scene.

Though Kainz does not develop this point, all persons are, in their own way, deeply committed to their own worldview. There is no intellectual possibility of absolute value neutrality—not among human beings, anyway.

The conception of our current cultural conflict as a struggle between two rival religions is instructive and humbling. At the political level, this assessment should serve as a warning that our current ideological divides are not likely to disappear anytime soon. At the far deeper level of theological analysis, this argument serves to remind Christians that evangelism

remains central to our mission and purpose. Those who aim at the merely political are missing the forest for the trees, and confusing the temporal for the eternal.

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