

Against Aggressive Secularism

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Perhaps the most important virtue embraced by all humanists and many religionists is a belief in the separation of religion and state. However, a virtue turns into a vice if it is taken too far. A great example is the aggressive secularism found in France, Belgium, Germany, Austria and other nations.

According to the government-appointed U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, some European governments are suppressing the rights of religionists - particularly Muslims - to dress and practice their customs as they see fit. These governments are going after “religious attire and symbols, ritual slaughter, circumcision, and the building of mosques and minarets.”

Muslim women wearing full-face veils are stopped and frisked by the cops. This is similar to the degrading stop-and-frisk policies of the police used against Blacks and Latinos in the U.S., especially in New York City.

However, there are times when people should not be permitted to wear certain items of clothing, regardless of their religious beliefs. For example, some Muslim women believe they should be able to take photos for their drivers' licenses while they are veiled. Many Muslim women believe they should be able to wear their veils when going into banks and other places where large sums of money are kept,, etc. This is absurd. Then there is the problem of the burka, which has been found to be dangerous to women going out into traffic, etc. In these cases, authorities are correct to intervene and deny religionists the right to wear certain clothing at certain times.

Some European governments pass measures and restrictions against groups they deem to be cults. Conversely, in the U.S., groups deemed to be cults have the right to exist as long as they are not holding people against their will, engaging in acts of violence, etc.

There are certain cases in which governments have a “compelling state interest” giving them the right to put an end to certain practices. The best example would be preventing a cult from performing a human sacrifice. Another example is when authorities intervene to prevent religious

fanatics - such as those among Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses - from denying life-saving medical care to their children.

There are many good reasons why authorities should prevent parents from withholding life-saving medical care from their children. To deny such care is, in effect, to commit a human sacrifice. However, no belief should ever be deemed so sacred that it becomes more important than the lives of children. Moreover, children grow up and often reject the religions of their parents. Why should the parents have the right to deny their children such an opportunity?

Authorities should also have the right to prevent religionists from practicing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), aka genital cutting. Human rights must always take precedence over religious dogma or religious practices.

Why should a concern for others not also extend to other animal species? Why should people be allowed to torture and brutally slaughter other animals in the name of their God? These are good questions. However, there is one major problem. People have the right to kill other animals in numerous ways for food, clothing, experimentation, and so forth. Why, then, should they not also be permitted to kill other animals in the name of God? There has to be consistency here. The double standards and hypocrisy simply will not work.

Some religionists have been charged with hate speech for denouncing homosexuality. This is problematic. After all, religious texts have condemned homosexuality for millennia. Moreover, speech does not oppress. Actions oppress. Even bigots should have the legal right to express their opinions as long as they are not encouraging violence against anyone.

On the other hand, some critics have been charged with hate speech for being highly critical of religion - especially Islam. Again, there should be no right not to be offended. Dealing with real and perceived offense is the price we all must pay for living in democratic societies.

In the U.S., there have been many efforts to prevent Muslims from building mosques. The best example is the so-called World Trade Center (WTC) mosque proposed for New York City.

Islamophobes claimed that Muslims wanted to build a mosque at the site. In reality, moderate Muslims proposed an Islamic community center several blocks from the WTC that would have been open to Jews, Christians and others.

Aggressive secularism encourages fear, hatred, intolerance and discrimination against the religionists being targeted. Secularism means separating religion and state so that neither side can be controlled by the other. It does not mean that one side should oppress the other.

Throughout history, many governments have tried to suppress religions. The former Soviet Union, China, Cuba and other Maoist and Stalinist governments have done likewise. However, not only is this unfair and anti-democratic, but it does not work. At best, it merely pushes religion underground. Furthermore, after these repressive kinds of governments come to an end, many people once again embrace religion.

The alternative to religion is not repressive government. Rather, the alternative lies in providing viable secular alternative life styles and life stances. It is all about the competition of ideas, and not the suppression of ideas we do not like.

Too often, secularists are unwilling to support true religious liberty. What is worse, some secularists either support aggressive secularism or downplay or ignore it. However, this is not what humanism is all about. Mere secularism does not a humanist make. What is at least as important as secularism is a consistent defense of democratic values, which include genuine religious freedom and toleration.

It is important that more humanists take leading roles in speaking out against aggressive secularism. Not only is this the ethically correct course of action, but it shows religionists that humanists are serious about fighting for freedom and justice for all.