

Secular yet Religious

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

When many people use the term “secular” they mean atheist or agnostic. However, one can be religious yet fully committed to the defense of church/state separation and to keeping religion out of other areas in which it clearly does not belong. Moreover, one can be religious yet favor reason, experience and observation over faith, and have a completely secular worldview.

It is crucial that non-theists understand that some of the most important champions of church/state separation have been religionists. Perhaps the best example in the U.S. would be Barry Lynn of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, headquartered in Washington, D.C. The Reverend Lynn is an ordained minister, yet he has been the leading voice in the defense of church/state separation in the U.S. for decades.

Some people are mostly or entirely nominal believers. They profess to be members of religions or houses of worship out of habit, for purposes of group identification, out of loyalty to their families and neighborhoods, to avoid conflict with their more religious colleagues, etc. (The atheist labor leader A. Philip Randolph had an honorary membership in a church.)

The late, great Nelson Mandela seemed to have been a good example of a nominal believer. Some atheists believe that he was an atheist, even though some of his biographers contend that he was a lifelong Methodist. Mandela sometimes used religious language. However, he believed that religion was a private matter and rarely if ever discussed religion in detail. He was a secularist in the sense that he believed in church/state separation. His organizations were secular, as were the statements he supported, such as the Freedom Charter of the ANC.

Martin Luther King is recognized as one of the greatest religious leaders of all time. However, he believed in church/state separation and, like Frederick Douglass long before him, was opposed to prayer in public schools. He used religion as a tool to improve a secular democracy, not as a weapon to destroy it, as many of his counterparts from the Religious Right have sought to do.

Malcolm X went so far as to establish a secular organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU.) Though he embraced Sunni Islam, many scholars believe he had become a secular humanist in his last days. In the OAAU he welcomed atheists, Muslims, Christians, Confucianists, and others. He had long believed that religion had done more to divide people than to unite them, and that a secular organization could best promote the interests of his people.

Writing in the new book *Malcolm X at Oxford Union: Racial Politics in a Global Era*, author Saladin Ambar related the following:

There is every reason to believe that had he lived, Malcolm would have found himself within the modernist tradition of Islam - a member of the Rational school. As some scholars have suggested, the tradition, emergent in the medieval period, “appears to anticipate many principles associated with Western law such as rationality,

objectivity, principles of individual liberty and equality.” (p. 111. The quoted passage comes from *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, by Turkish journalist Mustafa Akyol, pp. 90-93.)

Malcolm also formed the Muslim Mosque, Inc. to provide moral and spiritual guidance for those seeking it. In this way, Malcolm provided a good model for social justice advocates that happen to be secular humanists. They could form secular social justice organizations and have separate groups promoting secular ethics for those with interests in that area.

As quietly as it is kept, there have been many secular Arabs and Muslims throughout the world. This should not be surprising. After all, many Arabs and Muslims live in nations in which their people are regularly victimized by Muslim theocrats. For them, secularism is not merely something to be defended in the abstract. It is a matter of life and death.

Non-theists should be eager to join with religionists that work for a secular world. There are many theists that reject creationism and Intelligent Design, and that do not want this kind of pseudoscience being promoted in the public schools. There are many religious progressives that oppose prayer and other religious activities in the public schools. They are opposed to abstinence-only sex education and in favor of comprehensive sex education and contraceptives for anyone that needs them. They are in favor of women’s right to abortions, etc.

Non-theists must understand that we have many allies among the religious progressives that are interested in defending secularism. We must not equate secularism with non-theism. We must recognize that secularism benefits us all, and that we all should do our part to defend it.