

Thursday, February 02, 2012

## *Threats to Secularism and Religious Liberty Worldwide*

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Any conception of the New Humanism will have to confront threats to secularism and religious liberty worldwide. Sadly, there are many, and one will always find work in trying to roll back the tide of theocratic reactionary forces on the global scene.

In Nigeria, the Boko Haram terrorist organization is wreaking havoc, and spreading fear and loathing among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Boko Haram means “Western education is forbidden.” The children of Boko Haram members are prevented from attending school and being influenced by teachings rooted in Western discoveries in science, Western history, Western music, Western philosophy, Western art, etc. Boko Haram wishes to turn Nigeria into a theocratic Muslim nation.

Boko Haram members have bombed Christian churches and committed deadly acts of violence against Christians. Many Christians are terrified, and many are vowing to fight back. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has said that Boko Haram presents a greater threat to Nigeria than did that nation’s civil war. The government is apparently helpless in stopping the violence. They are afraid that, by intervening, they will simply encourage more Muslims to join the terrorist group.

In Egypt and Tunisia, oppressive governments have been overthrown, but new theocratic forces are threatening secularism and religious freedom. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the theocratic Salafis have combined to win about 70% of seats in the nation’s first free elections in several decades. This political phenomenon has occurred despite the fact that secularists led the drive to oust former President Hosni Mubarak from power. Women, secularists, moderates and others in Egypt are worried that the theocrats will impose their will upon the masses.

In Tunisia, Ennahda, the most powerful political party, is threatening to slant the nation’s future constitution toward sharia. The country’s 22,000 Catholics are concerned that their rights will be immediately trampled underfoot. Christians in Tunisia have already faced discrimination since the ouster of their former dictator of 32 years, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. They have faced police harassment, and they have had their phones tapped.

In Libya, there is much political uncertainty. Abdul Hakim Belhaj, leader of the Tripoli Military Council, is preparing to run for political office during elections planned for April. Many Libyan Christians are concerned because Belhaj used to lead a Muslim militia with ties to al-Qaeda.

In Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood has played a major role in protests against President Bashar Assad. There are over 2 million Christians in the nation of 22 million, and they are afraid that once Assad is removed from power, theocratic Muslims will take over the nation and make their lives miserable.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban still has great influence. The nation is known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and there is not much tolerance for Christians. The government has shown no interest in providing protection for persecuted Christians in the country. There are 8,000 Christians there, but the government does not recognize them as citizens of the country. Moreover, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, it is illegal to convert to Christianity. There are no longer any churches in the nation, and the government discourages their presence.

It would be a mistake to believe that there are no threats to secularism and religious liberty in the ostensibly democratic West. In the U.S., highly influential and powerful members of the Christian right are routinely vilifying and demonizing Muslims. Political leaders such as Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan are leading efforts to outlaw sharia in the U.S. This sounds like a good idea. However, sharia poses no threat to the U.S. Still, many states have instituted laws against the establishment of sharia.

Indeed, in November, 2010, 70% of voters in Oklahoma supported an amendment to the state's constitution calling for a ban against sharia. However, on January 11, 2012, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the law was invalid and that sharia posed no threat to the state.

Not long ago, there was a major controversy regarding the establishment of a Muslim community center a few blocks from Ground Zero, where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed on 9/11/01. Opponents referred to the center as the Ground Zero Mosque, as though the plans were to build it on the site where the towers once stood. Apparently, many Islamophobes do not want Muslims anywhere near them.

In truth, Muslims were also killed in those terrorist attacks. Furthermore, some Christian family members of those killed in the attacks were not opposed to the establishment of the center, known as Park 51.

Islamophobes have attacked Muslims throughout the U.S. In New York City, a Muslim had his throat slashed simply because of his faith. Islamophobes have tried to prevent the establishment of mosques in Tennessee and other states. Islamophobes have vandalized and firebombed mosques throughout the nation.

In December, 2011, a Florida chapter of the reactionary Focus on the Family organization successfully persuaded the Lowe's home improvement chain and other businesses to cease advertising for The Learning Channel (TLC) program "All-American Muslim." The program shows typical Muslims trying to make it in the U.S. However, Christian opponents of the show argued that it is simply Muslim propaganda. Moreover, they contended that the show is unrealistic because no Muslim terrorists appear on the program. (Focus on the Family is the same group that criticized the Campbell's Soup company for making halal—according to Muslim law—soups for Muslims. They argued that Campbell's was making the U.S. safe for sharia!)

These are just some of the threats to secularism and religious liberty worldwide. The New Humanism must place more emphasis upon individual freedom and must strongly oppose cultural relativism. Harmful and inhumane practices must never be defended at the expense of legitimate

human rights. By taking and defending this position, the New Humanism will positively influence the world in a major way.

---

[These remarks were to be read before participants at a conference focusing on the New Humanism, organized by UNESCO and the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Paris, France, January 23-24, 2012. Due to time constraints, this presentation was not delivered.]