

DOES MODERN SECULARISM HAVE A MEMORY PROBLEM?

by [Fredric Heidemann](#) · November 16, 2018



After many years of awkward silence, the secular media is finally recognizing some of the most profound social problems facing American society. The widely-acknowledged dangers of the increasing number of children [growing up without fathers](#). The [psychological damage](#) caused by the hookup culture. The long-lasting [wounds](#) and unintended [casualties](#) of divorce. [The deleterious effects of pornography](#). The list could go on.

What strikes me most about these articles, aside from the obvious tragedy, is that they read as though this is somehow breaking news—as though no one had ever considered it before. Yet religious leaders of nearly every stripe decried the same or similar problems for decades, but were either ignored or denounced as out-of-touch, fussy curmudgeons, often by the same publications. It would be all too easy to say “I told you so” and smugly walk away. However, I believe this is part of a much larger phenomenon that I can only describe as the short memory of modern secularism. Whether it’s forgetting the blunders of his predecessors, unconsciously borrowing moral precepts from the religious sphere, or failing to recognize the enormous stabilizing force that religion brings to society, the modern secularist seems to easily forget the readily-available facts that contradict his go-to narrative of blaming religion for society’s ills and dismissing its benefits.

How easily we forget that Social Darwinism—the disturbing application of a “survival of the fittest” ethos to human societies—and “scientific racism” were the inventions of nineteenth century atheists and agnostics eager to free society from old-fashioned morals that allowed “inferior” people to survive. Agnostic Herbert Spencer was a leader in this area, and at least he is still mentioned in some history textbooks. But how many people have even heard of [Ernst Haeckel](#), one of the earliest and most vocal proponents of this theory, who ironically founded the Association for the Propagation of Ethical Atheism? Very few, I daresay, since it seems most modern secularists have forgotten what their predecessors were up to.

The memory loss extends to the people who opposed their positions: often overtly religious people articulating overtly religious principles. Take for example the debate between orthodox Christian G.K. Chesterton and agnostic George Bernard Shaw over eugenics. Chesterton was disgusted by eugenics while Shaw saw an opportunity for “extermination...on a scientific basis.” It is worth mentioning that Chesterton’s other major eugenics opponent, Dean Inge, was an Anglican churchman who became the poster boy for Anglican Modernism—a do-it-yourself, secular spirituality devoid of miracles and moral or theological doctrine, a misguided attempt at “Christianity without religion.”

I can’t help but feel like this collective amnesia has crept into other areas, allowing the proliferation of myths and absurd opinions about religion. How else could religion be blamed, in otherwise educated circles, for most of the world’s violence despite being clearly contradicted by historical fact (see [The Encyclopedia of Wars](#) by Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod)? The reality is that both secular and religious ideas can be dangerous, but when secularism has turned militant, it has been far deadlier. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Maoist China are almost singlehandedly responsible for making the [twentieth century the bloodiest in human history](#). It is not by chance that those regimes systematically suppressed religion and saw Christianity as singularly incompatible with their ideologies.

A few points of clarification before proceeding. First, I hope by now it’s clear that by “secular” I’m *not* referring to the original meaning of that word, which denotes a state that avoids adopting an official religion and intermingling state and religious structures. If the U.S. Constitution’s prohibition on establishing a state religion were abolished and replaced with a requirement that the Vice President be a Catholic bishop, I would be the first to object. Rather, by “secular” I’m referring to a more modern bent on the word: an attitude that views religion as unimportant and, in its aggressive form, desires its elimination from the public sphere.

Second, I am not crassly accusing today's secularists of the sins of their predecessors. The great irony is that most secularists of today would agree with the traditional Christian morality of Chesterton over the modern utilitarianism of Shaw and Inge in the eugenics debates. My point is that such episodes have been largely forgotten, and the secular humanists of today seem to be entirely unaware that they have adopted positions that were seen by their forefathers as hopelessly outdated manifestations of traditional Christian moralizing. And they continue to do so.

For the secular humanist, the uncomfortable reality is that the modern notion of human rights is rooted in Christian social morality. Harvard law school and history professor Samuel Moyné recently wrote an excellent book on the development of human rights philosophies in the twentieth century called [Christian Human Rights](#). Moyné traces the development of human rights, in its current expression, to the pre-World War II era, where Christians apprehended the horrors of both left-wing communism and right-wing fascism and marshalled a response condemning the abuses of both. But the story goes back further. The eighteenth-century predecessor to human rights—natural rights—was similarly Christian in origin. As Bishop Barron has eloquently [pointed out](#), the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” flatly contradicts all honest observations of humanity unless people are “endowed by their Creator” with such inherent dignity. Though the document's author, Thomas Jefferson, was probably a deist with only weak pseudo-Christian tendencies, he acknowledges the Christian origins of his ideas of liberty, calling emancipation [“a doctrine truly Christian.”](#) Other Founders like John Adams even more clearly [credit Christianity](#) with influencing their ideas of human liberty, and anyone who has read Bartolome de las Casas, Thomas Aquinas, or Augustine will notice that Christian ideas of human dignity prefigure similar eighteenth-century ideas.

However, the modern secularist faces perhaps an even more uncomfortable reality: the modern concept of human rights, being so inextricably linked to religious principles, may need religion in order to survive. Contemporary secular ethics may be running on the warped residue of Judeo-Christian morality, but that residue is thinning. Will it be enough to stop the “will to power” that so thoroughly infected secular ideologies in the last century but has so far been avoided in this one?

It's too early to ring alarm bells, at least as far as outright tyranny is concerned, but the coinciding rise of secularism, polarization, political violence, [“polite persecutions,”](#) and flirtations with speech suppression warrant a red flag. Again, the deleterious effect of secularism on the American political climate was [predicted](#) for some time by the religious segments of society, but the secular side has been slow to catch up. *The Atlantic* woke up to

smell the coffee earlier this year, running an article arguing that [*America's secularization has made the political climate less tolerant*](#) and more antagonistic.

The American media's current fascination with the Alt-Right and Antifa movements is a case in point. Both movements resort to violence and intimidation against their opponents. But there is one interesting fact that gets little attention. The Alt-Right [*demographic*](#) tends to be [*atheist or agnostic*](#), as do the [*Antifa supporters*](#). I submit that it's no coincidence both groups are distinctly, even aggressively, secular. In a world where people lack a generally accepted understanding of basic metaphysical truths, moral precepts, and first principles, each person invents his own version of truth. There are no absolutes with which to appeal. There is no room for civil argument and honest debate because there is no fixed goal for an argument to move toward. There are only psychological categories, which invariably break down to "us versus them" thinking and only power to determine who prevails.

To publications that often criticize religion, like *The Atlantic*, rising secularism breeding unrest is counterintuitive. But it makes perfect sense. Sociologists have long known about the link between religious observance and social stability. A devout person is more likely to be financially stable, [*avoid addiction, maintain a marriage, and generally healthier*](#) than a less observant person in the same socioeconomic profile. In other words, religious people perform better in key categories of social stability than their less religious peers living under the same conditions. That stability (or lack thereof) has serious political implications, and we see it playing out now with certain grassroots political organizations showing flashes of violence and demagoguery.

Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to pin all the nonreligious onto the same list of horrors. That would be as stupid as blaming "religion"—as many secular thinkers do—for the abuses committed by people who happen to have certain distorted religious views. In the words of fellow Word on Fire blogger Joe Heschmeyer, that way of thinking is akin to [*blaming the Holocaust on "politics."*](#) Such inane generalizations are unfair and absurd no matter who the target is. That said, I think there is one generalization about modern secularism that is fair, and therein lies the purpose of this post. Because the secular media loves to exaggerate, simplify, and mythologize the darker episodes of Christian history and beams at the faintest whiff of religious scandal, we never forget the dangers of religion turned sour. Can modern secularists admit the same thing about secularism run amok? Can they even identify it? Certainly not well enough, for they have forgotten when it has happened and what it looks like. And we have let them forget. It's time we reminded them, for everyone's sake.

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Fredric lives with his wife and their daughter in the Lansing, Michigan area, where he also works as an attorney. Born a...

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Rita Mauget Ban • 2 days ago

It seems that this article is more concerned with "making us right" than saving the soul of the secular; perhaps we may start by looking at our selves, for example, what good does outlawing abortion do in our great country that has one of the highest rates of infant mortality in the developed world?

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FFSociety → Rita Mauget Ban • a day ago

So killing tens of millions of babies is all good because our country is lower on the mortality scoreboard than you would like? Your reasoning is defective.

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Rita Mauget Ban → FFSociety • a day ago

I find it hypocritical as a mother to care about one and not the other.....

^ | ▾ • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›



FFSociety → Rita Mauget Ban • a day ago

I agree. Your original post said we should ignore the horror of one because of the other. But I agree it would be hypocritical to value one and not the other

^ | ▾ • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) ›

**NIGELTEAPOT** → Rita Mauget Ban • 2 days ago

We (Catholics) are right.

Outlawing abortion makes it against the law to sacrifice children to the devil. It seems your argument is that you might as well sacrifice the children to the devil if (by your absurd position) that they will die anyways.

This position of yours has eternal consequences.

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