

Will the Real Ethical Culture Please Stand Up?

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by **Edward L. Ericson**, Senior Leader Emeritus

This is not an easy time to be an Ethical Culturist. We do not live in a favorable environment for humanism, or for any progressive or forward- looking way of life. It is widely assumed today that a quite different moral philosophy speaks for the social values, and the personal and family values, of America. Religious institutions and movements that are openly hostile to our humanist and ethical philosophy have become the self-appointed monitors and gatekeepers of what is called the American way. In mid-America and most of the South a biology teacher who values his or her job must be careful not to argue too forcefully the case for evolution, not to speak too favorably of Darwin - whose name has been expunged from many textbooks – above all, not to encourage independent critical thinking.

Citizens who do not profess conventional religious beliefs are held apart as pariahs. A youth who acknowledges the agnostic or non-theistic belief of his family is denied membership in the Boy Scouts, a policy of discrimination that the Supreme Court has let stand on the fictional ground that the Scouts are a private organization – despite a long history of governmental sponsorship and benefits. The message is clear: Believe what conventional religion expects of you, or you do not belong, you are not really American.

A recent American president expressed this sentiment with brutal directness. “I don’t know that atheists should be considered as citizens,” he said, “nor should they be considered patriots.” You cannot imagine Jefferson or Madison saying that. But the senior President Bush said it. The present Chief Executive routinely equates fundamentalist Christian beliefs with being American. Jefferson argued, to the contrary, that an atheist is as likely to be a good citizen as a believer in God. Jefferson wrote that the moral sense is native to human beings regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

The Constitution guarantees freedom from religious tests, but our political elite insists on imposing such tests.

When we allow denial of constitutional protection to such a basic right as freedom of conscience, how secure is any personal right - a woman’s right to choose, gay rights, or the right to die with dignity? The Terry Schiavo case – the legal battle to allow a brain-dead woman to expire after many years of artificial life support, a case that agitated the entire nation and tested the independence of the courts– was played out in Florida, in the circuit court of my home county, in Clearwater, the county seat.

So, as you can believe, Carol and I were determined to be among the guests assembled in Clearwater last November when Judge George Greer, the courageous judge who presided in the Schiavo case, received a Civil Liberties Award from our countywide chapter of the ACLU. Powerful politicians, including Governor Bush of Florida, the state legislature, President Bush, and leading members of the Federal Congress attempted repeatedly to block the judge’s ruling. As tensions mounted, death threats were made against Judge Greer, and he was placed under twenty-four hour police protection by our County sheriff’s department. That protection was still necessary – a deputy sheriff

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

standing by as bodyguard - when the judge addressed us at the awards banquet last November.

At the height of the public agitation, the minister of the Calvary Baptist Church of Clearwater, where Judge Greer was a long-time member, asked for his resignation. For his legal ruling in the Schiavo case, the minister wanted him out of his church.

This incident caught my eye because the Calvary Baptist Church of Clearwater is the congregation to which my mother faithfully belonged, and where my brother and I attended Sunday School and church services from the time we were children until we were grown.

So learning that the good judge and I had come from the same theological pod, although at different times, was, as you may understand, of considerable interest to me. Some things that I had learned in Sunday School obviously required unlearning. I had been taught in Sunday School that Baptists above all others had suffered and died for the principle of church-state separation. Baptists believed in "soul liberty," what you and I call freedom of conscience. Baptists remembered in solemn pride that the last victim to be burned at the stake in England was one of their own who refused to bow to the established religion. That principle – that church and state must be separate and that each individual soul is the master of his or her conscience – was drilled into me at an early age.

In 1925 – eighty one years ago – the Southern Baptist Convention – now the nation's largest Protestant denomination with 16 million members – adopted a statement of principles that was emphatic in defense of church-state separation.

The statement declared: "The Church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work.....the state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion.....(T)his implies.....the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power." That is what I was taught in Sunday School. But after a generation of Religious Right agitation by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, the Christian Coalition and the like, the old principles have been widely abandoned.

What members do within their churches is none of our business. But what they do outside of their churches necessarily becomes our business. When the Southern Baptist Convention with its millions of adherents speaks in much of the South and mid-America – legislatures, school boards and county commissions dare not contravene their will. When the Mormon Church speaks in Utah or Idaho, or when the Catholic Church speaks in Boston or Providence, governors and mayors get in line and political reputations are made or broken. School curricula and state budgets are revised. Textbooks are purged and library books are screened.

But set aside for the moment any concern we may have that major sectarian bodies often wield, and sometimes abuse, overwhelming political power. The religious problem in America is deeper than that.

The problem lies in the insidious character of conventional religiosity as a cultural monitor. Quite apart from specific religious institutions and beliefs, there exists a vaguely-defined pseudo-religiosity that weighs upon the very air we breathe, a cloud of narcotic piety that stifles critical thought and magnifies gullibility.

"I don't care what religion you have, so long as you have a religion." We hear that said again and again. Any religion is better than none. But when the evangelist Franklin

Graham, the son of Billy Graham, welcomes the war in Iraq, on the ground that it opens up a mission field for the conversion of Muslims to Christ, is that an example of any religion being better than none? When zealots call for the murder of doctors and nurses in abortion clinics – and moral zombies carry out such acts – is that an example of religion being better than no religion at all?

Secularists and religionists argue about whether “religion” does more good than harm – a meaningless argument. Everyone has a belief system, and a value system, of one kind or another. That is no problem. The harm comes when society privileges favored belief systems, so that they are rendered immune to criticism. These de facto religious Establishments are then at liberty to attack other points of view, but are held to be above criticism themselves, no matter how oppressive or absurd, or venal they may become.

The civilized world is horrified when religious zeal in the Islamic world is used to incite acts of terror. Yet are those acts different in principle from – for example – inciting the murder of a physician in Pensacola, Florida by a right-to-life fanatic in a spasm of religious fervor? Because of such crimes, which have occurred elsewhere as well, abortion services have disappeared from wide regions of the United States. Staying just within the law, most of the time, a campaign of threat and fear is working with startling effectiveness.

In the newspapers, we read repeatedly of gays being beaten and perhaps killed just for being who they are. Two years ago the presidential election hinged on the trumped-up issue of gay marriage. Political observers have concluded that the outcome in Ohio turned on that issue alone. And with Ohio so went the nation. For this November’s elections, religious rightists have already placed gay marriage amendments on the ballot of seven states and are busy getting the issue on as many others as possible, hoping to polarize the electorate and thereby maintain political control.

When we see the convergence of fundamentalist fervor and power politics, the swing of national elections on artificially inflamed religious issues, the assault on science education, the hardening of anti-immigrant feelings and xenophobia in both Europe and America; when one hears the Pat Robertsons and Tim Lahayes urging the faithful to bring on Armageddon - to hasten the final battle between God and Satan and thus to set the stage for the Lord’s return – when such lethal nonsense is preached to millions, and believed by millions; when jihadists and ayatollahs and mullahs pronounce fatwas of death on people half-way around the world, is there any room to doubt that civilization is being thrown into reverse?

I believe - a thesis not happily arrived at – that what we are witnessing represents a tectonic shift in the moral and intellectual bedrock of civilization.

Militant religion combined with tribalism is now in ascendancy in both east and west. In Christianity the polarity of light and darkness stretches back almost to the time of Christian origins. The Manichaeon doctrine of the powers of light subduing the powers of darkness, of Satan’s hordes overcome by the sword of the celestial angels – a myth derived from Zoroastrian dualism – has festered from the beginning in Christianity, and regrettably was grafted from Christian lore, onto Islam. Events are forcing us to understand that Armageddon can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. End-times theology is paralyzing and distorting our foreign relations. The conflict between Israeli and Palestinian is welcomed by the Christian right as advancing God’s plan to bring about the Rapture and Christ’s return.

To prevent an Armageddon of fundamentalist making, all sides must step back from the present belligerence. In international affairs the United States should be the first to exercise self-restraint. We have brought the Islamic world to a seething boil with our economic and political interventions enforced by military terror. Americans must come to recognize the part we are playing in the metastasis of terror.

As long as the most powerful nation on Earth sets an example of intervention and invasion, the prerogative to impose “regime change” at its discretion, all lesser powers will seek to expand their capacity for resistance and disruption. If the most technologically empowered practice the terror of shock and awe, the least technologically favored will turn to the terror of the headsman’s blade and the suicide bomb. That is the symmetry of terror – “smart” bombs for the strong – suicide bombs for the weak.

So what must we do to reverse this slide toward barbarism? I suggest on this, our 130th birthday, there is a constructive course for us to take, a course which Ethical Culture is well equipped to pursue.

What Felix Adler set out to do in the context of his time, we should undertake in the context of ours. The centrality of ethics – the application of ethics in every dimension of human life, from the personal to the global, is our guiding commitment.

Fortunately – at long last - a majority of Americans, according to opinion polls, are coming to believe that the country is on the wrong course. That awakening can be our opening.

The answer is not, as some suggest, to deny to religion a legitimate voice in shaping public opinion. The voice of ethical and religious conscience carried the message against slavery. The Social Gospel movement fought against child labor and sweat shops, and for the rights of immigrants and workers. The Civil Rights movement, as we remember, was largely a struggle of religiously and ethically motivated activists of all races. There is much that religious societies can do legitimately without crossing the line of church-state separation. The essential rule is that the encounter of church and state must be kept at arms length. That means independent, socially critical religious institutions – institutions not beholden to the state for support, or joined to a political faction.

Insofar as humanism and ethical culture are defined as liberal movements – and they are, defining “liberal” in its original meaning as “that pertaining to the free mind” – it is our business to see that liberalism is not regarded merely as moral indifference or a superficial relativism. Liberalism is not the default position of ethical discourse. Moral values have been hijacked by the extremist right. And what a distorted scheme of values they have given us!

Enlightened conscience and reason must claim back their kidnapped offspring. Thomas Jefferson, guided by his study of the Scottish and English moral philosophers, understood that the roots of morality are found, not in dogma, not in punitive indoctrination, but in the very core of our nature as social beings. The ancient Stoics – exemplified by Marcus Aurelius – understood this clearly.

We develop as moral beings by reaching out and activating the moral spark in others. It was that belief, that moral freedom would empower us, that education would enlarge us, that free association and self-governance could be trusted to guide our civilization, that inspired the Founders of the nation to give us the Constitution and the country we have – if, as Franklin said, we can keep it.

A century after Jefferson and from a somewhat different philosophical base, Felix Adler arrived at a virtually identical working principle. In the interaction of right relationships we grow toward our highest human potential.

On that foundation Adler established the ethical movement and set it to work. People say we would be a more effective, and grow faster, if we were a more “spiritual” movement. Perhaps, that may be true; but to be real the spiritual life must be rooted in the moral substance of our deeds and relationships.

In my book “The Humanist Way”, I argued nearly 20 years ago that the “spiritual” (properly understood) grows out of the ethical. I find myself returning to that theme again and again. It is bedrock truth, I believe. Spiritual life is grounded in ethical reality. Dreaming about it, praying for it – sitting in your cave gazing at your navel will not make a better person or a better world. Compassion means concern for others as the doorway to our deepest human identity.

In the light of history, in the face of the horrid things that human beings do to each other, isn't it rather absurd to describe us as ethical beings? Wouldn't it be more realistic to see ourselves as the immoral species? Of course, we are! Only a creature capable of moral reasoning can be immoral. The Nazi chiefs were put in the dock at Nuremberg and found guilty of their crimes precisely because they were deemed to be morally responsible for their deeds.

If we were sharks we could live contentedly as sharks. So far as we know, no shark ever wasted away from a bad conscience.

All of the world's literature predicates the moral structure of human life and assumes the devastating consequences of disordered moral relationships. Aeschelus, Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hawthorne, Melville, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams – these and other dramatists and novelists write about nothing else. Right relations lift us up and crown us with laurels. Dysfunctional relationships entomb us in a thicket of thorns.

If the human race is to break out of that thicket, it will be by knowing, and acting on the knowledge, that our lives are nothing apart from the sum of our relationships.

Lady Macbeth laments “out, out damned spot” and in her plaintive wail we know that she is condemned already. The playwright gives us a cautionary tale, a moral catharsis, to spare us a similar fate. The ethical law of conservation makes no exceptions: As you do to others, you have done to yourself.

In the Koran it is written: Let there be no compulsion in religion....You follow your religion, and I shall follow my religion.

That text, sacred to every Muslim – if consistently applied by Muslim and non-Muslim alike – would resolve much the world's strife.

That is a necessary first step.

But beyond that first step, there remains a necessary second step – the step that takes us to common ground, the ground of moral engagement.

All the world's higher religions and philosophies affirm the principle of moral solidarity. You are your brother's keeper. Show mercy. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked. Help the alien, the stranger, within your gates. Love your neighbor as yourself

What can we do, as members of the Ethical movement, to make these values explicit in our communities, businesses, nation, and world?

The answer is so simple that we dismiss it as a truism. Yet, it is so exacting – so difficult in practice – that we evade it.

We must live our ethical culture. (Lower case “ethical culture.”) “Ethical action” starts in the home. It begins in the bedroom and the family room. It follows us Monday morning on the subway and in the office or market where we work. It is at school with us, and at city hall, on the picket line and when we shop.

Ethical centrality means just that. Day by day we are committed to live morally centered lives.

When we take a stand on public issues – and we must stand up for justice and fairness – the ethical basis of our stand should be clear and explicit.

You ask me, a retired Leader and guest speaker, what this means specifically for the program of this Society at this moment in your history?

You and you alone, as members and Leaders, can give that answer. The agenda for society action depends on your individual and collective talents, interests, and resources. As a Society you must think these matters through and – as the Quakers would say – arrive at a sense of the meeting. Then you can act in unity and strength – always highlighting the imperative that energizes you.

Back in 1951 when the Society celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, Albert Einstein sent a letter of congratulations and good wishes. Einstein called for what he described as “an ethical-moral configuration of our common life.” He said it was of “overriding importance” to civilization.

Without ethical culture,” he concluded (writing ethical culture in lower case letters), “there is no salvation for humanity.”

Fifty five years later, with the prospect of an Armageddon of our own making staring us in the face, Einstein’s words resonate ever louder and clearer. Without ethical culture there is no salvation for humanity. We are convinced. It is our charge to carry the urgency of that message to the world.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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2 West 64th Street • New York, New York 10023
212.874.5210 • www.NYSEC.org