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# The End of the Secular Century

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## Murray N. Rothbard

**T**he storm over Salman Rushdie provides a vivid and dramatic illustration of one of the great truths of our era: that the Age of Atheism is ended. During the 1960s trend theologians proclaimed that God is dead; but now we find that God is still (or again?) very much alive, and that it is atheism for which burial rites must be conducted.

We have to realize that the secularist age, even though seemingly inevitable and eternal at the time, was only a brief glitch in the history of mankind. Secularism was born in the Age of Enlightenment, in the eighteenth century; it was given great impetus by Darwin in the late nineteenth century, and it came into its own and dominated Western culture from the 1920s through the 1960s. In the United States, mainstream Protestantism had slowly but surely been transformed from a militant pietism of the mid-nineteenth century into a secular, barely religious, form of left-liberalism. Preachers would deliver sermons about the virtues of the Marshall Plan or aid to the homeless interlarded with a few small sentimental references to “God” or “Jesus.” During the early 1960s a friend of mine rented a room in the home of the Protestant chaplain, and told him, “It seems that you and I have identical views on religion. The only difference is that I call myself an atheist, whereas you call yourself a Protestant minister.”

As for pre-Vatican II Catholics, they were scarcely integrated into American cultural and intellectual life. They were considered a strange breed, a throwback to the Dark Ages, who really *believed* that stuff.

Bill Buckley likes to tell a story of his meeting, as a young man, with Ayn Rand, with Rand telling him: “Come, come, Bill, surely you are much too intelligent to believe in God.” Ayn Rand, however, was not alone in this attitude compounded of arrogance and naïveté. She was, characteristically, simply more blunt about it. The dominant secularist attitude in American culture was precisely that: the only people who could believe in God or Christianity were credulous and half-witted peasants. And American life of the 1920s through 1960s seemed to confirm this notion. For, after their defeat at the Scopes trial, conservative fundamentalist Protestants

retreated into the hills and rural fastnesses of America, and into the life of marginal social and economic classes. It was then easy for sophisticates to dismiss hard-shell Christianity as merely a cult of hillbilly snake-charmers.

And not only Christianity. The secularist twentieth century also dealt a grave setback to Islam. Moslem regimes were generally secularist and heedless of Islam; the gravest blow came when the Kemal Ataturk regime, after World War I, brutally forced a Western-style “modernization” on Turkey by virtually suppressing Islam and outlawing such Moslem practices as the *chador* (the veiled dress for women).

In every civilization, religion had always been the dominant force in people’s values, goals, and very lives. In the twentieth century, it was possible for secularist intellectuals to ignore this overriding fact, and to claim that modern science had put an end to these “superstitions” of the past. But now, since the 1970s, secularism is rapidly going down the tubes, in the United States and throughout the world. Religion is back, and with a vengeance—literally and figuratively. Fundamentalism has made a remarkable comeback in the United States, and Islam, both Sunni and Shi’ite, is back with a roar. No longer is it possible to ignore the importance of religion in human life and culture.

Even though much fuss about the Rushdie affair has been made in the United States, England, of course, has really been the center of the storm. England, arguably the least religious country in the Western world, is the adopted home of the ex-Moslem Salman Rushdie and was the original publisher of his book. A fascinating article from London in the *L. A. Times* (Dan Fisher, “Multicultural Concept Takes Beating in Britain,” March 1, p. 10), reports a rising tide of anti-foreign and generally xenophobic attitudes in England in the wake of the Rushdie controversy. Apparently, in 1966, Labor Party Home Secretary Roy Jenkins (now a leader of the Social Democrats) set forth a new policy toward Britain’s racial and ethnic minorities: acceptance of cultural diversity, instead of trying to mold all minority groups into one homogenous British product. But now, in the wake of increased Moslem immigration and the Rushdie controversy, Right and Left alike are rapidly rejecting cultural diversity and talking again about a stern approach toward imposing one “British culture and its values.”

The trouble is that cultural liberalism was adopted in Britain, and to a large extent in the U.S., by secularists whose benign and naive view of cultural differences is of happy ethnics

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wearing their quaint folk costumes and going through their charming little folk dances on national holidays. What they left out of this Disneyfied view of life is *real* cultural differences and conflicts, and especially the serious commitments of militant religion. In short, clashing attitudes toward liquor, the role of women, religious blasphemy, and all the rest. Cultural diversity is a noble ideal but, to paraphrase Mao, it is no tea party; it is an often serious and rugged business, and secularists had better start wising up to this basic fact.

There are some interesting and ironic twists to the Rushdie affair that have gone unnoticed. One is that the Ayatollahs and other angry Moslem leaders have issued their pronouncements, *not* as government officials, but as leaders of private religious communities. No Moslem government, in Iran or elsewhere, has sent any hit men to get Rushdie; in a sense, enforcement of the Moslem death penalty has been “privatized,” although methinks it is not the sort of privatization that Bob Poole and others have in mind. At the same time, the defense of Rushdie by the British

government has been nationalized: for the British taxpayer is now being forced to shell out an enormous sum for possible lifetime protection for Rushdie and his wife. But why shouldn't they pay for their own privately arranged protection? Even monarchists surely do not expect to commit government police forces to extraordinary and expensive measures to protect any one person indefinitely. Now that Rushdie's inscrutable novel—previously the victim of bad reviews—has been made into a runaway best seller by Moslem threats, he is certainly in a position to privatize his own defense.

The long-term strategic lesson for secularist libertarians of the resurrection of religion in the modern world should be crystal clear. The prospects for the eventual victory of liberty, in the United States and in the rest of the world, are excellent; the prospects for the triumph of atheism are nil. Secularist libertarians should stop trying to convert the religious to the dubious glories of atheism, and should start trying to convert them to the cause of liberty. ●

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# Building Bridges To the Right: Libertarians, Conservatives, and Humanists

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## Edward Hudgins

**T**he modern secular humanist movement in the United States began in the third decade of this century as a movement of the political left. Humanists rejected revealed religion in favor of reason as the only means to knowledge, and accepted the betterment of man as the goal of ethics, economics, and politics. During that period—and to this day—many humanists believed that a “rational” approach to public policy meant government regulation of the economy, a welfare state, or even socialism.

Today, however, the secular humanist movement is finding more and more libertarians among its ranks. While joining the humanists in advocating personal freedom of speech, lifestyle, and sexual conduct, libertarians also believe that the government should leave economic matters to the individual. Libertarians, in the tradition of their classical liberal predecessors, believe in laissez-faire capitalism. The gradual mingling of secular humanists and libertarians, though not without its problems, is good for both groups. At this time in the development of both movements, each side needs the other.

The leftist leanings of many secular humanists often scare

off potential allies and sympathizers who might be open to a rational approach to life but who do not think that this necessarily entails supporting Michael Dukakis or Jesse Jackson. Libertarians, on the other hand, often pay insufficient attention to the fact that the preservation of freedom ultimately depends on a certain moral order and on supporting social institutions. As a secular humanist and a libertarian I maintain that each movement can be strengthened by working with the other. In addition, cooperation between the two movements offers an opportunity to build bridges to some of the supporters of the religious right by demonstrating that freedom and reason can help us to deal with many of the social evils with which the right is legitimately concerned.

### Defining the movements

**L**ibertarians as a group are united in their acceptance of the political principle that the only legitimate function of government is to protect the life, liberty, and property of individuals. They believe that individuals should be free to do as they please so long as they do not violate the equal rights of other individuals through the initiation of force. If the government wishes to limit freedom, it bears the burden of proof. Limits can only be justified in light of the protection of rights. All libertarians thus believe, with secular humanists, in personal rights and social freedom. One's lifestyle, sexual

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