Theocracy Alert

The fundamentalist attack on separation of church & state defames America and its founders

By Harvey Wasserman
Online Journal Guest Writer

June 11, 2005 (freepress.org)—The right-wing's multi-front war on American democracy now aims at our core belief in separation of church and state. It includes an attempt to say the founding fathers endorsed the idea that this is a "Christian nation," with an official religion.

But the founders—and a vast majority of Americans—repeatedly, vehemently and with stunning clarity denounced, rejected and despised such beliefs.

Nowhere in the Constitution they wrote does the word "Christian" or does the name of Christ appear. The very first phrase of the First Amendment demands that "Congress shall make no law concerning an establishment of religion."

One major reason Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, Ethan Allen and the vast majority of early Americans rejected the merger of church and state was the lingering stench of Puritan intolerance. The infamous theocratic murders of the Salem witch trials sickened the American soul, just as today's power grab by Karl Rove's new corporate fundamentalists creates an atmosphere of intolerance and fear, defined by the world's largest prison gulag.

With characteristic duplicity, the radical right is attempting to re-write another of this nation's most cherished beliefs. Consider a widely circulated screed by the University of Dayton's Larry Schweikart. With astonishing inaccuracy, Schweikart asserts that Jefferson's famous demand for a "wall of separation between church and state" doesn't really mean what it says. Jefferson's observation that the founding fathers were not particularly devout is also dismissed, as if Schweikart knew them all and Jefferson didn't.

Twisting metaphors, changing meanings and ignoring Jefferson's Unitarianism, Schweikart conjures a completely fictitious endorsement for a Christian state.

Then comes the astonishing assertion that the incomparably urbane, tolerant and ever-eclectic Benjamin Franklin was somehow a Christian soldier. Never mind that in his Autobiography the Puritan-born Franklin, with his usual wry wit, laments having been dragged by a friend to church, from which he fled back to his books and experiments.

Never mind also that the legendary atheism of the wildly popular Tom Paine and Ethan Allen was embraced throughout a new nation that loved rational reason.

Instead, the Rovewellian claim that the US belongs to Puritan fundamentalists and their corporate sponsors is fed with random shreds deliberately misused as if by divine right.

The Deistic God of Franklin, Jefferson, and their Enlightened cohorts was in fact a humanistic divinity, rooted in the possibilities of the mind and spirit. America's true founding faith drew strength from diverse sources, including native America, pacifist Quakerism and the actual teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: broad, peace-loving, tolerant, egalitarian, pluralistic, loving.

In other words, the precise opposite of G. W. Bush's totalitarian jihad. Today's theocratic crusaders promote the mean spirit of Puritan fanatics who ruled Boston from 1630 with an iron fist and a hangman's noose. To claim that this infamously repressive (and repressed!) state church was somehow supported by its most focused opponents is to defame America's founders and Truth itself.

It is not the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments that form the bedrock of American values. It is the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution. If anything should be chiseled in stone on our public buildings, it's the Bill of Rights.

Which is precisely what this attack on our history means to burn at the stake. Awakened America rose up in revolt against King, corporation and clergy. Its rejection of a state-sponsored church, Christian or otherwise, was fiercely explicit and decidedly mainstream.

Today's corporate-funded fundamentalist jihad is at war with America's uniquely diverse revolutionary soul. Spitting in the face of our historic core, the Big Lie of a "Christian nation" is vintage Rove at his most Orwellian.

America's founding genius lit up the world with secular pluralism. Those who attack our uniquely open spirit with phony scholarship are those whom George W. Bush might most accurately describe as "people who hate America."

Harvey Wasserman is author of [Harvey Wasserman's History of the United States](http://).