

## *Theocracy Alert*

### **Turning to friends in faithful places: Why non-theists must befriend likeminded minority religious groups**

**By Jeff Nall**

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June 14, 2005—What would it be like to live in a country ruled by religion; to live under a government that uses tax dollars for faith-based programs; to be led by a president that makes weighty foreign policy decisions after communing with God; to have a Supreme Court that preserves discriminatory references to God in the nation's patriotic oath; to have a Congress that proposes an amendment putting the word God in the Constitution, and nullifying the separation of church and state?

Sadly, we are learning what such a world is like all too quickly: American tax dollars pay for faith-based drug rehab programs; our president implemented a faith-based foreign policy; the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the word "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance; and three Supreme Court justices have all agreed "that the Pledge as recited by schoolchildren does not violate the Constitution" ("Supreme Court Preserves 'God' in Pledge," The Associated Press, June 14, 2004). Vying for Christian voters, Democrats are preparing to increase their public acknowledgment of God.

According to Donya Khalili, spokesperson for [Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#), President George Bush's "Faith-Based Initiative" is currently the most disturbing encroachment on the separation of church and state. She says that the current policy not only gives money to religious organizations, but it also allows—and in fact encourages—"groups to discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring" for the first time since Franklin Roosevelt put provisions in place that deny federal funds to organizations that discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or sex.

Potentially even more threatening than faith-based initiatives, the proposed amendment to restore religious freedom seeks to undermine the courts by placing the Christian notion of God in our secular Constitution. According to the amendment's only article, supporters explicitly seek to secure the people's right to "retain the right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, and traditions on public property, including schools."

If ever there were a time for non-theists to circle the secular wagons, draw the line, and protect the Constitution, it is now. However, there are not enough irreligious Americans to do the job alone. Now is the time to forge alliances, especially with the faithful.

When non-theists set aside their desire to embolden people across the globe to forswear faith in mysteries in favor of reason and science, they want one thing above all else—freedom to not believe. Essentially the freedom to not believe is protected by the Constitution and its principle of separation of church and state. But the Constitution also upholds each American's right to believe and participate in the religion of his or her choosing. Therefore, as non-theists struggle to secure the dichotomy between matters of the spirit and those regarding earthly governance, they are unintentionally heralding the rights of Americans to practice the faith of their choosing.

Considering American non-theists live in a nation where more than 70 percent of the population considers itself Christian and tends to vehemently disagree on deep issues ranging from the origin of mankind, gay marriage, women's rights and roles, and concepts about what a family is and should be, it is of little

surprise that non-religious persons are almost inherently repulsed by faith as they know it: worship of the patriarchal "father" in the sky; literal interpretation of Biblical scriptures; belief that mankind is inherently sinful; and the belief that man has domain over all that inhabits the Earth.

The problem with such a characterization is that it does not depict all religious persons in our nation. Rather, such a depiction is merely a stereotype derived from an understanding of the typical practices and beliefs of Christians. Non-theists do not necessarily distinguish one religion from another, nor do they acknowledge the less subversive spiritual movements happening here as well. The point is, simply, for the free thought movement to gain ground, both politically and culturally, non-believers must forsake apathetic generalizations in favor of recognizing potential allies, even if they are religious.

While optimistic non-theists, as of late, have turned to various religious polls that indicate an increasing population of atheists/agnostics, they must realize that these numbers do not represent an adequate body capable of rapidly fighting the de-secularization of this country. Though there are approximately 15 million agnostics/atheists in the U.S., according to [The Barna Research Group](#)'s 2002 report, there are nearly just as many non-Christian persons of some other faith. Certainly this is a group that is as threatened by encroachments on secular government, by Christian fundamentalism, as non-believers are. Polarizing themselves from freethinking religious persons is a grave error. In doing so, non-theists are fashioning pie-in-the-sky idealism rather than pragmatism. If they are to continue to fortify the division between god and government, they must be reasonable and practical; they must ally themselves with those whose freedom of religion also depends on this bulwark.

It is important to call American non-Christians what they really are, "The Other People." Whether Jewish, Muslim, atheist, pagan, Buddhist, or a follower of Native American religion, such groups are those small, non-Christian pieces of the Barna pie. But being "The Other People" isn't so bad when one realizes the potential of forming alliances with these minority religious groups in a concerted effort to make the non-Christian presence felt—to form a voting bloc.

If non-theists are so doctrinaire, refusing to extend understanding to neo-pagans, Buddhists, or Wiccans—a religious movement, whose membership has increased by 1,675 percent in 11 years—then they will be no better than that which they fundamentally oppose.

Many in the free-thought community have smiled happily at religious surveys like that of the American Religious Identification Survey of 2001, which pointed to nearly 30 million Americans that identified themselves as having "no religion." But in homage to realism, it must be acknowledged that of those 30 million people, fewer than 3 million identified with one of the following: atheist, agnostic, humanist, secular. The truth is the vast majority of those remaining 27 million Americans likely have very little at stake in matters of separating church and state; many might benignly go along with increasingly Christian-influenced governance. Those most concerned with the safe keeping of the Constitution and this nation's legacy of tolerance amount to nearly 8 million Americans (or 3.7 percent of the population according to the survey). This much is proven by the activism of groups such as the [Michiana Pagan Alliance](#), which is officially aligned with the organization Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Others on the front line of the separation battle include the Florida-based [Wiccan Church of Iron Oak](#). In 1994, the group's founders, Priestess Jacque Zaleski and Priest Roger Coleman, were singled out by the city of Palm Bay for holding "[r]eligious celebrations in the backyard of their Palm Bay home." Eventually the city agreed that the celebration, no different than a Christmas gathering at one's home, did not violate city code because, according to board member Diane White, the home "is primarily a residence" and not a church ("Wiccans Win Right to Hold Home Services," *Florida Today*, November 22, 1994).

In the Church's March 21, 1997, newsletter, Roger Coleman wrote of their experience, "The cost was high to both my personal life and to Jacque's. The cost was high emotionally and monetarily and we still have to raise money to pay off debt before we are clear of the suit. The cost was high also to members of Iron Oak and to the Pagan community that fought along with us." Adding, "In a very real way, we won. Many

Wiccan and Pagan groups united together to help Iron Oak, to stand shoulder to shoulder against religious intolerance."

Though many non-believers find it difficult to set aside their disdain for faithful enterprises, when the time is taken to examine not only the plight, but also the various perspectives held by spiritual people, the common bond is all too clear.

Al Rapaport, director at the [Open Mind Zen Center](#) in Brevard County, Florida, told me in an interview that his group, which "has Buddhist roots," benefits immensely from the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.

"Obviously, the constitutional right to choose a religious or philosophical path is very important to anyone not following the majority way, which in our culture is Christianity. The problem, as we see it in the Zen practice, is that everyone is attached to their own particular view of what god and 'true' belief is. Everyone believes their version is more correct than anyone else's. This creates tremendous suffering in the world, and has since the beginning of human culture. In Zen practice, we endeavor to drop our attachment to a particular hard and fast way of looking at this issue, which enables the mind to be flexible and avoid clinging to notions that may not still be appropriate."

The idyllic hope of many that free thought will miraculously spread across the globe like a vaccine, saving humanity from the pestilence of religion has all the characteristics of a wild fantasy. Religion will likely flourish through the world until the end of civilization, but that doesn't mean it can't be prevented from ruling the world.

For the freethinking movement to expand and continue to be a viable force against dangerous fanatics, it is best to rescind the declaration of war on religion as a whole, honing in on notions of "true religion," textual literalism (religion, myth etc.), and blatant dogmatism. If not, non-theists may very well lose the separation of church and state that is held so dear. Quite simply, the greatest threat to freethinking is not faith itself, but the rule of faith in society.

Non-theists should concentrate on goals such as forging alliances with church and state separationists and non-dogmatic people of faith, as well as removing faith-stereotypes from discourse. This will do more than assist in the defense of the right to disbelief. Such worthwhile goals will also improve the image of non-theists around the nation and, consequently, the ability to "educate the public about the views of non-theists."

This battle is not simply a battle between non-theists and Christians; it is a battle between secularists and fundamentalists—after all, there *are* secular Christians.

Liberty, freedom and truth are the salient features of this unique nation, a nation that cannot be described in terms of a specific doctrine, be it religious or non-religious. Rather, the U.S. stands as a nation of ideas where each individual is entitled to his or her own. This is a country where freedom flourishes, a country that led an exodus of freedom out of centuries of intolerant religious rule and kingly dominance; one that entered into the far reaching pastures of liberty and potential happiness. If this tradition, largely bequeathed by deists, is to be preserved, non-theists must unite together with those that share the love of a secular government; they must turn to their friends of faith.

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