Why militant secularism is for believers, too

Posted: Tue, 27th Mar 2012 by Terry Sanderson

The *New Scientist* magazine had an interesting series of articles about the "science of religion" last week (which will be available free for a few more days to those who register on the site). It was all summed up in an editorial that advised "secularists" to rethink their strategy. The editorial reads:

> "Give me the child until he is seven, and I will show you the man." This Jesuit maxim epitomises how many of us perceive religion: as something that must be imprinted on young minds.
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> The new science of religion begs to differ. Children are born primed to see god at work all around them and don't need to be indoctrinated to believe in him.
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> This is just one of many recent findings that are challenging standard critiques of religious belief. As we learn more about religion's biological roots, it is becoming clear that secularists are often tilting at windmills and need to rethink.
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> Another such finding is that belief in a god or gods does appear to encourage people to be nice to one another. Humans clearly don't need religion to be moral, but it helps.
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> "Religion is etched in human nature and cannot be dismissed as ignorance or indoctrination"
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> An interesting corollary of this is a deeply held mistrust of atheists. In fact, atheists might consider themselves as unrecognised victims of discrimination. In a recent opinion poll, Americans identified atheists as the group they would most disapprove of their children marrying and the one least likely to share their own vision of American society. Self-declared atheists are now the only sizeable minority group considered unelectable as president.
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> Such antipathy poses a dilemma for opponents of religion, and may explain why "militant atheism" has failed to make headway.
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> Secularists would also do well to recognise the distinction between the "popular religion" that comes easily to people's minds and the convoluted intellectual gymnastics that is theology. Attacking the latter is easy but will do little to undermine religion's grip.
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> This is not an apologia for god. Religious claims still wither under rational scrutiny and deserve no special place in public life. But it is a call for those who aspire to a secular society to approach it rationally — which means making more effort to understand what they are dealing with. Religion is deeply etched in human nature and cannot be dismissed as a product of ignorance, indoctrination or stupidity. Until secularists recognise that, they are fighting a losing battle.

There are a few flaws in the *New Scientist*'s opinion (as well as failing to explain why, if religion is so deeply innate and inevitable in the human condition, there are any atheists at all).

First of all, the lazy use of the word 'secularist' as a catch-all for atheist, agnostic, humanist, rationalist, non-believer etc etc, which leads to the assumption that secularism is anti-religious.

Individual members of the National Secular Society may well be unconvinced by the claims of religion and may even feel antipathy towards it, but we have to put that aside when arguing for a secular society. We have to accept, as the *New Scientist* exhorts us, that religion and religious believers have always been with us and always will be to some extent and that they have the right to pursue their beliefs in any way they want to, within the law.

Our Secular Charter makes clear that we agree that religious groups have their domain. This domain must be separate from that of the state in order to protect everyone who has to live in it, believer and non-believer alike.

Trying to dismantle or destroy religious belief is quite different from opposing religious power-seeking and privilege, which is what the NSS is about. Criticising the abuses perpetrated in the name of religion is not the same as saying that all religious believers are guilty of those abuses, or that they are stupid for believing as they do.

We know, for instance, that blame for the abuse of children within the Catholic Church's hierarchy cannot be laid at the door of all church-going Catholics. Indeed, it was those very rank-and-file congregants who were the victims of these crimes. But the religious hierarchy, when under inconvenient scrutiny, quickly turns any criticism on its head and makes it into a condemnation of all believers. This tactic deflects criticism from them and infuriates people of good will who are misled into thinking that criticism of their church's misbehaviour is a criticism of them and their beliefs.

This problem was addressed – not very successfully – by Julian Baggini in the *Guardian* in what he called his Heathen Manifesto. In this he proceeds from the idea that "militant atheists" have come to a dead end in their arguments against religion: atheists think God doesn't exist, religious believers believe he does, and all that can follow from that is rancour.

He concludes that there has to be some middle ground where all people of good will can meet and discuss these issues without becoming polarised and fractious. He eschews what calls the "militant secularist" approach.

But being a 'militant secularist' – that is wanting to halt the stride of reactionary religion into public affairs – is not a negative thing. The fact that it is portrayed as such by the religious leaders who so desire the power to control everything simply reinforces its legitimacy. By opposing religious privilege and excess we are defending the rights of those who do not share the views of those religions. For every privilege granted to a particular religion, other religions, and people without religion, suffer discrimination.

So, militant secularism is not something to be booed, but to be cheered. It defends the rights of all, not just the rights of some.

Religious leaders, of course, think they are entitled to privilege because... well, they've always had it and it is part of our "heritage" and our "tradition". You can understand why they would panic and become hysterical when it is threatened. But that does not make them right, and it does not make us into villains for raising the issues.

Julian Baggini and other non-believers think some kind of accommodation can be made between those who want religion and those who don't. But he will soon find that other than tolerating each

other's opinions and accepting that we all have the same rights and entitlements, there is nowhere to go with 'inter-faith' dialogue. Efforts to confront and talk about differences simply increases friction.

Atheists cannot be made to believe and believers cannot – with some exceptions – be persuaded that they are deluded (as Richard Dawkins would have it). So we have to leave it at that and then find a way to live together.

That way is secularism.

Secularism can do the job if the majority accepts it as a friend rather than an enemy.

Popes and ayatollahs will never embrace secularism willingly because they are convinced that their particular take on religion is superior and must prevail. This is not something that we need to hypothesise about - the consequences of such thinking can be seen in the bloody history of European Christianity and in present-day Islam in the Middle East. Popes and ayatollahs are at the forefront of attacks on secularism in places where it is presently installed, seeking to undermine and overcome it.

But those ordinary believers who want peace, stability and an equal place for all can join with atheists to create a society where no religion rules but all religions are free. It is a society based on secularism.

In such a society believers are free to believe and atheists are at liberty not to. The democratic secular state they inhabit will have no power to coerce religious belief or, equally, will have no power to suppress it.

This surely is an arrangement that all people who crave peace can embrace.

You can read another take on Baggini's Heathen Manifesto here.

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Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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